

Maria ROŠTEKOVÁ

Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica (Slovakia)
maria.rostekova@umb.sk

Gilles ROUET

Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica (Slovakia)
gilles.rouet@umb.sk

THE VISEGRÁD GROUP – A MODEL TO FOLLOW?

ABSTRACT The Visegrád Group, based in particular to support the “return to Europe” of Central European countries, has resulted in a flexible framework for the implementation of cooperation at various levels. This framework was effective in the negotiation of the accession to the European Union. The group was maintained after the 2004 accession and the activities have evolved. Now, the V4 is an active regional group allowing the four countries to speak with one voice, both internally and externally. This raises the question of the structure of the European Union, specific confederation of 28 member states with complex governance, not always satisfactory. Two issues need to be explored: on the one hand, an extension of such regional alliances which could perhaps improve this governance, and, on the other hand, the establishment of regional alliances including some candidate countries (official and/or potential) could also make it possible to overcome the opposition between enlargement and deepening, and, secondly, to support the negotiations of countries while establishing a necessary environment of good neighbourliness.

Keywords: European integration, Regional cooperation, West Balkans, Deepening, Enlargement

INTRODUCTION

In October 2011, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia celebrated the 20th anniversary of the birth of the Visegrád Group (V4). They have now entered the third decade of the existence of this flexible platform for regional cooperation. Together, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the aim to overcome all the communist legacy and to install the necessary reforms in the context of accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions, the Central European countries have realised that these objectives could only be achieved by avoiding to adopt a competitive attitude and putting forward the idea of closer regional cooperation.¹

After joining the NATO in 1999 (except Slovakia, which joined in 2004) and the EU in 2004, the regional group has completed the first objective for which it was created in 1991 with the declaration of Visegrád. An important debate followed then and gave birth to two distinct schools of thought. For the first one, it was necessary to accept the fact that the “Visegrád was exhausted” and therefore did not need to be kept alive. The second camp had a different way of thinking. Not only has this cooperation in Central Europe always its place in the EU, but also, it has the potential to address some common challenges, such as the emigration of nationals of the four countries to other Member States, the Ukrainian and Balkan immigration to the area, looking for ways out of economic and financial crisis, etc. It was also important that the V4 could participate in the designing of a more ambitious policy in the EU by establishing special relations with other regional organisations. Then the V4 could expand the scope of cooperation in other areas with common goals (energy, tourism and justice) or try to increase its influence upon the governance and politics of the EU, in particular as regards the Eastern Partnership.

In two decades, the Visegrád Group has undoubtedly marked the political map of Central Europe and it could serve as a model to follow, especially in the Balkans. But the “model”, if it exists, is not actually exportable directly as contexts and realities are very different, but it could be important to encourage different States, and not only member States, to think about some EU regional group.

DEVELOPMENTS OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

The declaration of Visegrád is part of a long tradition of collaboration between neighbouring countries that share a common destiny,² united by geographical, cultural,

¹ V. Havel, ‘The Visegrad Dream Still Relevant Today’ in A. Jagodziński (ed.), *The Visegrad Group – A Central European Constellation*, Bratislava 2006, International Visegrad Fund, pp. 54–55, at <http://visegradfund.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/download/Central_European_Constellation.pdf>, 11 November 2013.

² The meeting which is mentioned here is the one that took place before 1335, when the Czech, Poland and Hungary kings met in the Royal Castle of Visegrád above the Danube.

economic and historical proximities. The group is in fact the brainchild of three, then four countries who considered themselves politically and economically weak after their independence. It was time to get rid of communism, to eradicate tensions in Central Europe and to make the necessary reforms in the prospect of full membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions (EU and NATO). These 3 and 4 countries seemed well together not only by proximities, but also with the consistency of their visions for the future of Central Europe. The four countries then implemented a policy and a close economic cooperation to achieve the objective to speak with one voice and to strengthen their joint position. However, the history of the V4 is not linear and it should not be forgotten, given the positive results, the steps of the evolution of this new alliance.

