

V4 – Conference – Where to carry on?
'The Visegrád cooperation's present and perspectives'⁺

(Merre tovább? A Visegrádi együttműködés jelene és távlatai)

Eotvos Lorand University – Budapest, April 28, 2015

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(Introductory remarks)

The Visegrad Group - Present and Future
lecture at the ELTE University

It is a great pleasure to address the audience at the ELTE University on such a successful story as the V4 cooperation.

We have to acknowledge that the Central Europe was for ages, probably even too long?, a specific part of our continent, developing according to its own patterns, often diverging from those of Western and Eastern rims of the continent. Finally, only after the collapse of the Soviet Empire our part of the continent fully united with the West joining the EU and NATO.

The recent 25th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain, 15th anniversary of joining NATO, as well as the 10th anniversary of the EU accession reminded us of the incredible journey our countries and the Visegrad Group at large have been through in a couple of decades. The transition of our countries might still serve as a lesson of democratic transformation for others. As you may know, next February we will celebrate also 25 years of V4.

The Visegrad Group itself was born in times which we may already consider historical. In the nineties the four countries were united by shared experiences and common objectives - as integration with NATO and the EU. That mission was successfully accomplished by 2004. In the following decade the Visegrad Group became a platform for coordinated efforts focused essentially on two vectors. Inwardly, it served to pursue the Group's regional integration and outwardly it helped to elaborate common positions and policies within the European and transatlantic integration structures.

V4 proved to be a useful and relatively efficient tool: in policy areas - where national interests and priorities overlapped at least partially - it helped to coordinate and amplify national positions both within the EU and NATO, build broader coalitions and endorse common interests, which further increased its relevance and capacity to influence the decision-making process. Thus, we should make further use of the V4 format in order to present our regional perspective on current European and global challenges. It is truth, that recently manifested internal V4 differences on the policy towards Russia have weakened a little the V4's image.

I have to say very openly, that for Poland it is crucial to preserve the V4 brand, based on solidarity among its' members and to give new impetus to the Group. Together we can do more in political - but also in practical - terms, and if we speak in harmony our voice will be better heard, especially in international fora. We should not limit ourselves to an efficient coordination on the current EU agenda.

⁺ The Conference was held in Budapest, *Eötvös Loránd University* (ELTE) on April 28, 2015; organized by *South-East Europe Research Center* and *International Relations Quarterly*.

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Given the current situation we should make all the efforts to consolidate and strengthen the basis on which our cooperation relies. The V4 needs to stay further focused on key issues: energy security, defense policy, North-South transport links development, boosting trade, enhancing economic cooperation, promoting innovations and supporting advanced scientific research, and last but not least encouraging more people to people contacts.

Poland regards the V4 as crucial in terms of regional cooperation. Furthermore, we want the V4 to reach out to other regions and partners. We have successfully shaped the EU Eastern policy and projected our experience of democratic transformation into the EU neighborhood and beyond.

As I mentioned, we have some difficulties nowadays. All these divergences between us may have their rational explanations, rooted in each country's perception of its national interests. But as the crisis is not ending we have to remember that we are not just faced with a local conflict. It is a generalized threat to European security and the international order. Or even worse – a fundamental challenge to the European project as such. That is, the project which was the initial *raison d'être* of the Visegrad Group.

The revival of hard security threats should be an even stronger incentive to re-launch the V4 as a regional grouping with a strong sense of common interests and mission. It is important that the Eastern Partnership (EaP) remains a shared priority for the Visegrad Group.

And now a few words about our future.

We have all invested a lot, over the past two decades, to build Visegrad's considerable political capital. It would be unwise not to continue to invest it now, when stakes are so high. And it seems unlikely that it could be easily matched or replaced by other existing or hypothetical regional formats. If the Visegrad Group gives up on its ambition to become a potentially powerful regional player, the cost of such a failure may be unexpectedly high for our region in terms of loss of relevance and capacity to form and shape European policies.

The absence of a shared Visegrad position on such fundamental European questions as common security, neighborhood policy, relations with Russia, to name just a few issues which are at stake in Ukraine, is incompatible with the level of credibility and relevance that the V4 has achieved so far. Visegrad Group can and should play a key role in shaping a strategic response to the crisis in Ukraine and the broader Russian challenge. This is especially true in a moment when the European Union as a whole is badly divided over the same issues and when a clearer line and a stronger political initiative is urgently needed.

And finally let me be very clear. It is also about economy. V4 together with NB8 represent more or less the same potential as Germany. Polish trade turnover with the V4 partners is now more than 35 bln Euro. It is a huge amount. It is the same for others countries. Significant? (Big), good and very well balanced trade. The successful V4 brand is also helping us to bring new investors to our region. And once again, we have still many unfinished common projects that we have to continue together. I am personally very relaxed and optimistic about the future of our cooperation.

Thank you

Roman Kowalski, Ambassador of Poland to Hungary, April 2015

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