



– EST. 1991 –

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*The Visegrad Cooperation: what should I call you?*

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*Abstract:*

*This study intends to explore the nature and functioning of the so-called Visegrad cooperation. As a 30-year intergovernmental platform witnessing growing academic and public interest in recent years, Visegrad has become an independent brand in European politics. Despite a number of valuable studies dedicated to this special form of subregional integration embedded within the European Union, theoretically and empirically well-founded research aimed at understanding the patterns of the Visegrad cooperation is still lacking to date. This study is intended to contribute to a deeper and better understanding of this platform. In this paper, we overview why states cooperate in general, then give a brief description and classification of the Visegrad cooperation. As part of this, we provide some ideas on the logic and pattern of the cooperation, and present some key issues from the past 30 years of the Visegrad platform. Finally, we analyse the underlying reasons for its relatively low level of institutionalisation, since this loose regional cooperation dating back to 1991 lacks any meaningful formal institutions that exist in other similar regional cooperations (see e.g. the Benelux Union or the Nordic Cooperation). We argue that the four governments are present and make politics in three different arenas simultaneously: the national, the regional (V4) and the supranational (EU) arena. Every government plays so-called nested games in each arena and keeps shifting its preferences between them, aimed at optimising its overall “payoff”. Regional cooperation occurs when the interests of the four governments overlap and they prefer the regional arena over the national and EU arena. We divide the 30-year period of the Visegrad cooperation into three larger phases: 1991–2004, 2004–2015 and 2015 –. These are described by the different weighting of the three arenas by the four governments, with the regional (V4) arena gradually appreciating over time. Finally, we argue that, beyond the flexibility offered, refraining from institutionalisation entails both practical (avoiding additional bureaucracy) and political (preserving sovereignty) benefits for the Visegrad countries. Our study relies on the relevant international relations and political science literature, and also borrows some theoretical assumptions from game and rational choice theory. The author hopes to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of regional cooperations in the EU.*

*Keywords: international cooperation, intergovernmentalism, regionalism, integration, cooperation, institution, institutionalisation, Visegrad Group, V4*

### ***International cooperation between states***

As the key players in international relations, states keep interacting with one another all the time. According to neoliberal institutionalism, one of the key approaches in international relations, international cooperation is justified by the interdependence of states, aimed at managing conflicts and representing state interests in a world of anarchy (Börzel, 2016). Cooperation can be seen as occurring “*when actors adjust their behaviour to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination*” (Lindblom, 1965:227). This implies two assumptions: first, the parties involved must have a goal (or several goals) to attain. Second, cooperation must provide those interacting with some kind of gain or reward (Milner, 1992). States as independent actors are assumed to be rational players in the international arena, seeking cooperation in order to maximise gains or minimise losses (Tema, 2014). In practice, cooperation can materialise tacitly, explicitly in the form of an agreement (or set of agreements), as a result of a negotiation in an explicit bargaining process, or can even be imposed on weaker parties by stronger ones (Milner, 1992).

International cooperation should be understood in the context of domestic political considerations as well, which clearly play their part in governments’ behaviour – for instance, “*in economic issues the internal distribution of the costs and benefits of different international policies weighs heavily*” (Milner, 1992:490). Putnam sees international cooperation as a complex phenomenon driven by and rooted in domestic political considerations beyond the reality of international relations (Putnam, 1988). International cooperation serves for the complex interests of states, and it cannot be reduced purely to economic issues, goals: other social, cultural, political, symbolic etc. considerations are also at play (Putnam, 1988). Our assumptions comfort to the ideas of Putnam and see the Visegrad cooperation as the result of a complex set of considerations of every Visegrad government.

Keohane argues that the simplest way of cooperation is setting up international institutions, regimes (Keohane, 1984). Indeed, similar to various social phenomena and problems, institutions have key importance in international politics as well. We can differentiate between different types and levels of institutions in light of our topic: from international agreements, rules, norms, laws etc. to various forms of integrations and organisations, institutions comprehensively permeate the world of international relations. In a broader sense, institutions are aimed at anchoring the expectations and guiding the behaviour of states. Regional cooperations – like Visegrad in our case – can be interpreted as the participating countries’ joint

attempt to achieve their political and policy goals, and to expand their power in international politics (Lake-Powell, 1999).