Signed on 15 February 1991, by Jozsef Antall, Prime Minister of Hungary, Lech Wałęsa, President of Poland and Václav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia (an alliance called then “Visegrád triangle” or V3) during a meeting in the Hungarian town of Visegrád, it should contribute to the process now called “return in Europe” of these four Central European countries. If the concerted action of V4 had led quickly to the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact, to the abolition of the COMECON and to the consolidation of the democratic transition process, the initial enthusiasm had quickly met some first obstacles about the possibilities of a closer cooperation: for example, the Czechoslovak separation, causing internal tensions and followed by a change in the political climate in both countries after independence,³ some tensions in Slovak-Hungarian relations emerged in relation to the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam and about the status of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, or the bloody conflict in the former Yugoslavia, etc.

Although the desire to transform the V3 into V4 existed formally, in practice, the concept of Visegrád was emptied of its contents. The common policy vis-à-vis Brussels and the European Union has been abandoned by all countries and competition has been established to determine which country was the best and could be integrated as the first one.⁴ Such competition still exists in the internal political debates in different countries, for example, when Slovakia joined the euro in 2009.

The international situation in Central Europe has changed after the results of the legislative elections that brought progressive political change in all countries of the Visegrád Group. The meeting of the Prime Ministers, October 21, 1998, in Budapest, which then clearly stated priorities to join NATO and the EU, is a very important moment for the revival of the regional cooperation and resulted, a year later, with the signing of the Joint Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the V4 countries,

³ The Czech politics, or more precisely the “Klausian” one, of exclusivity and “reward”, has led even to force the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to stop using the term “Visegrád” in the administrative relations and the corporate documents. Cf. P. Lukac, ‘Pourquoi les Slovaques ont-ils besoin de Visegrád? Dossier “Slovaquie, le poids des héritages”’, *Regard sur l’Est*, 1 May 2000, at <http://www.regard-est.com/home/breve_contenu.php?id=124, 11 November 2013>.

⁴ Idem, ‘Regionálna spolupráca v strednej Európe na začiatku 21. storočia – nové podoby a nové výzvy’ in A. Kotvanová, A. Szép (eds.), *Ročenka zahraničnej politiky Slovenskej republiky 2001*, Bratislava 2002, pp. 57-70.

supplemented by the document *Contents of Visegrád Cooperation* at the meeting of 14 May 1999 about the need for a common and coordinated accession of the four countries in the region.

The revitalisation of the regional cooperation within the V4 has played a very important role for the release of Slovakia's political isolation between 1994 and 1998. With the support of Prague, Budapest and Warsaw, Slovakia could then catch up with other countries in the region to improve its economic score and rank among the best candidates. Thus, the Visegrád cooperation has enabled Slovakia to benefit more from the "safety net" that other post-communist candidate countries. The contribution of the V4 cooperation of Slovakia was so obvious that the Slovak public, as witnessed by several sociological surveys, was overwhelmingly in favour of EU membership.

The mechanisms for regional cooperation were adopted at the Summit of the Prime Ministers on 14 May 1999 in Bratislava, with the document *Contents of Visegrád Cooperation*, and were essential for balancing regional cooperation. The principle of a rotating presidency of the country was adopted; each Member State holding the Presidency during one year (from July to June of the following year) and the President State is responsible for developing an annual action plan. Meetings of representatives of the V4 countries are provided at all levels: prime ministers meet at least twice a year and the national coordinators are responsible for the preparation of these meetings. Secretaries of State of Foreign Ministries are supposed also to meet twice a year and the various departments cooperate according to their needs. The agreement also includes meetings between Ambassadors. We must also add the cooperation between the Heads of State, Presidents of Parliaments or representatives of the civil societies. The document lists several areas and sectorial cooperation.

