

IS THERE ANY FUTURE FOR VISEGRAD COOPERATION WITHIN EU?

SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

Concept of closer cooperation of some Central European countries has its own long history. The idea of reinforced cooperation of some Central European States was formulated during trans-border meetings of dissidents in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and East Germany in the last decade before the collapse of the Berlin wall. In the hectic period of changes in early 90-ties new leaders, without special experiences of administration and ruling, were facing enormous problems inherited from their predecessors as well as an uncertain development in the Soviet Union. In such a situation, it was very natural for the new political elite to look for allies among friends and partners in a similar position in the closest neighborhood. Multilateral informal discussions started in April 1990 in Bratislava upon the invitation of the Czechoslovak president V.Havel¹. This process resulted in an official meeting of Presidents, Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers and Member of Parliaments of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland in Budapest in February 1991. Following this meeting the joint statement *The Declaration on Co-operation of Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Republic of Poland and Republic of Hungary on the Way of the European Integration* was signed on February 15, 1991. The declaration became known as a Visegrad Declaration and three cooperating states formed “the Visegrad Three”. Since its formal creation, the medium term strategic goal of the Visegrad group was a full incorporation to the European political, economic, security and law systems². Visegrad declaration sees cooperation among citizens of all three countries as a necessary condition of common evolution to the democratic social system. The common will for cooperation was expressed in envisaged practical steps, eventhough their formulations were general and not binding. Despite all up-and-downs of visegrad cooperation in the following decade, all countries achieved by 2004 their initial goals.

Path to this stage was neither easy, nor streamline. The Visegrad cooperation was deeply frozen in mid–nineties, but even after the revitalization in 1998, it was several times labeled as a non-perspective artificial group or simply as an empty shell. What could be the lessons learned from history to avoid the same mistakes in near future?

LESSONS LEARNED

As one of the believers and probably first full time practitioner of the Visegrad idea, I would like to use this opportunity to share with you some conclusions from up-to date experiences

¹ Jiří Dienstbier: Visegrád, in *Mezinárodní politika 2/1999*, p.4.

² see „The Visegrad Declaration“ at www.visegradgroup.org/declaration.htm

and observations. Those could be shortly presented as 5 lessons learned by me since the revitalization of the Visegrad cooperation in 1998.

1, right content in consonance with national interest of all partners

Key element of successes lies in the identification of appropriate content for cooperation. In any case, when practical content of cooperation was in individual interest of all four members, such endeavor was coronated by success. Common goal was of paramount importance and particular motivation was secondary. Support for Slovakia in catching-up with NATO and EU is the best positive example of this lesson. Neighboring countries were driven by fear that centrally located Slovakia, in case of failure, would remain isolated causing a lot of problems for them. Just take the issue of the borders. Beside external motivations, every country has had different internal motivations too.

In contrary, abortive attempt to coordinate V4 visa policy towards Ukraine in year 2000 is an example of failure and negative prove of this thesis. When Czech Republic raised the issue of implementing visa regime for Ukrainians, Slovaks were more or less forced to joint them due to “green” border between both countries. But imposing visa was unacceptable for Poland and Hungary mainly due to the considerable higher minority and other links to Ukraine. Despite common declarations of V4 Presidents, the coordination of visa policy was impossible due to different national interests.

2, expectations appropriate to achieved level of mutual harmony

Too high expectations raised sometimes by representatives of V4 countries themselves or by journalists are harming common interest. Like in previous case of visa coordination, several times it happens that joint declarations were inappropriate to the objectively achieved level of harmonization of national interest. Most often, such cases were connected to the European integration issues. Just one example, during the press conference after the Prime Ministers summit in Smolenice castle in December 2002, they declared common position on negotiation prior to the Kopenhagen European Council. Prime Ministers promised to go “shoulder by shoulder” until the very end of the negotiation to show common determination of V4. In fact, the final of negotiations was too specific for every country, so that such promise was more a political will then justified position. Naturally, unfulfilled expectations raised a wave of criticism and many of commentaries were declaring the V4 idea dead.

On the other side, a common V4 action vis-à-vis to Cuba in 2001, after the imprisonment of two Czech Members of the Parliament, reflected exactly full harmony in V4 in relation to Human Rights Issue and unprecedented step of Cuban authorities. This action was fruitful and showed an expected outcome.

3, common goals adequate to existing cooperation mechanism

When Visegrad countries created working cooperation mechanism in a particular field, common goals were achieved quickly and they sustain for longer time. The International Visegrad Fund is a flagship of Visegrad cooperation because of appropriate legal framework, sufficient administrative capacities and regular financial flow. IVF is flourishing because of cooperation mechanism, which is working and relatively independent of political debate within V4. This was proved during the V4 internal crisis in early 2002, caused by the attempt of re-opening the Beneš Decrees.

On the other hand, non-starting story of joint Visegrad modernization of Mi-24 battle helicopters is showing that even an intergovernmental agreement creates no more than a legal precondition, which could not work without proper practical cooperation mechanism.