In this study, we examine the case of the Visegrad Group (hereinafter “Visegrad Group or “V4”) as a form of regional cooperation in Central Europe, comprising the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. More specifically, we are interested in how this platform works in practice, whether there is any pattern of cooperation (or non-cooperation), what factors governments consider and on what issues they typically cooperate. Furthermore, we seek some possible explanations for the low level of institutionalisation of the Visegrad cooperation. For the purpose of this study, institution shall mean any classical formal institutional structure, decision making or other relevant body which could improve the efficiency of the four governments’ cooperation either directly or indirectly, e.g. through making their commitment more credible. Following some theoretical overview, we outline the nature and key characteristics of the Visegrad cooperation. We introduce George Tsebelis’ ideas borrowed from game and rational choice theory. Then we present the key issues that best reflect the three periods of the Visegrad cooperation. In the final part, we explore the possible motivations of the four governments for refraining from deepening their cooperation, that is, from institutionalising. For the purpose of this paper, we rely on selected literature from the field of political science and international relations.

### ***Institutionalise or not to institutionalise?***

Scholars researching in the field of international relations have been primarily interested in how and under what conditions states cooperate. The factors that affect the level of institutionalisation in regional cooperation have been less researched. However, pioneer authors such as Keohane shed light on the importance of institutions in reducing the transaction costs of international cooperation (see the costs of coordination and enforcement) (Keohane, 1984).

The level of institutionalisation in international cooperations – in a narrower sense, i.e. formal institutional settings – can depend on some different factors. For instance, if the likelihood of opportunistic behaviour is considered high among the participating states, ensuring joint benefits will require a more institutionalised cooperation (Lida, 2000). Similarly, if the issues subject to international cooperation are relatively specific, a need for more institutionalised structures will arise, because safeguards and guarantees need to be in place regarding a specific asset that is less substitutable compared to more general assets (as such envisaging greater costs, losses if enforcement is not successful) (*Ibid.*).

International cooperation of states can be viewed “as a mixed motives game where some interests converge while others collide” (Krapohl, 2008:6). Common institutions can be useful tools in ensuring the credible commitment of the cooperating states to their long-term interests. In this regard, regional integration arrangements can be understood as a form of international regime (*Ibid.*).

As for some practical considerations, the formal institutionalisation of international cooperations can prove to be inefficient if the established structures, rules etc. are too rigid, too costly to operate or too bureaucratic. The possibility of selecting issues to cooperate on offers flexibility for the cooperating states. Thematic cooperations that do not require a permanent set of institutions can be mentioned here. This competitive advantage can be more easily exploited where the likelihood of opportunistic (or free-rider) behaviour is low among the participating actors.

### ***The Visegrad cooperation***

The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, as a geographical bloc in Central Europe, share some important characteristics. First, they are post-communist countries, each of them having regained their independence back in 1989-90. Second, in addition to similar historical, cultural roots and values, they have basically similar economic and political weight (Poland means an exemption in this regard) and interests. Third, all of the countries involved are willing to pursue cooperation with each other as a declared goal in a flexible framework since 1991. Finally, one should not forget about the fact that the four countries accessed the European Union (EU) together in 2004, meaning that they followed the same integration trajectory prior to accession, and shared similar political and policy challenges.<sup>1</sup> Based on the foregoing, the four countries seem to be ideal allies and natural cooperating partners for each other. However, at the same time, they are rivals on a number of issues (e.g. attraction of foreign investments). Therefore, their relationship can be described as “coopetition”.<sup>2</sup>

As the most successful regional activity in Central Europe (Cabada, 2018), the Visegrad cooperation is an interesting form of integration. According to Gebhard, the Visegrad Group is a special case of “complementary sub-regionalism”, understood as a loose form of cooperation embedded in the broader institutional framework of the European Union (Gebhard, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> With the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia were also given the task to build their own state structures.

<sup>2</sup> The term comes from the words „cooperation” and „competition”.

Dangerfield (2016) classifies it as a “subregional grouping” by following Dwan’s definition: “a process of regularised, significant political and economic interaction among a group of neighbouring states between national governments, local authorities, private business and civil society actors across a wide range of issues” (Dwan, 2000:81). The Visegrad intergovernmental cooperation launched in 1991 has a pre-accession and a post-accession phase (Dangerfield, 2008). In the beginning, three countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland)<sup>3</sup> aimed at the dissolution of the Soviet-era security and integration structures and the accession to the European Union and NATO (Dangerfield, 2008:638). One of their key achievement was the signing of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). Following various intensity and level of cooperation, and a clearly visible competition and rivalry between the countries in the EU accession process, the Visegrad countries finally succeeded in their NATO and EU integration efforts by 2004 (Schmidt, 2016, Grüber – Törő, 2010, Gallai 2018). As full members of the EU, the four countries were given the task to elaborate the framework and practices of the joint work within the institutions of the European integration.

The Visegrad governments make politics and policies in three different arenas simultaneously: the national, the regional (V4) and the supranational (EU) arena. Based on George Tsebelis’ theory, we argue that these governments play so-called nested games in the three arenas, and they optimise their strategy to achieve a maximum overall payoff (Tsebelis, 1990). The three arenas can be described as follows:

National arena: the field of domestic politics where governments strive to preserve their popularity to win the elections and keep political power. If this is not possible, they aim to minimise the loss of votes/influence.