In 2002, this document was completed by the *Annex to the Contents of Visegrád Cooperation* which provides the outline of the presidency that must also arrange all the meetings of type "V4+" with its partners. The meetings between experts may be convened by any country of the group. Different forms of political cooperation (meetings between the Prime Ministers, Presidents and representatives of foreign ministries, parliaments and with negotiators with the EU) are coordinated by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs. But various activities can be performed in an *ad hoc* manner. During their summits, the Prime Ministers are required to report on the status of implementation of priorities and to take appropriate action.⁵

During this period, the principle of cooperation is passed from the presidential level to the prime ministers, which is related to the fact that during the summit in Bratislava in 1999, Slovakia had not yet elected a President. However, this change has resulted in some stabilisation of the cooperation as the executive of the countries of the Visegrád Group is in the hands of prime ministers.⁶ Thus, with this approach, the functioning

⁵ *Annex to the Content of Visegrad Cooperation*, 2002, The Visegrad Group, at <<http://old.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=941&articleID=9559&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>>, 11 November 2013.

⁶ P. Lukáč, *Vyšehradská štvorka*, Banská Bystrica 2004; J. Vykoukal [et al.], *Visegrád. Možnosti a meze středoevropské spolupráce*, Praha 2003, *Edice Bod*.

of the V4 group fit better with the actual policy of the concerned countries, which has resulted in increased cooperation at lower levels. The meetings between the Presidents retain their symbolic role, which is essentially declaratory, and although this mechanism has already enabled the implementation of concrete measures, for example, during the Summit of Presidents in 2002 the approach for organising successive referendums on EU membership was accepted in accordance with the level of support from citizens of the four countries, from the largest level to the lower one.⁷

The objectives of the first decade of V4 were achieved despite various turbulences. Especially, this regional alliance has not lost its *raison d'être*. The prime ministers of the four countries have agreed on the continuation of the group and, in May 2004, the declaration of Kroměříž (new Visegrád declaration) was signed in which they pledged to work for greater cooperation between the enlarged EU and its immediate neighbours to the East, with emphasis on regional activities and initiatives to strengthen the identity of the Central European region and the flexible and open nature of this cooperation.⁸

After memberships to multiple instances (NATO, WTO, Council of Europe, EU, OECD), the V4 countries have considered that the objectives had been met and that their cooperative efforts had been realised. Thus, the question of the future of V4 arose. The 4 countries, even relatively similar in many aspects, sometimes had divergent opinions, particularly about the relations vis-à-vis the neighbouring East or South, or about the Roma problem. Inside the V4, 4 countries do not have the same weight inside the European Union, Poland is considered as a “great country” like Spain, for example. But ultimately the activity of V4 has not slowed, it has evolved. The creation of a youth association, which offers academic scholarships to students wanting to stay in one of the universities of member countries, is a good example of practical development.

At the beginning of September 2006, the four heads of state have seen and expressed a common position about the postponement of their accession to the Schengen area, and then found that their accession to the euro zone would take longer than expected. They then clearly recognized the difficulties of managing the “side effects” of the process of democratic transition. The European integration, the institutional and policy changes are relatively long processes and the V4 had a new legitimacy, perhaps also exceeded. The patterns of cooperation have evolved. Indeed, the member countries have joined their efforts for a better access to European programs, they sought solutions to their common problems (especially the emigration of their citizens to the West, the rise of populism, the attitude towards Ukrainian immigration or Balkan...). Local and regional cooperation was then reinforced with new relationships with the civil society, but also in establishing new forms of relationships with other regional organisations

⁷ M. Kollár, G. Mesežnikov (eds.), *Slovensko 2002. Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, Bratislava 2002.

⁸ *Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrád Group countries after their accession to the European Union*, 12 May 2004 (The Kroměříž Declaration), The Visegrád Group, at <<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/declaration-of-prime>>, 11 November 2013.

(such as the Benelux), Austria, Slovenia (as part of a regional partnership) and countries still further east (V4+, as part of a deliberate policy on the Eastern Partnership).

