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## Visegrad Group Marching into Its Thirties: Consistency and Evolution

### *I. Introduction*

The year of 2021 marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Visegrad Group (also known as the Visegrad Four or V4). The Visegrad Group's establishment traces its origins to the Visegrad Declaration announced on the summit meeting held in the Hungarian castle town of Visegrad on February 15, 1991 by the leaders from Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, including Václav Havel, the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Lech Wałęsa, the President of the Republic of Poland, and József Antall, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary.<sup>1</sup> The Visegrad Declaration<sup>2</sup> officially stated the similarity of the situation that had evolved over the past decades had determined for the three countries convergent basic objectives: full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom, elimination of all existing social, economic and spiritual aspects of the totalitarian system, construction of a parliamentary democracy, a modern State of Law, respect for human rights and freedoms, creation of a modern free market economy, full involvement in the European political and economic system, as well as the system of security and legislation according to the Copenhagen Criteria.<sup>3</sup>

The V4 Group is considered the Central European regional cooperation scheme for political, economic, and cultural cooperation. From this formal declaration thirty years ago, it is crystal clear that establishment of Visegrad Group aimed to enhance cooperation among the Visegrad countries in the process of European integration. In 1993, Czechoslovakia was dissolved as Czech Republic and Slovakia became independent states. Thus, the number of Visegrad countries increased from three to four. After years of efforts, all four member countries of the Visegrad Four joined the European Union on May 1st 2004, which was one of the major milestones on their way into the European integration. Since the establishment of Visegrad Group, three decades has passed and during the past several

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<sup>1</sup> The Visegrad summit meeting was held against the historical backdrop of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, with the aim of advancing cooperation with one another and to further their integration into the Euro-Atlantic structure.

<sup>2</sup> Visegrad Group: Visegrad Declaration 1991. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412> (accessed: 10 March 2021)

<sup>3</sup> This important decision was reached by the Copenhagen European Council in June 1993. Tanja Marktler: The Power of the Copenhagen Criteria. *Croatian Yearbook of European Law and Policy* 2006:2(2), p. 344. DOI: 10.3935/cyelp.02.2006.23.

decades, dramatical changes have not only been happening to the four countries of Visegrad Group, but also to the European continent and even the whole world. As one of the major sub-regional groups in Europe, the V4 today is still full of vitalities, playing a noticeable role in certain issues on the European agenda or even on the global agenda. In this perspective, the role of Visegrad Group is of much potential for both regional and global issues in future.

In order to obtain a holistic view of the development of the V4, the paper is to apply the macro-historical approach to analyze Visegrad Group's development in the past three decades. Specifically, three perspectives are used for the analysis, including the historical perspective for review on the shared experiences that are linking Visegrad countries, the consistent perspective for observation on the Visegrad Spirit that is uniting Visegrad countries, and the evolutionary perspective for examination on the changing situations that pushing Visegrad countries forward. It is easy to find that the similarity of the experiences shared among Visegrad countries is the pillar foundation for Visegrad cooperation, the consistency of cooperative spirit embedded in the development of Visegrad Group is the fundamental drive for Visegrad cooperation, and the flexibility of adapting to evolving geopolitical situations endows the V4 with much potential for cooperation in future.

## *II. Historical perspective: shared experiences linking V4 countries*

Historically, the peoples in Czech, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia shared rich experiences. Just as Milan Kundera observed, Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation. Central Europe therefore cannot be defined and determined by political frontiers (which are inauthentic, always imposed by invasions, conquests, and occupations), but by the great common situations that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition.<sup>4</sup> It is just these shared similarities that have been linking the Visegrad countries closely together and have been nurturing cooperation opportunities for the Visegrad countries once and again throughout the evolving process of history.

As early as in the 14th century, to counter expansion by the Habsburg of Austria and to settle international disputes, the medieval Congress of Visegrad in 1335 between Charles I of Hungary, Casimir III of Poland, and John of Bohemia was held, and the three rulers agreed to create new commercial routes to bypass the city of Vienna and reached agreements on series of disputes.<sup>5</sup> The Congress of Visegrad was one of the outstanding diplomatic

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<sup>4</sup> MILAN KUNDERA: *The Tragedy of Central Europe*. In: Y. Albrecht & M. Segers (eds.): *Re: Thinking Europe: Thoughts Europe Past, Present and Future*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2016. p. 204. doi:10.1017/9789048533084.015.