Regional arena (V4): the venue of intergovernmental cooperation, typically along specific issues and policy fields, between the institutions, but more importantly, the governments of the four Visegrad countries.

Supranational arena (EU):<sup>4</sup> an arena located above the national level with a strong federalisation characteristic, independent institutions, and the primacy and enforcement of the *acquis communautaire*.

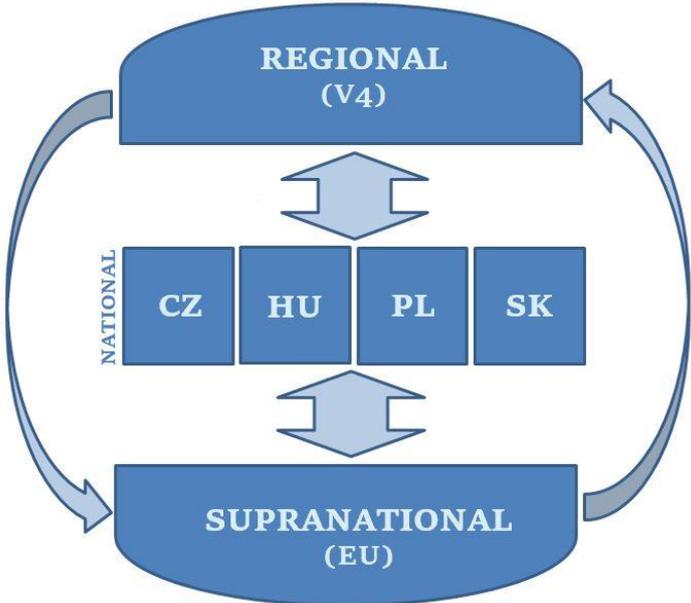
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<sup>3</sup> Czechoslovakia was dissolved as of 1 January 1993, while the Visegrad Declaration was signed nearly two years earlier (on 15 February 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Originally it was an intergovernmental cooperation as well, but after Maastricht it has increasingly taken up supranational characteristics.

In this approach, each government faces different actors (players) in various arenas. In the national arena, these are practically the relevant domestic political actors: the opposition, various institutions, organisations etc. with whom the government plays the games. The regional arena is the common arena where the four governments interact. Regional cooperation occurs when all the players concurrently view this arena as their principal arena (Tsebelis, 1990). In practical terms, this arena becomes active when the governments of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia place their focus on this dimension, i.e. regional cooperation (when their interests overlap). Otherwise, non-cooperation means the business-as-usual state of the V4 arena, a framework or stage not used as a result of the players' decision (when their interests are conflicting). Finally, the supranational arena represents the EU-level field where all the four governments are present, but, in contrast to the regional one, they are independent actors in the sense that they do not use the Visegrad format. Instead, they represent their interests without stepping up together with the remaining three Visegrad states. In our understanding, this also entails a strong commitment to meet the EU's expectations (normative compliance), with the respective government aiming to maximise its "payoff" (policy outcome) at the EU level. If this becomes a government's principal arena, less attention is paid to the national and the regional (V4) arena. The supranational (EU) arena is described by the highest level of complexity with regard to other players: a government faces many (currently 26) other governments, a set of various institutions, all functioning by special rules.

**Figure 1: Three arenas where the Visegrad governments are active**



*Source: Own elaboration*

Regarding the dynamics of the Visegrad cooperation, we can identify three different phases described by a varying willingness to cooperate on the side of the four governments:

- Phase 1 (1991–2004): characterised by individual preparations for the EU and NATO integration (era of competition, dominance of the national, and even more the supranational “EU” arena), loose regional cooperation, institutionalisation in politically non-vital areas;
- Phase 2 (2004–2015): characterised by the appreciation of national and EU arenas for interest representation with visible success (mix of cooperation and competition, emergence of national and regional arenas);
- Phase 3 (2015–): manifest problems and ineffective policies in the EU arena, increasing importance of national and regional arenas.

These phases are described by different strategic choices of the four governments regarding regional cooperation. In phase 1, for instance, the Visegrad platform was more rarely used compared to the two later phases, reflecting the dominance of the national and EU arena from 1991 to 2004. After the EU accession, the four governments explored the potential in regional cooperation, but some issues proved to be rather dividing than uniting (when cooperation was not rewarding).

