

**By Ph.D. Michał Dulak**

**Due to the informal and thus flexible nature of the Visegrad Group, the question of whether cooperation within it still exists never ceases to be relevant. Even if there were moments when relations at the highest political level were cold, cooperation developed well between the ministers and parliamentarians of the four countries. However, never in its history has the Visegrad Group faced such far-reaching implications for the security of each of its members. Instead of consolidating the cooperation of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, which share a common experience of the oppressive regime of the USSR, the threats posed by the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine have adversely affected the relations between them. There is a serious risk that the deep rift that has emerged between the group's members over their attitude toward Russia could make a return to the previous formula of the Visegrad Group impossible in the future.**

### **History and what it means for the contemporary role of the Visegrad Group**

The idea of cooperation between states in the post-Communist Central European region was proposed by the then Czechoslovak President Václav Havel, during a speech in the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on January 25, 1990. He said then: " For the first time in history, we have a real opportunity to fill the great political vacuum that appeared in Central Europe after the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire with something genuinely meaningful. We have an opportunity to transform Central Europe from what has been a mainly historical and spiritual phenomenon into a political phenomenon. (...) What we have to offer are spiritual and moral impulses, courageous peace initiatives, under-exploited creative potential, and the special ethos created by our freshly won freedom"[\[1\]](#). However, despite attempts to provide a deeper justification for the existence of a community of several countries in this part of the continent, the purpose of their cooperation was very utilitarian from the beginning. This was evident in the very title of the declaration signed in Visegrad on February 15, 1991 - Declaration on Cooperation of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration. The ambitions for integration into the political, economic, and defense structures of the West, which were expressed there, have been achieved. Four countries became members of NATO (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in 1999, and Slovakia in 2004) and, above all, the European Union. Thus, on 1 May 2004, the main engine that drives the Visegrad Group was extinguished. The new engine of cooperation was to be launched by the Visegrad Declaration, signed by the prime ministers in Kroměříž several days later - on May 12, 2004. It was agreed then that the Visegrad Group countries would continue to focus on

regional activities and initiatives aimed at strengthening the identity of the Central European region. From then on, cooperation was based on specific projects while maintaining its flexible and open character. This has been facilitated primarily by the activities of the Visegrad Fund established in 2000 (the only formal institution of the Visegrad Group). Project cooperation in the V4+ format also developed within it, involving countries from the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, but also Japan, South Korea, and Israel.

However, under the conditions of EU membership, where each country pursues its own national interests, the formula of an informal political agreement between the four countries meant that the Visegrad Group was no longer as useful as before. Therefore, on the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the Visegrad Group, it was decided to clarify the scope of cooperation between Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in the European Union. In 2011, the Bratislava Declaration listed important areas of common interest of the four countries, such as European energy security, transport infrastructure, development of the four freedoms of the common market of the EU, deeper cooperation of the group within the CFSP, support of the integration aspirations and Euro-Atlantic ambitions of the Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans, and work for complementarity between the EU and NATO.

Since 2004, the Visegrad Group has thus become a forum for political consultations aimed at agreeing positions mainly on EU issues. At the same time, it should be noted that in practice these positions concern only those topics in which Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary have common interests. When looking for an analogy from everyday life that would illustrate what the Visegrad Group is, we can compare it to a quadruple sculls boat. It is a four-person boat in which each crew member operates two oars. If everyone rows uniformly, then the entire team is moving in one direction. However, if at least one of the members does not row or makes oaring movements opposite to the others, then the boat cannot sail in any direction. Importantly, in such a situation, it does not tip over, but fails to perform the task for which it was built.

### **Dynamics of cooperation in recent years**

To see whether the Visegrad Group's formula proposed after 2004 has been successful, it is worth taking stock of its successes and failures in recent years.

The Visegrad Fund is certainly a success, and there is no disagreement among Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. After the prime ministers decided in 2021 to increase the fund's budget by €2 million a year, today it has €10 million at its disposal,

which is allocated to social projects, including recently also helping refugees from Ukraine. In November 2023, the presidents of the Visegrad Group countries jointly agreed that it is justified to further increase donations from member states<sup>[2]</sup>.

Another tangible success, this time in the field of security, was the formation of the Visegrad Battle Group. It allows to improve coordination in the field of defense between the participating countries, as well as to increase the interoperability of their armed forces. So far, the Visegrad Battle Group, under Polish command, has been on six-month duty three times - in 2016, 2019, and 2023. In the last case, during the war in Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Croatia participated in the battle group in addition to Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.

During the migration crisis in the European Union in 2015 and 2016, the countries of the Visegrad Group unanimously opposed the mandatory refugee admission mechanism proposed by the European Commission. They even succeeded, despite the fact that Slovakia and the Czech Republic accepted small groups of refugees in accordance with the relocation and resettlement mechanism. As a result, to this day, the countries in the group are still trying to coordinate a unified position toward the EU's migration policy.