<sup>5</sup> ÁGNES BERNEK: *Central and Eastern European Geopolitical study*. Central and Eastern European Countries in the Multipolar World of the 21st Century. Budapest, Pallas Athéné Innovation and Geopolitical Foundation, 2018. p. 58.

events in Central Europe in the fourteenth century. The alliance between the three Central European countries lasted for over half a century and provided each country with the right to conduct its international relations autonomously. These events illustrated that throughout the Middle Ages Visegrad functioned as a place for conflict resolution and rightly became an emblem for Central European cooperation over the centuries to come.<sup>6</sup>

The Congress of Visegrad held in 1335 aimed to intensify mutual cooperation and friendship among the three Central European states, which after hundreds of years inspired another summit meeting in Visegrad among the leaders of the Central European countries.<sup>7</sup> During late 1980s and early 1990s when the Cold War was ending, the geopolitical situation for the Central European countries was experiencing dramatical evolutions. In face of similar challenges, the Central European countries again joined hands and established the cooperation mechanism of Visegrad Group. In order to adapt to the complex situations and the challenging transitions, Visegrad countries gradually enhanced their cooperation through the reorientating process from the Warsaw Treaty Organization and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance to NATO and European Community for security and economic interests, and embarked onto a brand-new course.

It is the shared historical experiences that inspired Visegrad countries to join hands together. The renewed cooperation in establishment of Visegrad Group after the Cold War among the Central European countries derived from the historical spirit embedded in the 1335 Visegrad Congress and the ensued alliance formed by the three kingdoms. Visegrad is just a scenic little town located in the largest bend of the Danube River but embodies the linking between historical experiences and common realities. The formation of the Visegrad Four was motivated by four factors of decisive relevance: the desire to eliminate the remnants of the communist bloc in Central Europe; the desire to overcome historic animosities between Central European countries; the belief that through joint efforts it will be easier to achieve the set goals, i.e., to successfully accomplish social transformation and join in the European integration process; and the proximity of ideas of the then ruling political elites.<sup>8</sup> It is just the historical relations, cultural inheritances and religious traditions shared among Visegrad countries that have been driving the Visegrad cooperation. Just as the Visegrad Declaration in 1991 stated, a favorable basis for intensive development of cooperation is ensured by the similar character of the significant changes occurring in these countries, their traditional, historically shaped system of mutual contacts, cultural and spiritual heritage and common roots of religious traditions.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the three decades since the establishment of Visegrad Group, Visegrad countries have consecutively organized various commemoration activities: conceptions

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<sup>6</sup> GYÖRGY RÁCZ: *The Congress of Visegrad in 1335: Diplomacy and Representation*. The Hungarian Historical Review, 2013. Vol. 2. No. 2, Angevin History (2013). p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> RICK FAWN: *Visegrad's place in the EU since accession in 2004: "Western" perceptions*. International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs, Vol. XXIII. No. 1–2. 2014. p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> Visegrad Group: *History of the Visegrad Group*. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/history> (accessed: 12 March 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Visegrad Group: *Visegrad Declaration 1991*. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412> (accessed 10 March 2021).

or ideas such as Visegrad Citizens<sup>10</sup>, Visegrad Spirit<sup>11</sup> and V4 identity<sup>12</sup> have also been frequently discussed. At the very beginning, Visegrad countries focused their cooperation on business and trade issues, especially by reaching the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) on December 21, 1992 in Kraków, Poland. Since then, the cooperation among Visegrad countries has been not only continuously expanding into more and more policy areas, but also has been increasingly mechanism-secured.

The cooperation established by the Visegrad Group is important for the V4 countries themselves, and is an added value towards a secure and prosperous European Union. The V4 Group have become constructive partner in Europe in implementing EU key priorities and programmes and, through their input, have contributed to political and economic integration.<sup>13</sup>

### *III. Consistent perspective: cooperative spirit uniting V4 countries*

It is clear that there is something consistent throughout the development of Visegrad Group in the past three decades, and that is just the cooperative spirit that has been uniting the Visegrad countries closely together for shared targets and interests. Though Visegrad cooperation draws inspirations from historical experiences and cultural elements, yet Visegrad countries still conduct their cooperative activities based on realist fundamentals. Cooperation among Visegrad countries is mainly proceeded through periodic meetings at various government levels, which is non-institutionalized and quite flexible.