***Key political and policy issues of the Visegrad cooperation***

In the following, we present some key political and policy issues from the past 30 years of the Visegrad cooperation. Though this platform is not exclusively limited to cooperation on EU-related issues, experience shows that the four participating countries typically expose themselves on such issues. The most important issues are listed in **Table 1**, but there were some others where regional cooperation was successfully achieved.<sup>5</sup> These are also presented in the following.

**Table 1: Phases and key issues of the Visegrad cooperation**

Dimension	Period		
	1991–2004	2004–2015	2015–

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<sup>5</sup> The table contains not only issues of successful cooperation, but rather the most prominent “hubs” where the behaviour and strategy of the four governments can be best revealed. Some of these (e.g. sanctions against Russia) even show cases of non-cooperation.

<b>Principal arena</b>	National, supranational	National, supranational	National, regional
<b>Issue/Set of issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU and NATO accession</li> <li>• CEFTA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schengen accession</li> <li>• Liberalisation of labour markets/land moratorium</li> <li>• Multiannual Financial Frameworks (2007–2013 and 2014–2020)</li> <li>• EU Constitution (Reform Treaty)</li> <li>• Sanctions against Russia</li> <li>• Eastern Partnership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migration</li> <li>• Rule of law/media/judiciary reforms</li> <li>• Election of Von der Leyen</li> <li>• Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 + Next Generation EU</li> <li>• Covid-19</li> </ul>

*Source: Own compilation*

### Period of 1991–2004

#### **EU accession/NATO accession/CEFTA**

In the first phase, the four governments generally preferred their own national arena and the EU arena over the newly established V4 format for more than a decade. The reasons for this seem to be understandable. First, the four governments were given the task to ensure the transition to democracy and market economy, and to build a well-functioning set of institutions. One can assume that under such circumstances no political willingness or capacity remained to fill the Visegrad platform with meaningful content. The goals and interests of the national governments rendered their strategy to be optimised for the national arena. Second, concurrently with the mentioned challenges, the four governments were intensively preparing for the EU (and NATO) accession. In the second half of the 1990's, they more increasingly appeared as rivals in the EU accession process. They believed that accession will be granted with more favourable conditions based on their individual progress and performance, and thus decided to follow individual strategies during negotiations. This necessarily weakened cohesion among the Visegrad governments (Grüber-Törő, 2010).<sup>6</sup> This is interpreted as the depreciation of the regional arena in favour of the supranational one. The issue of accession, naturally, should not be seen as an “ordinary” issue (like the attitude to Russia, for instance); rather, it should be seen as the general consequence of the four governments’ strategy. The issue of NATO accession

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<sup>6</sup> Following the millennium, however, the EU made it clear that all candidates will access simultaneously, and no preferential treatment will be granted based on the candidates’ performance.

shows similar characteristics, while the case of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) is a counterexample in the first period of the Visegrad cooperation. Signing the CEFTA was a key achievement of the Visegrad countries in this phase, but this issue does not overwrite the overall trend prevailing prior to 2004.

### Period 2004–2015

The EU accession of the four Visegrad states (2004) can be interpreted as a milestone in the past 30 years. Following this, the four governments generally discovered the opportunities offered by this regional format. Still, cooperation on some key issues did not occur due to either differing positions (e.g. sanctions against Russia) or (allegedly) conflicting interests (e.g. EU funds, reform of the EU). Nevertheless, these do not invalidate the general observation that regional cooperation levelled up in this period.

### **Schengen accession**

The border-free Schengen Area ensures free movement to hundred millions of citizens within the European Union. It is one of the success stories of the integration. The removal of internal border controls between member states also supports trade and tourism. In recognition of their mutual interest and strategic preferences, the Visegrad states, already as full EU members, applied together for Schengen membership (with the Baltic states) and conducted intense negotiations from 2004 to 2007. Beside the highest possible level of coordination between the four governments, the Visegrad Group used a single voice towards the Schengen member states and the European Commission (Grüber – Törő, 2010:63-64). Their unity persisted later, and their joint pressurising behaviour proved to be rewarding, and were admitted into Schengen in December 2007 (*Ibid.*). This issue reflects the appreciation of the regional arena as a result of the four governments' strategic choice. In order to realise their common interest (i.e. reach their maximum “pay-off”, the removal of internal border controls), they did utmost efforts to join the Schengen zone together, instead of seeking individual preferential treatments.

### **Liberalisation of labour markets/land moratorium**

This broader issue is related to the Schengen accession. After 2004, all the four governments were interested in the opening of labour markets by old member states so their citizens could take a job in Western Europe. Therefore, it is a relevant question whether the four governments took meaningful steps together to ensure preferential treatment for themselves. Seemingly, even if cooperation occurred in the regional arena, the result is minimum mixed: old member states

opened their labour markets for newcomers at different dates, varying from the accession date of 1 May 2004 (UK, Ireland, Sweden) to the end date of the 7-year transitional period of 1 May 2011 (Germany and Austria) (European Commission, 2011).

### **Multiannual financial framework (2007–2013 and 2014–2020)**

The funds available to the Visegrad countries in the 7-year multiannual financial frameworks (MFF) are of paramount importance to them. Based on their level of economic development and welfare, they have been eligible to receive large amounts from the Structural and Cohesion Funds since 2004. As such, the four governments are expected to easily find a common position and negotiate as a bloc. However, that is not necessarily the case. For instance, in the negotiations preceding the adoption of the MFF for 2014–2020, clear-cut cleavages could be identified between the four governments (see e.g. Kačan et. al, 2012).

### **EU Constitution (Reform Treaty)**

The four countries accessed the European Union in the middle of a fundamental institutional reform process. Though they were not key players in this, they had the chance to join in. As newcomers, they were given the chance to express their opinions on the developing institutional framework of the EU. However, they were not able to use a single voice in the constitutional Convention (Dangerfield, 2008). This was rather a failure, a missed chance of the four governments (Grüber-Törő, 2010).

### **Election of Donald Tusk**

A cooperation was pursued on an issue of different nature when former Polish PM Donald Tusk was appointed as the president of the European Council in 2014, enjoying the support of all the four Visegrad countries as a strategic goal for the region (Nič, 2016:285). In this case, the four countries could hope for a president who better understands this region and embraces the opinions and interests of the four countries (at least implicitly).

### **Energy policy**

Another interesting field of cooperation – and at the same time of non-cooperation – is energy policy. The Visegrad Group shares the common interest of energy security in the Central European region, which was reflected in the enhanced coordination on related issues following the gas crisis of 2009. This helped the four countries to use EU funds and the Commission's regulatory framework to build interconnectors and other missing infrastructure (Nič, 2016:285). However, staying on the issue of energy, the case of the proposed Energy Union project showed

a more divergent picture, in part deriving from the Visegrad countries' different domestic energy policy considerations (Mišík, 2016).

### **Sanctions against Russia**

The Ukrainian crisis has triggered sanctions by the European Union since 2014. The Visegrad governments proved to be divided on this issue (in particular on the third round of economic sanctions): Poland was strongly supportive, while the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia objected to the sanctions (Rácz, 2014). Though neither of them used a veto in the Council, the case well showed the limits of the Visegrad cooperation.

### **Eastern Partnership**

The Eastern Partnership was launched in 2009 as a joint initiative to provide a forum and policy framework with six non-member partner countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The Visegrad governments soon discovered their common interests in this field, and showed lively coordination and cooperation, making it a successful example of the history of this intergovernmental platform (Dangerfield, 2009). This was based on the geographical proximity and overlapping geostrategic interests of the four countries. Furthermore, the transformation of the EU neighbourhood policy in times of their accession gave them a good opportunity to find an own issue which could be greatly identified with the "Visegrad brand", a promising chance to start being "policy-makers" (Sadecki, 2018:262-263).

### **Paris Agreement**

The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia successfully influenced the joint EU negotiation position for the Paris global climate summit in October 2014, where they, instead of blocking the package as a whole, sought allies (Romania and Bulgaria) and presented a common set of demands to be incorporated in the EU's final proposal. This resulted in more favourable future emission reduction targets for the respective countries (Nič, 2016:285).

### *Period 2015–*

As already mentioned in the foregoing, the migration crisis of 2015 can be interpreted as the second milestone in the history of the Visegrad cooperation.

### **Migration**

Following the Hungarian government's anti-immigration position taken in early 2015, the other three Visegrad governments soon joined Viktor Orbán and formed a massive alliance on a key

dividing political issue. Though tensions had already appeared between Hungary and the EU prior to 2015, the migration crisis can be deemed as the start of a period where political and legal disputes with Brussels and other member states are more prevalent, and disappointment with the performance of the European Union comes to the surface not only on the side of the Hungarian government, but also other Visegrad governments, which was not typical before 2015. The European migration crisis means an important milestone in the history of the Visegrad cooperation, since the issue was able to bring the four countries closer than ever before, and could also create room for further cooperation. The four countries could gain an extra political weight after 2015 by stepping up together which they could not have achieved otherwise (Gallai, 2018). The migration crisis of 2015 has brought along one of the most prominent and politically interpretable cooperations of the Visegrad Group, providing the four countries with the greatest coverage in its history (Nič, 2016:282). Beyond the shared rejection of irregular mass migration to Europe, the new PiS-led government in Poland placed greater emphasis on and attributed more significance to the Visegrad cooperation, visibly boosting it (Gallai, 2018:5). In addition to simply gaining extra political weight, the four Visegrad countries could soon become the symbol of EU countries which categorically turn down any proposal for the relocation or resettlement of migrants, or encouraging migration from outside the continent. By smartly using the issue of irregular migration to Europe, the Visegrad Group could successfully collect allies in other member states, too. Moreover, the rewards gained from its common hard stance on immigration seem to far exceed the damages suffered in the political and legal debates against other EU member states and Brussels.

### **Double standard of food products**

The issue of double standard of food products emerged in 2013, but the key arguments of allegedly disadvantageously treated member states – Slovakia and Hungary – were communicated later, in 2016. The two countries requested the Commission to take the necessary measures in 2017, which was followed by a joint statement by the PMs of the Visegrad countries (Mogildea, 2018:8-9). This activism proved to be rewarding, since later the Juncker Commission agreed on the unacceptable practice of food producers, and a set of guidelines and even a directive were passed subsequently.

### **Rule of law/media/judiciary reforms**

Over the last decade, some heavy conflicting issues arose in the relationship of Hungary and Poland with the European Union, centred around the rule of law, media legislation and judiciary

reforms. Though the first of these issues had emerged already before 2015, tensions and conflicts seem to remain to date. According to public information, coordinated action – or even solidarity – has been missing in such cases among the Visegrad governments, again, revealing some limits of the regional arena. In this respect, there are some more recent examples of these dividing lines between the four governments: for instance, the Czech and Slovak partners (foreign ministers) openly criticised the Hungarian and Polish prime ministers for their veto against the combined financial package including the MFF 2021–2027 and the Next Generation EU (European Recovery Instrument) because of some rule of law criteria incorporated as conditionality (Euractiv, 2020). Interestingly, in order to demonstrate their alliance and cooperation, the Hungarian and the Polish prime ministers even issued a joint declaration on their position (Visegrad Post, 2020).

### **Election of Von der Leyen**

The Visegrad governments – especially Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán – manifestly supported Ursula Von der Leyen to be the new president of the European Commission in 2019 (EuObserver 2019). The key political goal was clear-cut: to prevent socialist candidate Frans Timmermans from becoming the president. Although it is the European Parliament's competence to elect the president of the Commission, coordination was also relevant in this case, since the four governments had the chance to deliver the votes of their own parties present in the EP. Though the election took place as a secret ballot, the MPs of the Hungarian governing parties admittedly voted for Von der Leyen, and so did their Czech counterparts according to media reports (Visegrad Group, 2019a and 2019b).

### **Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 and Next Generation EU**

The largest financial package in the history of the EU promised an ideal field for regional (V4) cooperation, since interests seem to be overlapping. This is also reflected in the programme of the current Polish Visegrad Presidency, which foresaw significant coordination among the four governments in the course of the negotiations (Visegrad Group, 2020). High-level discussions between the cabinets were already underway in mid-2020 (Government of Poland, 2020). Nevertheless, as already mentioned above, the Hungarian and the Polish governments preferred some political considerations (see the veto) over agreed action (if any).

### **Covid-19**

The Visegrad countries have suffered severe consequences of the coronavirus pandemic since

early 2020. In theory, as one could expect, combatting the pandemic could be an ideal field for cooperation, by expressing strong solidarity towards each other. In addition to the new EU financial package, the programme of the current Polish Visegrad Presidency also emphasised the importance of acting together against the adverse consequences of the pandemic (Visegrad Group, 2020). Nonetheless, only a few minor signs of realised coordination, political and policy action on this issue can be traced from publicly available information.

Overall, these issues well reflect the potential offered by the Visegrad platform. After 2004, the four governments started to use this regional cooperation framework more frequently to advance their own agenda and interests. This trend continued after the migration crisis of 2015, accompanied by the manifest questioning of the effectiveness and authority of the EU arena. However, some issues after 2004 revealed different interests and strategies pursued by the four governments, at the same time highlighting the limits of the Visegrad platform.

### ***Institutional arrangement and functioning of the Visegrad cooperation***

In the final part, we briefly analyse the level of institutionalisation of the Visegrad platform. By nature, cooperation between the Visegrad governments aims to improve the interest representation potential available to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia independently. Therefore, their rationale for cooperation is not a classical institutional problem, or at least not directly: the case of the cohesion and structural funds to be allocated among member states under the EU multiannual financial frameworks is an interesting example. When they support each other in ensuring funds for themselves, they act in a coordinated manner (in solidarity as allies) to improve their economic welfare, i.e. to get more funds, which can be interpreted as a distribution of “public” goods where they are a “privileged group”.

The brief history and milestones, and the above (non-exhaustive) list of issues of the V4 cooperation shed light on the varying intensity and clear limitations of this regional “soft” integration. As for the latter, one should also bear in mind that the Visegrad cooperation heavily depends on the national political background of the four participating countries: based on past experience, the head of government in office in each country has key role in driving cooperation. If seen as valuable and beneficial (naturally, in political terms), a supporting attitude materialises and activism will prevail (see arena choices). If this is not the case in any of the four countries, the result will likely be a low level of activity.

The Visegrad Group is usually identified with the highest level of cooperation, which is based on the regular discussion and coordinated action of the four prime ministers. Beyond other

occasions, they hold their own informal “mini summit” before every Council summit in order to discuss their opinion and strategy. Indeed, this format is the most relevant one in terms of both symbolic and practical power. Symbolic, because they can demonstrate unity at the highest possible level – towards both their voters at home and their potential European partners –, and practical, since the most valuable results can be delivered by the heads of governments on key issues on the EU level. Naturally, the V4 governments interact not only on the highest level: expert group, diplomatic, ministerial etc. levels also witness regular discussions and coordinated action, as well as do more technical or sectoral areas (Grüber – Törő, 2010).

Despite the successes listed above, the power and efficacy of the Visegrad cooperation is hard to assess for some more general reasons. First, the world of bargaining in (international) politics will never be visible in its entirety. We can confidently argue this also holds true for our subject matter. We can analyse the direct and indirect signs of cooperation – or non-cooperation –, which are often limited to official statements, press conferences, interviews etc. Second, partly relating to the previous argument, we can never be 100% sure whether an important result was attained thanks to an alleged coordinated action of the V4s. Nevertheless, as indicated above, there are some visible signs of the appreciating Visegrad format.

Overall, the Visegrad Group is a flexible form of cooperation that is exploited on selected issues where all the four participating governments are willing to act in a coordinated manner to influence EU-level outcomes for their own benefit. It is a mix of formal and informal interest representation methods at their disposal with clear limitations. And, though not institutionalised in the strictest sense, the Visegrad cooperation features some arrangements that can be deemed as institutions that determine the functioning of the VG, borrowing it a *sui generis* characteristic. First and foremost, the annual rotating presidency represents the framework for the four participating countries with practical significance.<sup>7</sup> The country holding the Visegrad Presidency of all times is responsible for setting the agenda of the one-year period concerned, which is always adapted to the work schedule of the European Council, thus guaranteeing the relevance of the cooperation.

In addition to the annual presidency, we can also mention the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), which was established by the four governments in 2000 to promote regional cooperation in and outside of the V4 region.<sup>8</sup> The IVF has what the Visegrad platform itself lacks: own

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<sup>7</sup> For the presidency programmes see: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs> (accessed on: 05/05/2021)

<sup>8</sup> For detailed information on the IVF see: <https://www.visegradfund.org/> (accessed on: 05/05/2021)

funding and permanent institutions such as a Secretariat, a Conference of Ministers and a Council of Ambassadors. The funding capacity of the IVF is EUR 8 million annually, which is awarded and disbursed to applicants in the form of grants, scholarships and artist residencies.

### *Stuck in between?*

Based on the above introduction to the functioning of the Visegrad Group, one could wonder why the four members refrain from formal institutionalisation. Examples are given: in the Nordic Cooperation – comprising North European states – we see the Nordic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Secretariat, the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers and so on.<sup>9</sup> The Benelux Union has its Committee of Ministers, the Benelux Council, the Benelux Secretariat-General, the Benelux Interparliamentary Consultative Council and even the Benelux Court of Justice.<sup>10</sup> However, for the sake of correctness, one should note that these institutional structures were already in place and functioning when the Visegrad countries were still building the “socialist dream”.

The weak institutionalisation of the Visegrad platform was a deliberate decision of the four countries’ governments in the 1990’s (Chruściel, 2014). This could be justified by the uncertainty surrounding the Central European region during the transition in the early 1990’s, under which circumstances Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland intended to create a loose framework instead of committing to strict formal structures (*Ibid.*). This can be interpreted as the key argument in favour of the Visegrad platform how we have known it for 30 years now. As Nagy (2021) put it, “[...] *the key to a long-lasting and deepening cooperation between the Visegrad countries was the mutual vision of open and flexible interaction with a pragmatical approach focusing on common values and interests*” (Nagy, 2021:7).

Indeed, already having showed some promising results, one could expect a similar institutionalisation in the Visegrad Group so the four countries could reach success on other issues as well. Some authors even criticise the Visegrad cooperation for lacking a higher level of institutionalisation. For instance, Walsch refers to other criticism the VG receives for its little institutionalisation, making it – as argued – highly inefficient (Walsch, 2014). Progressive liberal Czech analysts state that the lack of institutionalisation often resulted in focusing on either low-level technical aspects or controversial topics (Novotná – Stuchlíková, 2017).

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<sup>9</sup> For the organisational structure see: <https://www.norden.org/en/organisation/nordic-co-operation> (accessed on: 05/05/2021)

<sup>10</sup> For the organisational structure see: <https://www.benelux.int/fr/benelux-unie/institutions> (accessed on: 05/05/2021)

The basic framework of the Visegrad cooperation has been unchanged for almost thirty years now. The question arises: why? The simplest and emptiest answer would sound as follows: because any, some or all of the four countries are satisfied with the current framework, or at least have no incentive to take efforts to change it (or cannot agree on the institutions to establish). As a more meaningful explanation, we can assume that flexibility and informality (ensured by the current framework) are valued more by them compared to well-grounded formal decision making bodies.

This latter argument can be supplemented with some others. First, as EU member states, the Visegrad countries already operate a sizable bureaucracy solely due to their EU membership, and it can be imagined easily that they do not wish to build additional institutional structures (not to mention the costs such structures would demand). Second, cooperation with the remaining Visegrad countries is not the only viable option for the V4 states: alternative coalition partners can be sought on various issues on the EU level, which preference could not necessarily be pursued if common Visegrad decision making bodies were in place and gave clear-cut mandate on how to act on the EU level. In the event of unanimous decision making, this would not be a problem, because one country deserting would sink the entire cooperation on a given issue and thus be relieved from acting against its will. But then what would be the point in establishing permanent institutional structures? This dilemma sheds light on the question of sovereignty, because establishing common formal institutions would require to give up some of it. Add to this the fact that any Visegrad government could find itself facing a partner from another Visegrad country who would be confrontational and hostile (as a result of general elections). This is something politicians want to avoid based on rational political calculation. Under the current loose framework, cooperation occurs where desired by all the four countries, which is a quite comfortable solution.

### ***Conclusion***

International relations theories offer valuable insights on why and how states cooperate in the international arena. States are independent rational actors who seek to advance their (national) interests. Cooperation is subject to this notion, irrespective whether governments do it in more formal institutional settings or rather informally. Nevertheless, the level of institutionalisation shows a great variety from one regional platform to another. The Visegrad Group represents a unique form of regional intergovernmental cooperation in the European Union that could gain some extra political weight for its members in the recent years. Looking back at the past 30 years of this platform, one can see a varying pattern of cooperation and non-cooperation on

various issues. We identified three larger phases in the history of the Visegrad Group: (1) 1991–2004; (2) 2004–2015; and (3) 2015–. The first period was generally characterised by the dominance of national politics and policy making due to the nature of challenges following the regime changes in the region. With the achievement of EU and NATO membership, the four countries were given the chance to explore the potential offered by regional interest representation (predominantly on issues with EU relevance). Though the period after 2004 also showed some examples of conflicting interests – and thus, the lack of cooperation –, significant successes were achieved: the Schengen accession, the Eastern Partnership initiative, the issue of migration, or the election of Donald Tusk or Ursula Von der Leyen seem to be the most prominent examples. On the other side (i.e. lack of cooperation), among others things, we find the disagreement on the economic sanctions against Russia, the cases of the multiannual financial frameworks,<sup>11</sup> or the Covid-19 crisis management.<sup>12</sup> The migration crisis gave the opportunity for the Visegrad governments to increase their political weight on the EU level, which they smartly exploited. Still, despite this momentum, political dividing lines between the four governments did not fully disappear. All these examples reflect and justify the non-institutional character of the Visegrad platform, providing a flexible tool for the four participating governments of all times. This flexibility means the key rationale for preserving the non-institutional character, but other explanations are also at play. Equipped with some important institutions (annual Visegrad presidency, International Visegrad Fund), the Visegrad platform remains a rather loose, flexible framework for the coordinated action of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, which they can find appropriate to advance their own national interests in EU decision making from time to time. This brief study brought some further possible explanations why the four countries refrain from formally deepening the Visegrad cooperation, including some practical (see the avoidance of additional bureaucracy) and rather political (see the question of sovereignty) considerations.

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<sup>11</sup> MFF negotiations – at least according to publicly available information – show the signs of both cooperation and competition.

<sup>12</sup> As already mentioned above, we cannot have a full and comprehensive picture of the Visegrad governments' cooperation (or non-cooperation), since the world of international politics and diplomacy classically belongs behind closed doors. Researchers – without interviews conducted with decision makers, for instance – have to rely on publicly available information (official government documents, Visegrad joint statements, declarations, voting results in the Council of the European Union etc.). Therefore, all the arguments presented in this study are relevant for what can be learned from public information. This means that, unfortunately, package deals or other bargaining cannot be identified here regarding either the discussed issues or other unrevealed ones.

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