Twenty Years of Visegrád

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There is a proverb in many languages that if a living person is reported to be dead he or she is likely to have a long life. Well, the political cooperation of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, the "Visegrad-4", was reported to have come to an end several times in its twenty year old history; based on that I hope its prospects are quite promising. To paraphrase the 19th century Czech leader, F. Palacky, if "Visegrad" did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it.

Much has been written about conflicts and their roots. The Visegrad cooperation deserves recognition as the regional cooperative mechanism that replaced rivalry and conflict with cooperation. This close political and economic cooperation of four Central European countries was a cornerstone for stability after the end of the Cold War, it has remained so, and is a model to be emulated.

Set up on February 15, 1991 by Presidents Walesa and Havel and Prime Minister Antall, the goal of the cooperative mechanism named after the venue where the Polish, the Bohemian (that is Czech) and the Hungarian king met in 1335, was to help and speed up the transition of those countries from the Soviet orbit to the Euro-Atlantic structures, monitoring each other, learning from each others, coordinating foreign policy in all directions.

Sadly, I am one of the few who was not only "present at the creation of the Visegrad Cooperation," but was one its makers and players. I mourn the recent passing away of two dear friends and colleagues, Krzystof Skubiszewski and Jiri Dienstbier. There was such a harmony in thinking between us.

Visegrád had no formal organization, "not even a secretary" as then Prime Minister Klaus liked to insist upon. So bureaucracy did not hinder action. What made the Visegrad association work at the outset was the personal affinity among the leaders of the countries involved, and the common purposes that they championed. The founders were all staunch anti-Communists, committed to democracy and human rights. The "Visegrad idea" of Central European solidarity enjoyed popular support, going back to older and recent history. It was not a formal alliance, but, especially in its early phase, was quite close to that. As once I put it to Foreign Minister Skubiszewski, it was an alliance *"in pectore,"* in our hearts.

"Visegrad" deserves recognition as an instrument that eliminated potential animosities. After the bliss of 1989, quite a few people in Europe and America feared the revival of old conflicts in Central Europe. By establishing this triangular relationship we made sure such conflicts became unthinkable between us. Visegrad was the alternative to earlier, bad arrangements for the region, such as direct foreign domination (the Habsburg Empire before 1867 and, in a brutal version, Hitler's Third Reich), the attempt at integration above the heads of the member-nations (the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, 1867-1918), or one group ganging up against another and seeking support from selfish great powers (the so-called Little Entente in 1921-1938 and the alliance of Austria, Hungary and Italy in the early and mid-1930s). The association of the four nations was an ideal balance between two traditional, but failed or impossible foreign political orientations, an exclusively eastern and a one-sided western one. It was immediately welcomed by the outside world, particularly the U.S. and the Benelux countries.

The immediate (though unannounced) aim of the Visegrad cooperation was to dismantle the institutions which embodied our political, military and economic dependence on the Soviet Union: the Warsaw Pact and Comecon. The message of the first Visegrad summit was well summarized by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: "Separately, the Central European countries are weak; united they are irresistible, and Gorbachev was the first to note that." Indeed, the military element of the Warsaw Pact was signed away already ten

days later, on February 25! Impressive results followed. The formal dissolution of the Warsaw Pact took place on July 1, 1991. Immediately after the attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991 the "Visegrad Three" held consultations and agreed upon common reactions. I recall how, in the wake of the failure of the coup, Prime Minister Antall urged President Bush to recognize the independence of the Baltic States, and he was supported by the Visegrad partners. The Cracow Summit in October 1991 saw the conclusion of bilateral treaties, and issued an important warning to the international community on the conflict in Yugoslavia, denouncing t he war crimes committed. The three countries condemned all actions incompatible with the accepted legal norms of warfare, especially attacks on the civilian population, and advocated solutions which respect the right of nations for self-determination, including the formation of independent states, and also the full protection of the rights of national minorities. It took quite some time for the European Community to endorse those very principles. The three countries signed the "Europe Agreement" with the European Community together on December 16, 1991 in Brussels. The Central European Free Trade Agreement, created by the very three countries, was signed on December 21, 1992. In the same year, at the Prague Summit in May, they announced their intention to join NATO. Overcoming western reluctance and Russian opposition to NATO enlargement required much coordinated effort. The admission of three of the four Visegrad members in 1999 would not have taken place, or not as early, without Visegrad.

Cooperation never stopped, even when it weakened, due to the attitude of certain leaders. It gained new momentum in 1998, after Orbán and Dzurinda were elected Prime Ministers. Cultural cooperation was always very popular, and the creation of the common "Visegrad Fund" mainly for such projects, helped to bring "Visegrad" closer to society, to the ordinary citizens. No one can deny the many tangible results. Temporary differences over agricultural trade, or over certain political statements mean less than foreign ill-wishers often perceive. Visegrad has served the stability and prosperity of its member countries well and its impact went well beyond the borders of the cooperation.

The Kroměříž Summit in 2004 stated that the key objectives set in the 1991 Visegrád Declaration have been achieved and a new declaration was adopted expressing determination to continue the cooperation, even as members of the European Union.

But Visegrád is, and even more should be not only high politics. In my opinion it should be felt by every citizen as producing tangible results, improving every-day life. In economically difficult times much can be done on the local level, on the level of business, especially small and medium enterprises. Transportation, roads, railways, pipelines between the four of us **should have improved more,** trans-border cooperation should develop much faster, restoring old economic ties. E.g. between Slovenia and Hungary we built a new railway line, between Slovakia and Hungary of several old railway-lines, severed after World War I, or later, not one has been reopened. The cultural and other programmes supported by the Visegrad Fund are another field where people see the working of Visegrád.

No veritable past is a guarantee for continued existence, let alone a bright future. This association may wither away if the participating countries fail to see its potential value under the new circumstances. I think there can be no doubt that once inside the Union we, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians have to keep together. This is not to say that we should form a newcomers' bloc, or a "poor members' club" in the EU. But we share very much not only in terms of our history and culture, but also in recent experiences, basic aims and interests. Separately the V-4 can be overlooked, outvoted, neglected over many issues, but combined they stand for a real major power, larger in population than the U.K. or France, and even its economic strength would be comparable to that of Spain. We know and understand better both the East (Russia and Ukraine), and also the Balkans, than our western friends. We have much to say on the problems related to them, but again if we speak in unison, we'll be better heard.

The V-4 should not focus only on its neighbourhood. Based on the history of the 20th century they are strongly committed to Atlanticism, to the continued close collaboration of the United States and Europe. Joining some of the older members of the EU, they can strengthen those who hold similar convictions.

As to the enlargement of “Visegrad,” my personal view is not rigid. While I would regret the dilution of our association, I am in favour of what I call an “enhanced Visegrad.” That would mean a second, wider circle around the V-4, composed of countries which often express similar interests and concerns, which have old historical and newer economic ties to some of the Visegrad countries. Apart from the Baltic States Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, perhaps even Austria and once admitted Croatia are the most obvious associates for ad hoc alliances, e.g. in pressing for a common EU “Eastern” policy as opposed to neglecting the East in favour of the Mediterranean.

In history Central Europe represented by the V-4 gave much to the rest of the world: scientists, scholars, artists, economists in abundance. In the last twenty years the world has learned the name Visegrad, because those four countries set good examples for other regions struggling with the difficult legacy of the past.

A hundred years ago the territory of the V-4 was a common economic space, with no internal borders, with a common currency, a common foreign policy, and even with a common army. Let us hope that we will soon return to that situation, but without the serious shortcomings of the one-time Monarchy.