During the early period after the establishment of Visegrad Group, cooperation among Visegrad countries did not go as well as expected and once was even moribund. Particularly, during the period from 1994 to 1998, Slovakia under the leadership of Vladimír Mečiar experienced strained relations with Hungary and the West. Vladimír Mečiar did not only stalled the process of integration into the Euro-Atlantic structure, but also had no interest in participating in Visegrad cooperation. Then the intensity of cooperation between the V4 countries began to slacken due to the prevalence of the idea that individual efforts towards accession to the Euro-Atlantic integration formations will be more efficient.<sup>14</sup> It is only after Mikuláš Dzurinda came to power in 1998 that Slovakia returned back to the

<sup>10</sup> OLGA GYÁRFÁŠOVÁ (ed.): *Visegrad Citizens on the Doorstep of European Union*. Collection of Contributions Presented on November 20, 2003 in Bratislava at the Seminar Organized by Institute for Public Affairs and Polish Institute in Bratislava, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2003, and OLGA GYÁRFÁŠOVÁ: *We, the Visegrad Citizens, Neighbours and Allies*. Available at: <https://visegradinsight.eu/we-the-visegrad-citizens-neighbours-and-allies> (accessed: 10 on March 2021).

<sup>11</sup> BEATA BALOGOVÁ: *Visegrad spirit will resonate within the EU*. *The Slovak Spectator*, December 13, 2010. p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> MATS BRAUN: *Postfunctionalism, Identity and the Visegrad Group*. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 58. Issue 4. July 2020. p. 935.

<sup>13</sup> EDIT SOÓS: *The Europeanisation of Public Administration in Ukraine. The Visegrad Group's Best Practices*. In: Kamil Glinka (ed.): *Urban Policy System in Strategic Perspective: From V4 to Ukraine*. Berlin, Peter Lang Publishing, 2020. p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> Visegrad Group: *History of the Visegrad Group*. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/history> (accessed: 10 March 2021).

process of European integration, and Visegrad cooperation was restarted, ushering in a new chapter for Visegrad Group.

In May 1999, leaders of Visegrad countries held a summit meeting at Bratislava and jointly announced the “Contents of Visegrad Cooperation (1999)”<sup>15</sup>, laying out substantive elements of the Visegrad cooperation and the structure of the Visegrad intergovernmental cooperation. The substantive elements of the Visegrad cooperation included target areas such as foreign affairs, internal affairs, education, culture, society, youth, sport, science, technology, environment, infrastructure and cross-border cooperation. The structure of the Visegrad intergovernmental cooperation included Prime Ministers' meetings, Meetings of other Government members, Meetings of State Secretaries of Foreign Affairs, Ambassadors' meetings, and Meetings of Visegrad Coordinators.

Compared with other regional cooperation, Visegrad Group has no permanent secretariat or headquarters. The only institutionalized mechanism regarding Visegrad cooperation is the International Visegrad Fund established in 2000, with its headquarters seated at Bratislava.<sup>16</sup>

After entering into the 21st century, the cooperative channels of the V4 have been continuously expanding and diversifying. Though there are no significant changes to the working mechanisms of Visegrad Group, yet Visegrad cooperation is becoming increasingly flexible. The “Annex to the Content of Visegrad Cooperation (2002)”<sup>17</sup> approved by Visegrad countries made improvement to the rotating presidency mechanism, emphasizing the role of the “V4+1” format for external dimension and making the ministry-level meetings for internal dimension more flexible.

Shortly after their accession into the EU in May 2004, Visegrad countries held an official summit of the Prime Ministers at Kromčříž and issued “Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation (2004)”<sup>18</sup>, mapping out targeted areas for cooperation within the Visegrad region, cooperation within the EU, cooperation with other partners, and cooperation within NATO and other international organizations. The V4 operates without any institutions on its own. The mechanism of cooperation is based on meetings at various levels: the meetings of Presidents of V4 countries, the meetings of Prime Ministers and Ministers of Foreign Affairs with National Visegrad Coordinators and national government members taking the crucial role of initiators and rotating one-year presidency with its own presidency programme. The foreign ministries have a coordinating role. The intergovernmentalist nature of states' negotiation and institution setting implies that national governments are thus the primary decision-makers with politicians holding more responsibility for political outcomes in the Visegrad Group's

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<sup>15</sup> Visegrad Group: *Contents of Visegrad Cooperation (1999)*. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/contents-of-visegrad-110412> (accessed: 2 March 2021).

