



Visegrad: Fit for purpose?



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ABSTRACT

Visegrad inter-state cooperation among the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia has faced numerous near-death experiences since its official birth in 1991. Furthermore, it has faced two challenges since the four member-countries' accession to the EU in 2004. Then Visegrad was eulogized, considered deceased by many precisely for having achieved the apparently ultimate aim of EU membership. Second, having purposefully stated rumours of its death, Visegrad has since 2008 been confronted by issues from outside and ones well beyond its size – the Obama presidency and its apparent abandonment of Central and Eastern Europe in its “reset” strategy towards Moscow; a post-Lisbon EU agenda; strategic reorientations in NATO; and both the general, that is, global, financial crisis and particularly within the EU and regarding the Euro.

This article, by contrast, contends that the fundamental changes and challenges that Visegrad has faced enhanced the Group's clear and successful strategy. It identifies and elaborates that strategy, drawing also selectively and thematically on the Group's historical experience since 1991. These strategies include targeted rather than broad selection of aims; retaining an exclusive membership while also inventing variable and flexible mechanisms for adding non-member countries to help them pursue specific initiatives. Through a study of annual Group Presidency agendas and reports, high-level and ministerial meeting declarations and media and secondary source analysis and interviews with National Coordinators, the article contends that the Group continues to promote realistic aims, and provides a unique platform for exercising them. This study concludes that Visegrad, despite the outside challenges remains effective in raising awareness, advancing smaller-scale policies and influencing EU policy towards the Western Balkans and European Partnership (EaP) countries, as well as achieving specific Visegrad initiatives with those states.

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1. Visegrad: fit for purpose¹

In a crowded world of inter-state formations, how can a grouping of only four countries, and previously transition ones, successfully band together, choose workable aims and implement them? How can it operate when overlain by the EU, the world's deepest form of regional integration? Does such cooperation have any role when confronting an assertive and energy-rich Russia and the Obama administration which, at least from a Central European perspective, is abandoning that region?

Additionally, any inter-state formation must seek appropriate goals; shooting low means irrelevance; aiming high risks overextension. This is particularly true of inter-governmental bodies which face myriad pressures from within their societies and their national governments, even before they try to reconcile interests at the supranational level. Intergovernmental

¹ The official group of Visegrad calls itself by this spelling. The Hungarian town in which the founding meeting was held is, however, Visegrád. Transliteration into Slavic languages also results, for example, in the use of diacritics, such as Višegrad. Some sources use the latter spellings and that is retained in direct quotations and references. Otherwise, in keeping with the official name, “Visegrad” is employed hereafter.

groupings that keep a wide agenda to ensure their relevance: “...provide many opportunities for a dramatic gap between the stated intentions of the organization and their actual practice” (Hurd, 2011, 246).

Visegrad cooperation among the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia has often been called the most successful form of post-communist regional cooperation, even if criteria for measuring such success are absent. At the same time, it has faced inordinate challenges, and, for varying reasons, has even been pronounced dead, and not once but several times. This article contends that Visegrad is fit for purpose because it avoids the dangers common among inter-governmental organizations of either under-ambition or overextension. This may sound like common sense and common place behaviour; as stated, it is not. While the study of world politics has given increased attention to regional formation – to the point of one important work tellingly being entitled *A World of Regions* (Katzenstein, 2005; Fawn, 2009), how we judge a regional formation's success is often left unsaid. This is not to say that no attempt has been made to determine what factors are necessary for Visegrad cooperation generally to occur (Druľák, 2002). Rather, it is to assert that both detractors and supporters of Visegrad have not assessed Visegrad in terms of an explicit match between expectations and capacities.

