



## Visegrad Cooperation and the Hungarian EU presidency – Representing the Common Interests of the Region

Gábor Túry

The Visegrad cooperation is now celebrating its 20th anniversary. Two decades ago on the 15th February 1991, three newly independent countries – Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary – established their cooperation. This cooperation symbolizes the European Union and Euro-Atlantic integration process of the post-socialist countries in Central-Europe. The integration provided a framework and guarantees for the building of democracy and free capitalist competition. At that time the post-socialist countries demolished the one-party system and the socialist style economy in order to build democracy and move toward capitalism. From the very beginning, the Visegrad group has had a clear agenda: to promote the integration of the CE region to the EU as rapidly as possible. After the EU enlargement, however, many politicians predicted the cooperation had lost its principal function. Not only because big bang enlargement could be interpreted as a fiasco by the Visegrad four, but also because many thought such an alliance could potentially weaken European integration. French President Nicolas Sarkozy also expressed his displeasure when the Visegrad countries gave a presentation at a European Council meeting. But the V4 is not an *alliance* in a legal sense: it is an *integration mechanism* based on the interests of its member states. It is a forum for the discussion of the issues and opinions of its members and has a flexible framework for discussing different topics. This is why, from the perspective of different political groups, it

remains a fragile think tank. There were periods in the life of the V4, when the cooperation was in a „neither dead nor alive” state for various internal political reasons. These circumstances provide the general framework for understanding how the V4 can serve as a successful, politically conciliatory arrangement and clues to how the Hungarian presidency could provide a decisive contribution.

The Hungarian presidency has been trying to emphasize the Central European character of its program. However some hot international issues and the future of the Eurozone are narrowing the maneuvering room of the presidency. Three general presidency program priorities reflect the interests of the V4 countries. Internal policies under the priority “Stronger Europe” could help strengthen the water and road networks between the New Member states. There has been a notable improvement in the case of building Trans European Networks. Creating high capacity transit north-south traffic linkages between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean would have both a “*development effect*” as well as a beneficial impact on heavily-used networks. The adoption of a *realizable* Strategy for the Danube Region would not only strengthen linkages between the West European industrial core area and CE industrial and urban zones, but would also incorporate border regions which until now have remained excluded from development opportunities. The word “realizable” is crucial, because the weakest link in the strategy – at least

based on the consensus of very different regions – is the lack of a feasible target. The priority “Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy” could involve and integrate such countries into the EU partnership program which have long-time partnerships with the V4. On the other hand, the EU partnership programs can help to ensure the security of the region, the main priority of the next EU president, Poland. Last but not least, the priority the “North-South Energy Connection”, has the goal of protecting the energy stability of the area from the Baltic Sea region to the Adriatic in order to complement the currently dominant east-west emphasis. This priority is high on the agenda and the V4 countries have taken steps to complete the north-south energy axis. Hungary also has a high interest in the further diversification of its energy resources through the Nabucco and Southern Corridors as well. Therefore, in order to ensure Hungarian gas supply security, Hungary has significant incentives to improve its achievements: by completing the Slovakian-Hungarian (proposed), the Romanian-Hungarian (completed) and the Croatian-Hungarian (soon to be completed) gas pipelines. Referred to as the Declaration of the Budapest V4+ Energy Summit (24 February 2010), the 20th anniversary of V4 meetings in Bratislava closed with tangible agreements. In order to improve the importance of regional energy cooperation, the Visegrad Four group presented a vision for representing their interests in the common strategy “Energy infrastructure priorities for 2020 and beyond”.

Based on the reality on the ground, representing the energy security interests of the V4 is a difficult task. First, there is no common EU energy security policy. This goal instead remains the exclusive competence of the member states. Second, concerning energy resource diversification, EU15 countries have different interests than those of the CEE region. Energy dependence on Russian resources is high in the CEE region. But building the Nord-South pipeline only for energy security reasons is not adequate justifi-

fication. The potential economic gain must also be clear. Without the potential for turning a profit, the Hungarian EU presidency’s energy sector priority emphasis on the North-South project has few prospects. Moreover, it remains unclear what the origin of the gas will be for these pipelines, as well as where they will begin.

Concerning the common interests of the CE region, the Hungarian presidency has little maneuvering room in which to achieve its program goals, especially when pitted against German and French initiatives. In the case of the Eurozone stabilization program, before the presidency period Hungary had a very ambitious plan to move the stabilization program forward as an outsider and New Member State. At the next meeting in March, the Eurozone members will meet together without the presence of the current EU president Hungary. If Hungary is not able to manage its Presidency program, the same situation is likely to arise as when the French press fiercely criticized the Czech presidency.

Regarding the representation of national and common regional interests, the Institute for World Economics previously published a study with the title, “The impact of the 10 New Member States on EU decision-making – The experience of the first years”. The basic conclusion was that, in the case of voting alliances and ad-hoc voting coalitions, regional cooperation is not a dominant factor. Despite the previously mentioned shared interests and positions, there is no evidence of a consistent pattern of building alliances across the NMS. On the contrary, the NMS initiate or join very different coalitions of Member States depending on the topic discussed. The European decision making mechanism is the same as any other domestic level political decision-making mechanism: political interests and power are sometimes stronger than the predominant consensus.

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