4, solidarity is not given, all should create and cultivate it

None of the Visegrad countries showed up—to now a real concession of its own national interest in favor of common Visegrad solidarity. Stakes during EU negotiations are internally very high, which makes any considerable adjustment to the common position unrealistic today. Even in politically low profile and technical issues, like joint candidatures in international organizations, one could observe more competition than cooperation. When any of the countries is asking for joint V4 support in his particular sensitive question, partners are evaluating such proposal exclusively in light of their interest. Nothing like broad “trade-off” negotiation mechanism exists in V4. Issues of concern for partners are often in contradiction. For working solidarity, a mutual trust and well identified clear goals are among first conditions. Trust building process should start from technical issues with immediate impact, which is necessary for cumulative growth of positive experiences.

5, public support is a function of real efforts, not of empty declarations

There is a considerable public support across whole region for regional cooperation in V4 format. This cooperation is partly based on the Visegrad idea but still there is a considerable number of people, who do not link direct cooperation among Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and Poles to the political Visegrad cooperation. Many of the people are finding political cooperation as not really target oriented exercise. In fact, there is not too much practical achievement of the Visegrad cooperation to be sold to public at home. On the other hand Visegrad, is a valuable label in international relations mainly because of potential hidden in the process itself.

For domestic support, more clearly identified concrete achievements are needed. The International Visegrad Fund, with two grant schemes and a scholarship program, is an

important tool in this sense. Gradually growing contributions to the IVF shows that governments are aware of the special place of the Fund within the Visegrad agenda. Highly positive perception of the Fund's activities was, since its establishment, several times proved in official Annual Report and Statements at the highest level.³

FUTURE IN THE ENLARGED EU

Based on experiences from the previous period and expressed political will of prime ministers to continue with Visegrad cooperation after accession, few conclusions could be drawn. The future orientation of Visegrad cooperation is a challenge, which has to be addressed by the governments of all countries in near future. A new declaration, which should create a framework, formulate goals and vision for the next decade of real integration of Visegrad countries in to the European Union, is under preparation. Clear understanding of common interest should be reflected in renewed goals to ensure that further cooperation would be less vulnerable to negative impacts of possible changes in political views of leadership in V4 capitals. Depending on the future content of the cooperation, the question of establishment necessary international administrative capacity, commensurable to declared goals, should be answered. Any future success of the Visegrad depends on a clear vision, consensual goals and appropriate mechanism for their fulfillment.

In my understanding, lessons learned in the past decade should be reflected in our steps in future.

1, right content in consonance with national interest of all partners

First step should be a clear identification of overlapping national interest of all Visegrad countries. Such area should be a core for any further content and goals of joint actions. I am convinced that for immediate future, Visegrad cooperation should concentrate on regional issues with practical impact for domestic electorate. European affairs are far more complicated to be addressed without first hand experience and proper consultation mechanism.

2, expectations appropriate to achieved level of mutual harmony

Future political statements should not exaggerate real potential of Visegrad cooperation. It is much more understandable and fair to admit, that V4 could not deal in short run with highly politicized questions. Neither issues like the Qualified Majority Voting or minority rights, nor Common Agricultural Policy reform could be addressed on current stage in Visegrad format.

³ www.visegradgroup.org Annual Report on the Activities of the Visegrad Group 2001, Cracow, June 1, 2001, p.10 or Joint Statement from the Summit Meeting of the Heads of Government of the Visegrad Group in Esztergom, June 29, 2002, point 12

Modest expectations, rather small practical steps than big jumps would more serve the idea of regional cooperation in Central Europe.

3. common goals adequate to existing cooperation mechanism

Any of the concrete goals should be backed by appropriate cooperation mechanism. I am rather skeptical to some idea of closer collaboration in the field of Eastern EU policy because of non existing cooperation mechanism. Without a working system, we are facing high risk to shift from collaboration to competition, driven by will to influence European partners according more narrow national interest.

4. solidarity is not given, all should create and cultivate it

Issue of solidarity is probably the most sensitive from all challenges. Despite political will and obvious need for cooperation, a lot of mutual prejudices and stereotypes still exist between us. Any misunderstanding or broken promise could seriously harm mutual cohesion of the Visegrad group. Trust building process is a long distance race without firm guarantees. But the example of the Franco-German way from war, through reconciliation, up to the closest tandem within EU shows that this is possible.

5. public support is a function of real efforts, not of empty declarations

To maintain and extend actual level of public support for Visegrad cooperation a concrete cooperation in favor for citizens is urgently needed. Successful implementation of the idea of passport-free movement across borders of V4 could be presented as one of major achievement for ordinary citizens of our countries.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

Effective regional cooperation is a complex process, which has more similarities with modern state building than with usual international relations. Regional cooperation in its very bases is on the half way between domestic and foreign policy. Only strong, well established societies could afford to keep solidarity and made commitments in seeking higher benefit from wider cooperation in non-zero game of regional cooperation. History of BENELUX and Nordic cooperation shows us that we have to be ready for backlashes and ignorance, but we should sustain in our efforts for decades. The future of Visegrad within the EU is in the hands of Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and Poles.

Dr. Urban Rusnák, Deputy Director of the Analyses and planning department of the MFA and former Executive Director of the International Visegrad Fund (2000-2003).

Ideas and views presented in this article do not represent the official policy or assessments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic