

# VISEGRÁD, THE UNWRITTEN ALLIANCE

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## 1. Could you give us a description of circumstances of the Visegrad meeting held in 1991? What was the position of Hungary as host country?

Three historic kingdoms constitute the core of Central Europe: the Polish, the Czech (or Bohemian), and the Hungarian. They often had to fight wars against the nearby Great Powers for their freedom, their very existence. In October 1335, hosted by the King of Hungary, Carloberto of Anjou, the kings of Poland (Kazimierz the Great) and Bohemia (John of Luxembourg), met in the Royal Palace at Visegrád in order to coordinate their commercial policies. Today's cooperation is rooted in the fight of the Central European intellectuals (the 'dissidents') for human rights, based upon the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, particularly on Charta '77, and in the inspiration received from the Polish Solidarność, and the reburial of the martyrs of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in June 1989.

At the beginning of 1990 the democratic new politicians of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, who had been opposed to Communism and now formed the freely-elected governments, were determined to preserve their solidarity. In November 1990, when the Paris Charter recording the basic principles of a new Europe after the Cold War was signed, Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall proposed to his Polish and Czech colleagues that the leaders of the three countries should meet at the beginning of the following year in Visegrád, recalling the royal summit of 1335, in order to coordinate their political aims. 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 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 other, coordinating foreign policy in all directions. The precondition of joining the process of European integration was seen as the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the political and military alliance imposed upon them by the Soviet Union in 1955. The common stand taken by the three countries sped up the process: the alliance of the unwilling was officially dissolved by the member-states on 1 July in Prague.

Sadly, I am the last survivor of the foreign ministers who prepared that memorable meeting and the documents signed in the restored part of the Visegrád palace of the Hungarian Angevin kings. I mourn the passing away of my two dear friends and colleagues, Krzysztof Skubiszewski and Jiří Dienstbier, and, naturally, József Antall (my one-time history teacher) as well as Vaclav Havel. There was such a harmony in thinking between all the founders: they were all staunch anti-Communists, committed to democracy and human rights.

## 2. Could you speak about the symbolic meaning of the Visegrad meeting? Whose idea was Visegrad as location for the meeting?

[I have answered that, too.]

## 3. How can you define the policy of Hungary towards the different integration forms during the first years of transition? What was the regional alternative for the Visegrad formation?

Besides European integration as the long-term aim of Visegrád there was also a determination to set aside old rivalries and the memory of conflicts between the four nations, to replace them with sincere friendship, re-establishing the economic and cultural ties that existed before the First World War. Visegrád was the alternative to earlier, bad arrangements for Central Europe, 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). Visegrád set a positive model for the whole post-communist world. It was not a formal alliance, but was quite close to that. As once I put it to Skubiszewski, my Polish colleague, it was an alliance *"in pectore,"* in our hearts.

Visegrád precluded an *"unholy alliance,"* a new *"Little Entente"* by the three countries which, as a result of the 1920 Trianon Peace Treaty, acquired large Hungarian minorities: Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. The nationalists of those three desired cooperation in repressive policies against those minorities.

There were quite a few earlier plans for bringing together the smaller nations of Central Europe. After the defeat of the Hungarian War of Independence in 1849 its leader, Lajos Kossuth, contemplated a *"Danubian Confederation"* of Hungary, Transylvania, Serbia and the Romanian principalities. The Romanian Aurel Popovici published a book in 1906 *„Die Vereinigten Staaten von Großösterreich"* a plan for the transformation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy into a federation. During the Second World War, conquered by Hitler and threatened by Stalin, the Slovak Milan Hodža had similar ideas in his *"Federation in Central Europe"*, published in his exile in the United States (1942). Several Hungarian and Polish contemporaries wrote and thought along similar lines during the war years. The idea was supported by several American and British politicians and authors, including Prime Minister Winston Churchill, but was categorically rejected by Stalin, whose aim was to bring its whole western neighbourhood under his total control. In the 1970s and 80s many intellectuals in the satellite states (Milan Kundera was best known internationally) revived the idea of Central Europe, as a historically and culturally distinct region desiring independence from Soviet domination.

A very cautious version of Central European cooperation during the last years of the Cold War was the creation of the *Alps-Adriatic (Alpen-Adria) Partnership (AAP)* in 1978. It began as a cooperation that crossed borders and brought together regions with divergent

social, political and economic systems. It included the provinces of Northern Italy (Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Veneto), Austria (Upper Austria, Styria and Carinthia), Bavaria, Croatia and Slovenia, and from the mid-1980's the south-western counties of Hungary (Vas, Zala, Somogy, Baranya, Győr-Sopron). In the late 1980s this region had 40 million inhabitants (more than twice the population of Scandinavia), and it contained 18 regional administrations. The many ethnic, national, linguistic and cultural groups made it one of the most colourful and varied regions in Europe. The aim of the AAP in the politically divided Europe was to transcend the division brought about by the Cold War. From above it wanted to harmonize development, environmental and economic plans, and from below (more important and more practical) to create micro-regional cooperation between civil communities, and so to prepare a testing ground for pan-European „pre-integration,” free of blocs and antagonistic ideologies.

It was primarily Italy who decided in a fundamentally unfavourable world political environment to establish a regional cooperation that extended beyond the bounds of the European Economic Community and constituted a thrust towards Central and Eastern Europe. This organization – willy-nilly – contributed to the erosion of the two European blocs that emerged after the Second World War. By the end of October 1989 the Polish and Hungarian regime change was on track, but the Berlin Wall was still solid and Ceausescu was moving ahead with destroying old Bucharest and erasing villages. Then, on 11 November, Italy, Austria, Yugoslavia and Hungary established the governmental cooperation called *Quadrangolare* in Budapest. Italy and Hungary in particular expressed clearly the intention of using the initiative to transcend the military and ideological blocs. The acceleration of the democratic processes in Europe, the fall of the communist dominoes raised the question of whether an initiative in Central Europe designed to bridge the gap between the blocs had a reason to exist now that the objective stated on its foundation had lost its validity. An unambiguous answer was provided by the steadily progressing cooperation inside it, by the dozen or so working committees dealing with more than 80 cooperation topics, having several hundred experts taking part in them, and the figure of several thousand participants at its various events. On a political level, the interest of the new democracies was shown by the transformation of the regional initiative into a *Pentagonale* (with the accession of Czechoslovakia) at the 31 July 1990 summit in Venice, and its expansion into a *Hexagonale* on 27 July 1991 in Dubrovnik, when Poland was admitted. Finally, recognizing the break-up of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, Ukraine, too, was accepted. At the Vienna summit on 18 July 1992, the name Central European Initiative (CEI) was assumed. In the following years Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova also joined, increasing the membership into 16. Nominally CEI still exists, but without the countries which joined the European Union in 2004 and 2007 respectively.

The Cracow Summit in October 1991 of the Visegrád Three saw the conclusion of bilateral treaties, and issued an important warning to the international community on the conflict in Yugoslavia, denouncing the war crimes committed. The three countries 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. That

did not prevent the three countries signing the “Europe Agreement” with the European Community together on December 16, 1991 in Brussels.

The most recent association in the larger Central European region is called the Three Seas, or Trimarium/Intermarium initiative (in another term BABS: Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea Initiative). It is a forum of twelve EU states from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea. Launched in 2016 in Dubrovnik, the aim is regular regional dialogue for development. It comprises Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

#### **4. How do you evaluate the Visegrad cooperation today? According to you what are the possibilities and the risks involved in the cooperation?**

Cooperation never stopped, even when it weakened, due to the attitude of certain leaders. It gained new momentum in 1998, after Orbán and Dzurinda, then both centre-right politicians, were elected Prime Ministers. Cultural cooperation was always very popular, and the creation of the common “Visegrád Fund” mainly for such projects, helped to bring “Visegrád” closer to society, to the ordinary citizens. The Kroměříž Summit in 2004 stated that the key objectives set in the 1991 Visegrád Declaration have been achieved. A declaration was adopted, which expressed the determination to continue the cooperation, now as members of the European Union.

After V. Orbán won the elections of 2010 with a super majority and was reelected in 2014 he was instrumental in giving a stronger, distinct identity to the cooperation vis-à-vis the rest of the European Union. For a while there were regular consultations with the Baltic Three and the Scandinavian Five as well. The V-4 became more visible in the response to the mass migration of 2015, as they categorically refused to admit economic immigrants and possibly even genuine refugees from Africa and Asia. Poland, aware of its weight in Central Europe, started to see itself as a regional leader. In the last few years, however, the Czech Republic, and even more markedly Slovakia, distanced itself from the anti-Brussels rhetoric of Hungary, while Poland, also strongly criticized for its internal policy by the EU, does not approve of Hungary’s intimate relations with President Putin’s Russia. Hungary is not supported by the Visegrád group in its conflict with Ukraine over the serious curtailing of the educational rights of the Hungarian minority in Trans (or Sub)-Carpathia. During the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States Poland and Hungary ostentatiously showed their sympathy with his policies. So in the last years the solidarity of the V-4 visibly weakened in both foreign and domestic affairs. That, however, can be easily remedied by adjusting the present policies of the four governments.

Visegrád is not only about 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 should have improved more, trans-border cooperation should develop much faster, restoring old, pre-1914 economic ties. The cultural and other programmes supported by the Visegrád Fund are popular because people see in them the actual working of the Visegrád idea.

## **5. What do you think about the impact of the Visegrad cooperation in the field of national minority policy? This issue is traditionally very important for Hungary.**

The 1991 Declaration contained the following statement: "They emphasize that national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities – in accordance with traditional European values and in harmony with internationally recognized documents on human rights – must enjoy all rights in political, social, economic and cultural life, and also in education." The signatories committed themselves to "developing a society where people are tolerant towards local, regional and national communities and are free of hatred, nationalism, xenophobia, and quarrelling with their neighbours." This conviction of the founders was never repudiated, but neither was it followed sincerely by the neighbours of Hungary. At least that is how Hungary and the Hungarian minorities feel it. I sincerely hope, however, that the many advantages shown by positive western examples and models, like South Tyrol, the Aland Islands, Schleswig, Belgium etc. will convince Hungary's neighbours of the wisdom of treating the Hungarian and other minorities fairly, in accordance with their moderate demands and the recommendations and conventions of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Friendly advice from the EU and NATO would facilitate that.

Having said that the present status and treatment of the Hungarian national minorities still leaves much to be desired, the V-4 deserves recognition as the proof that cooperation is the best way to prevent rivalry and conflict between states, bringing out the common interests of the participants. Visegrád has been a cornerstone for stability since the end of the Cold War, and remains a model to be emulated by other regions.

## **6. We are witnessing the „political ideologization“ of Visegrad. What do you think about this process? How do you see the Visegrad cooperation in the future?**

Nowadays in the EU one hears much about infringements of the rule of law and about illiberal policies. In my opinion it would be most regrettable if the V-4 were associated with populism, serious deficiencies of democracy, curtailment of the freedom of the press and the independence of the judiciary. At its foundation the foremost aim was to strengthen democracy, and to rejoin Europe by becoming members of the European integration structure. An anti-EU position, threatening the common budget with a veto and similar steps are repudiating the very idea of Visegrád and represent a most serious threat to its future.

I admit that 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. But it should be seen as obvious that 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 France, and even its economic strength would be comparable to that of Spain. Central Europeans 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 the four were and should remain strongly committed to Atlanticism, to the continued close collaboration of the United States and Europe, as they showed that during the early years of their association.

In the last thirty years the world has learned the name Visegrád, because those four countries set good examples for other regions struggling with the difficult political and economic legacy of the past. In the so-called migration crisis they became more visible than ever before. In my view they alone still have little chance to convince the rest of the EU to share the opposition of the V-4 to admitting any larger number of fugitive Muslims. But through more dialogue it should be possible to adopt a common European policy of keeping those unfortunate millions away by helping them to settle temporarily in the countries near Syria and Iraq, and to push for common international action to bring about peace in Arabia and thus allowing the refugees to return to their home country.

Apart from playing an active role in the on-going discussions in the EU the V-4 should help the fight against the many phenomena which represent a threat to world peace and stability like terrorism, racism, intolerance against national and religious minorities. All those horrible and repulsive tendencies and crimes had once taken place in Central Europe, too, and the message is unequivocal: they should not occur again anywhere, and that they can be prevented only by joint action.

In a book I published in 2016 on Hungary's neighbourhood policy during the years of the regime change (*Kísérlet a trianoni trauma orvoslására*). I gave the following forecast about Visegrád: "It was founded by the determined opponents of the communist dictatorship, who were dedicated to a western-type democracy and the common interests of the peoples of Central Europe. Visegrád will last until that way of thinking will remain decisive in these four countries."

## 7. What is the significance of Visegrad cooperation for Hungarian foreign policy?

For all the citizens of the four countries the Visegrád Cooperation multiplies their weight and influence. For Hungary specifically, I think there is the additional advantage to work closely together with those peoples with whom the Hungarians used to live together for a thousand years in a common political structure. Having separated and for many decades having quarreled with each other over the borders and the treatment of the Hungarian minorities, now they are together in the V-4, in the European Union and in NATO. That helps to restore many old economic, cultural and intellectual ties between them, and reduces animosities which used to poison so many personal contacts and relationships.

Almost two hundred years ago the great Czech historian and politician František Palacký, in his famous letter to the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848, expressed his view that "if the Austrian State had not existed for ages, it would have been in the interests of Europe and indeed of humanity to endeavor to create it as soon as possible." As it is known, Palacký advocated a kind of federation between the smaller nations living in the basin of the Danube. Indeed,

most of (though not all) the territory of the V-4 coincides with the erstwhile Habsburg, after 1867 Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. That was a common economic space, with no internal borders, with excellent lines of communications, with a common currency, a common foreign policy, and even with a common army. I do hope that the heart of Central Europe will soon return to that situation, but without the shortcomings of the one-time Habsburg Monarchy, and as members of the union of all the European democracies.

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He is the author of a large number of scholarly publications and political writings, including *Lost Prestige. The Changing Image of Hungary in Britain, 1894–1918* (Budapest, 1986, 1994, 2020 in Hungarian), in English: Reno, NV: Helena History Press LLC, 2020); *Post-Communist Europe and Its National/Ethnic Problems* (Budapest, 2005, 2009), *July 1944. Deportation of the Jews of Budapest Foiled*. (Ed.) (Reno, NV: Helena History Press LLC, 2018.) His book on Hungary's relations to its neighbours in the years of the regime change (*Kísérlet a trianoni trauma orvoslására. Magyarország szomszédsági politikája a rendszerváltás éveiben*) came out in 2016. He is co-author of a book on the history of skiing in the Carpathian Basin (2016).