With all these successes, it seems that the Visegrad Group has not been able to develop a common position on issues of much greater political importance. First, the group failed to agree on a solution that would enhance the energy security of all countries in the region. Only Poland and the Czech Republic took advantage of the opportunity to diversify gas and oil supplies that arose after Russia attacked Ukraine. Hungary and Slovakia, which are still the most dependent on Russian energy resources, face a huge problem today due to the restriction of the transit of raw materials through Ukraine until the end of 2024. The situation has become so tense that the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary publicly accused Poland of hypocrisy<sup>[3]</sup>.

The second area where the Visegrad Group has failed to demonstrate effectiveness is the lack of an agreed common position on the future of European integration. Point-wise agreement on certain policies (e.g. migration or deepening the common market) does not constitute a concrete plan for reforming the European Union that the group's countries could implement as part of their national European policies. The best evidence of the failure in this regard is that even Law and Justice and Fidesz, which are declaratively close to each other when it comes to their position towards the EU, did not cooperate within one political group after the last elections to the European Parliament.

## Why is the war the most important test for the Visegrad Group?

Before the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine, it was normal practice for prime ministers to meet frequently, even informally, for example, before meetings of the European Council to coordinate the positions of the Visegrad Group countries on EU issues. Ministers and speakers of the parliaments also met frequently. From February 24, 2022 to the present (30 months of war), the prime ministers of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary have met only four times<sup>[4]</sup>. The number of meetings at the level of ministers, who met eight times during the Slovak presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2022-June 2023), was also reduced. In 2022, the meeting of the speakers of the parliaments scheduled for November 25 was canceled because the Czech Republic and Poland announced that they would not participate in it due to Viktor Orbán's delay in adopting sanctions against Russia<sup>[5]</sup>. As a result, the political level of the meetings, which were held more often at the level of deputy ministers or parliamentary committees, has been lowered. The effect of these activities can be seen in the number of joint declarations, conclusions, and positions adopted by the Visegrad Group. After February 24, 2022, 12 of them were adopted, whereas in the whole of 2021 there were 31 such documents. Importantly, after the start of the war, it was more often limited to formulating general conclusions or communiqués after meetings, rather than joint positions or declarations entailing specific commitments.

An analysis of the content of these documents indicates that the issues of regional security that are fundamental for the future of the Visegrad Group were not touched upon. Rather, efforts were made to still find areas where a common opinion could be reached. Therefore, after February 24, 2022, the themes of the V4 countries' opposition to the EU's migration policy, the fight against hybrid threats, including disinformation, and the economic and humanitarian consequences of the war in Ukraine were raised more often.

The scale of the decline in cooperation between Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary is shown by the calendar and document repository available on the official website of the Visegrad Group. In both cases, reporting on the effects of cooperation in the group ends in mid-2023, i.e., when the Czech presidency begins. Today, Polish foreign policy in the region focuses on rebuilding cooperation within the Weimar Triangle. The Czech Republic, on the other hand, even before the meeting of prime ministers in February 2024, clearly declared that for further cooperation to make sense, it must bring specific results<sup>[6]</sup>.

The divisions between the Visegrad Group countries, which have been accentuated by attitudes toward Russia and the war in Ukraine, will not disappear even after the war ends. However, it does not seem likely that in the short term the leaders of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary will decide to take the radical step of completely abandoning

the Visegrad Group format. Cooperation will be maintained at a low political level and around uncontroversial but politically insignificant issues, as the last two years have shown. The Polish presidency of the Visegrad Group, which began on July 1, 2024, will not change anything in this situation, and will even perpetuate the minimalist in means and thematically truncated model of Visegrad cooperation that we have seen since the outbreak of Russia's attack on Ukraine.

### **Recommendations**

1. Seminars, conferences, and discussions should be organised with experts from Hungary and Slovakia to present fact-based arguments for the consequences of Russia's imperial policy in our region of Europe.
2. The cooperation that has developed so far between civil society organisations, academia, experts, officials, and parliamentarians is an important channel of communication on issues important to the region. Efforts should be made to maintain these channels of cooperation, even despite political conflict at the highest political level.
3. Parliamentary cooperation is a tool that provides wide opportunities for contacts and raising various topics that can be flexibly adapted to the current needs of the Visegrad Group countries, regardless of the political configurations in other countries. Therefore, during the Polish presidency of the Visegrad Group, the parliamentary dimension of regional cooperation should be given greater importance.

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[1] Address given by Vaclav Havel to the Polish Sejm and Senate (Warsaw, 25 January 1990),

[https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/address\\_given\\_by\\_vaclav\\_havel\\_to\\_the\\_polish\\_sejm\\_and\\_senate\\_warsaw\\_25\\_january\\_1990-en-d639c9ab-79ce-41d9-8767-4a9bd804ec35.html](https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/address_given_by_vaclav_havel_to_the_polish_sejm_and_senate_warsaw_25_january_1990-en-d639c9ab-79ce-41d9-8767-4a9bd804ec35.html)

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[4] 27.02.2024, 26.01.2023, 24.01.2022, 8.03.2022

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