Here we suggest some framework for analysis of success and failure in terms of Visegrad. The article then uses aspects of Visegrad's history to illustrate how we should think of regional achievement. It then turns to the selection of Visegrad policy preferences to show how self-limiting processes are an essential determinant of success. Is Visegrad policy-selection tautological – that is, does any Visegrad success arise only because it overcautiously picks unambitious aims? The article answers that by examining a range of issue areas. They are divided into two categories – those thrust on Visegrad, and those it picks. Within the former are some of the “big” scale issues, like the Eurozone crisis and changes in Euro-Atlantic relations brought by the Obama Administration. The other judges how well Visegrad has and can fulfil ambitions it chooses for itself, and therein considers just how ambitious those goals are. These include influencing selected but essential aspects of EU policy and relations with Visegrad neighbourhood countries (and this is not casually to mix EU policy towards its “neighbourhood” – as the section will show), Visegrad has had an important role in formulating that thinking. First, though, an overall word on sources and, to a degree relatedly, on any assessment of Visegrad is prudent.

2. Assessing Visegrad

Visegrad is a good news. As a later section suggests, Visegrad did not need to be. And its region is one in which historical animosities might have prevented any such cooperation. Indeed, many times Visegrad almost did not happen, or continue. It could be assessed from that vantage alone – a better-than-nothing approach. To be sure, that would set absolutely minimalistic expectations. But works on Visegrad do not frequently look at Visegrad in those terms. Additionally, those who do write on Visegrad generally are keenly-well disposed to it. Visegrad is not necessarily an activity that generates threat or animosity (although it has produced envy among those exclude from its membership) and therefore does not produce antithetical or hostile responses. It does, however, occasionally receive attention by erudite outsiders, but who call the group redundant (Lucas, 2012, 10). Those who do not write on Visegrad probably consider it unimportant. They would be mistaken; the volume of literature on Visegrad written within the region and to a degree now outside of it suggests strongly otherwise.²

The official documents of and secondary literature on Visegrad tend therefore towards the positive, and also encourage it towards greater initiative. There are some who are critical and dismissive. Nevertheless, the majority who take an interest do so from a vantage of support. Visegrad itself has undertaken, as any formation proud of itself should, to promote and celebrate its achievements. That, in part, is an aspect of “regionness”³ – how much a region, however self-defined, invests in securing and advertising a distinctive identity is surely an aspect of being a successful region. In recent years Visegrad has become very evident in generating its own identity and promoting that within itself and outwards. Any analysis of Visegrad is therefore looking at self-supportive literature.⁴ The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) also now produces a substantial amount of literature and promotional materials on the grouping. Existing literature therefore risks being not only self-referential but also somewhat gracious towards Visegrad. Likewise, one would expect that the very people who work for Visegrad would also be highly supportive of it. For this article most of the main people currently responsible for those activities were interviewed (as were others in earlier years) and the enthusiasm for, and appreciation of interest in Visegrad was demonstrable. Because Visegrad does not have the resonance and familiarity of, say, the EU or NATO, it does not engender the same level of divisive interest. Detached assessment, if not of constructive criticism is necessary.

Additionally how we should judge Visegrad, or any regional formation, is a vexing matter. We know that the study of the exercise of power should be relative and relational – juxtaposing the capabilities of one actor against another, and also how important and how each wants to achieve its goal. Pure accounting does not predetermine outcomes. Nevertheless, Visegrad is small: four countries with a cumulative population that is slightly less than that of France; and although the countries have experienced substantial economic growth, communist-era planning left a significant legacy that render their per capita GDPs

² The International Visegrad Fund initiated and published a bibliography of works concerning the Group to mark its 20th anniversary. One can quibble with the compilation (some sources are very short, even newspaper contributions; chapters of the same book are counted separately); nevertheless, the “selected” and therefore not comprehensive bibliography still contains 1412 entries. (International Visegrad Fund, 2011).

³ For “region-ness” see Hettne (1993) although the focus in this article is per the definition given in the text.

⁴ The present commentator has done the same, having written a review article of Visegrad's first book in part to contribute to the noting of Visegrad's expanding identity (source to be added later).

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