<sup>16</sup> The Fund does so by awarding €8 million through grants, scholarships and artist residencies provided annually by equal contributions of all the V4 countries. The official website of the Visegrad Fund is <https://www.visegradfund.org/>

<sup>17</sup> Visegrad Group: *Annex to the Content of Visegrad Cooperation (2002)*. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/annex-to-the-content-of> (accessed: 1 March 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Visegrad Group: *Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation (2004)*. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/guidelines-on-the-future> (accessed: 6 March 2021).

internal relations. However, the Visegrad Group is very active across a range of policy areas outside the regional cooperation and beyond the external borders of the EU too.<sup>19</sup>

Among the mechanisms of cooperation, Visegrad countries specially enlisted occasional informal meetings of Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers before international events. After the V4 states' accession to EU, the Visegrad Cooperation became an essential framework of representing joint interests in the EU, launching joint projects, and bringing closer the societies of the respective countries. The backbone of Visegrad cooperation consists of mutual contacts at all levels, from the highest-level political summits to expert and diplomatic meetings to activities of the non-governmental associations in the region, think-tanks and research bodies, cultural institutions or numerous networks of individuals.<sup>20</sup>

Nowadays, Visegrad cooperation also involves consultation and cooperation of Permanent Representations to the EU and NATO in Brussels, as well as in all relevant fora (OSCE, UN, CoE, OECD, WTO, etc.). On the Kroměříž summit meeting in May, 2014, Visegrad countries also made the Kroměříž Declaration<sup>21</sup>, stating with full satisfaction that the key objectives set in the 1991 Visegrad Declaration have been achieved, declaring their determination to continue developing the cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries as Member States of the European Union and NATO, and confirming that Visegrad cooperation will be based on concrete projects and will maintain its flexible and open character.

It is just because of the cooperative spirit consistently present throughout the development of the Visegrad cooperation that Visegrad countries have made series achievements in the past three decades. Visegrad Group features cooperation but not alliance, while at the same time, maintains instrument-oriented but not institution-oriented. It is these features that have secured a quite high efficiency for Visegrad cooperation, and have made issue-focused but not alliance-focused. All these have endowed Visegrad Group a high flexibility.

#### *IV. Evolutionary perspective: changing situations pushing V4 countries*

Visegrad Group's development in the past three decades could be defined mainly by two relationships, its relationship with NATO in terms of security interests, and its relationship with EU in terms of economic and political interests. Thus, the geopolitical landscapes surrounding Visegrad countries could then be analyzed through two dimensions. One is

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<sup>19</sup> EDIT SOÓS: *The Europeanisation of Public Administration in Ukraine. The Visegrad Group's Best Practices*. In: Kamil Glinka (ed.): *Urban Policy System in Strategic Perspective: From V4 to Ukraine*. Berlin, Peter Lang Publishing, 2020. p. 167.

<sup>20</sup> HYNEK BŮHM – ZSUZSANNA FEJES – JARMO GOMBOS – ENIKŐ HŰSE-NYERGES – MILAN JEŘÁBEK – DOMINIKA MAJERNÍKOVÁ – GYULA OCSKAY – MICHAL ŠINDELÁŘ – EDIT SOÓS – KATARZYNA WOJNAR: *Visegrad Group. Proposal on the V4 Mobility Council as intergovernmental structure for border obstacle management elaborated within the framework of the project 'Legal accessibility among the V4 countries'* funded by the International Visegrad Fund, 2018. pp. 38–39.

<sup>21</sup> Visegrad Group: *The Kroměříž Declaration*. Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union, 12 May 2004. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/declaration-of-prime> (accessed: 6 March 2021).

the security relationship between Visegrad countries and NATO, and the other one is the economic and political relationship between Visegrad countries and EU. It is just these two relationships that have defined the geopolitical situation for Visegrad countries and further influenced the priority issues for Visegrad Group.

On the security dimension, after the Soviet bloc collapsed in 1989, the strategic priority of the Central and Eastern European countries, including Visegrad countries, shifted to integration with the Euro-Atlantic structure, particularly joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for security interests. On their way of joining NATO, Visegrad countries mainly addressed related security issues in the context of bilateral arrangements: through the negotiation of state treaties guaranteeing existing borders and minority rights and committing states to develop cooperative relations; and through various more practical forms of bilateral political, economic and military cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Regarding the objective of joining NATO, Czech, Hungary and Poland realized their accessions to the alliance in March 1999, and Slovakia joined NATO in March 2004. After accessions to NATO, Visegrad countries completed their process of integrating with the Euro-Atlantic structure in terms of security.

On the economic and political front, after the political changes in Central and Eastern European countries in 1989, internally, Visegrad countries demonstrated a resolute commitment to a rapid transformation to a market economy and to pluralistic democracy, and externally, Visegrad countries expressed their strong desire to develop closer relations with the EU. After years of efforts, Visegrad countries completed their accession to EU in May 2004 and since then, Visegrad countries and EU have become a kind of community of shared interests. Nowadays, the V4 is a recognized symbol of successful political and economic transformation and, in many areas, also a model for regional cooperation. The Visegrad countries have become constructive, responsible and respected partners in Europe in implementing EU key priorities and programmes.<sup>23</sup>

By joining NATO and EU, Visegrad countries significantly have changed their geopolitical landscapes they are facing. In terms of security, accession to NATO eliminated the security vacuum Visegrad countries were encountering after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. While, on the economic and political dimension, accession to EU made Visegrad countries key players in various policy priorities on the EU agenda, and integrated Visegrad countries and EU into a close community of shared interests. After achieving their goals of integrating into the Euro-Atlantic structure, Visegrad countries have managed to profile Visegrad Group as a significant collective actor, and have managed to show that the group is able to function as a distinct and even a key player in various policy areas. After development for thirty years, Visegrad Group has already gained influence on certain issues on the European or even global agenda, such as financial budget, infrastructure interconnectivity, migration government, climate change,

<sup>22</sup> ANDREW COTTEY: *The Visegrad Group and Beyond: Security Cooperation in Central Europe*. In: Andrew Cottey (ed.): *Subregional Cooperation in the New Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999. p. 69. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-27194-8\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-27194-8_5).

<sup>23</sup> Visegrad Group: *The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group*. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava> (accessed 8 March 2021).

energy security, Eastern Partnership relations, Western Balkans relations etc. With their voting rights in European institutions, Visegrad countries can be able to exert much influence on targeted policy areas as they wish since Visegrad Group has evolved from a peripheral actor into a core actor in the process of European integration.

Regarding the role of Visegrad Group in future, clear orientations for further development of Visegrad Group could be found in the declaration by the Prime Ministers of Visegrad countries on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Visegrad Group<sup>24</sup>. Externally, that is to maintain inclusive and result-oriented cooperation on issues of common interest with other European and non-European partners within the V4+ format, and internally, that is to enable further development of its operational activities in the area of youth mobility (“Generation V4”) and to increase its visibility in order to promote the V4 among future generations, especially by increasing from 2022 the annual budget of the International Visegrad Fund to 10 million euros.

### *V. Conclusion*

When viewed from the macro-historical level, Visegrad Group’s development in the past three decades presents three features. First, from the historical perspective, Visegrad Group’s development originates from the shared experiences that have been linking Visegrad countries together. Second, from the consistent perspective, Visegrad Group’s development is empowered by the fundamental drive of the cooperative spirit that has been uniting Visegrad countries. Third, from the evolutionary perspective, Visegrad Group’s development is promoted by the changing geopolitical landscapes that Visegrad countries are facing. Therefore, it could be concluded that, the similarity of the experiences shared among Visegrad countries is the pillar foundation for Visegrad cooperation, the consistency of cooperative spirit embedded in the development of Visegrad Group is the fundamental drive for Visegrad cooperation, and the flexibility of adapting to evolving geopolitical situations endows Visegrad Group with much potential for cooperation in future. The geopolitical space shared by Visegrad countries is decisive in determining that the convergent interests of Visegrad countries are far more than their divergent interests. Thus, only by uniting together and presenting one voice could Visegrad countries maximize their national interests.

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<sup>24</sup> Visegrad Group: *Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Visegrad Group*. Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2021/declaration-of-the-prime> (accessed: 7 March 2021).



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## A VISEGRÁDI CSOPORT 30 ÉVE: KONZISZTENCIA ÉS FEJLŐDÉS

(Összefoglalás)

A Visegrádi Csoport négy közép-európai tagállam, Csehország, Lengyelország, Magyarország és Szlovákia regionális szervezete. Az együttműködés célja ezen országok gazdasági, diplomáciai és politikai érdekeinek közös képviselése, valamint szakpolitikai tevékenységeik összehangolása számos területen.

A visegrádi országok vezetői felismerték és megértették a történelmi lehetőséget, hogy az 1335-ös visegrádi királytalálkozó után hat és fél évszázad elteltével újraalakítsák korábbi történelmi együttműködésüket.

A tanulmány az 1991. évi megalakulás óta eltelt három évtized fejlődésének főbb fordulópontjait tekinti át. Az 1990-es évek közepén a Visegrádi együttműködés mélypontra jutott, majd 1999-ben vett újra lendületet, amikor megállapodtak a Nemzetközi Visegrádi Alap létrehozásáról. A V4-k együttműködésének újraéledésében a külső tényezők közül elsősorban az euroatlanti integráció játszott meghatározó szerepet.

Habár megfelelő intézményi struktúra hiányában a tagok közötti együttműködés mélységét az aktuális politikai akarat határozza meg, számos projekt és együttműködési program bizonyítja az együttműködés sikerességét és a V4-ek jelentőségét Európa jövőjének formálásában.