The activities of the V4 group for the Eastern Partnership are a good example. This policy was launched in May 2009, during the Czech Presidency, confirming the EU's willingness to develop its influence on the post-Soviet neighbourhood region and to affirm the role of the Central European countries. This policy is also an attempt to differentiate between partnerships from the South (promoted in particular by France with the Union for the Mediterranean launched in 2008 for the Middle East and the North Africa) and the East. However, the priorities of the European Neighbourhood Policy are generally taken up by the V4 for the Eastern Partnership (objectives of strengthening stability and security in partner countries and participation in economic development). The main objective is also consistent with the European policy, because it is not proposing to partner countries to join the EU, but to try a particular integration of neighbouring countries, to establish a geopolitical and geo-economic space linked with the EU and Central Europe. These interdependencies should help to stabilise this area and to provide a framework for economic development.

Although now the balance sheet, in particular linked to the reality of the interests of partner countries for this policy in a context of crisis, is relatively mitigated, it should highlight the particular commitment of the countries of the Visegrád Group who have together imposed a specific articulation on the basis of a comprehensive European policy. The Eastern Partnership of the European Union has been established with the commitment of the countries of the Visegrád Group, and that point demonstrates, only five years after their accession, the success of their European integration about this foreign policy. On this issue, the logic of the regional alliance is very important and could, for example, be exported to the Black Sea.

The fields of cooperation have expanded rapidly, both in line with European issues (increased administrative capacity of countries), or more specifically to the 4 countries (energy, judicial reforms, development of tourism, etc.). So the cooperation has also evolved on infrastructure, on cross-border cooperation, on culture, mobility and on coordination of political positions about the EU, about other regions and third countries. Indeed, the V4 group has also understood after accession to various instances, particularly to the EU, that it was essential to systematically speak with one voice on behalf of all for the preservation of the interests of each but also to strengthen the identity of their positions in Central Europe. A quick calculation shows that the cumulative force of the V4 voices is bigger than those of France and Germany combined. Then appears the interest of a greater institutionalisation of V4, but certainly such a development would be contrary to a characteristic that made the success of the V4 and will be developed further: flexibility. In addition, specific changes in policy positions in each country and the only access of Slovakia to the euro zone do not facilitate common institutional advances.

In summary, the Central European countries are entering then a new era of cooperation with new priorities, changing mechanisms for intergovernmental cooperation and extension of areas of regional cooperation.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrád Cooperation summit of 15 February 2011, during the Slovak presidency, the Prime Ministers have adopted a new declaration (declaration of Bratislava). The results of the V4 seem largely positive. However, many questions about the future of cooperation were discussed at numerous commemorative events, such as the conference about the next 20 years of Visegrád Cooperation financed by the International Visegrád Fund (IVF), an initiative that brought together diplomats, scholars and academics.

Despite their occasional differences, the four Visegrád countries know they have everything to gain by continuing to work together. The V4 group can be analysed both as a useful and legitimate lobby, capable of weighing to Brussels and Strasbourg, but whose influence remains to be built. But perhaps the main question is not to know if the V4 group can or not, one day, become like Scandinavia or Benelux for Central Europe, but rather to exceed this model: the EU should not develop as a centre whose peripheries need lobbying, but as an organisation that would benefit an articulation of a new kind. Regional alliances may have a particular role to play in this evolution. In this sense, the V4 group can continue to change.

WHAT MODEL OF COOPERATION?

The future of the Visegrád cooperation is still open. This opening is due in large part to the informal nature of its operation. The Visegrád will never transform itself into an institutionalised political bloc. The International Visegrád Fund, based in Bratislava, is the only official institution established during the existence of V4. However, the regional cooperation is dynamic and continues to evolve.

The evolution of the Visegrád Group has several features including “gradualism”: the Visegrád Group, as such, is indeed rather characterised by a gradual change than by decisions making some major turning points for the cooperation. It is also necessary to mention the sizeable continuity of priorities in the program regardless of the country chairing the group.

The V4 was set up as a non-institutionalised platform based after 1989 on *ad hoc* meetings, often in response to external factors. However, in February 1991, the meeting of Visegrád resulted in an agreement about regular meetings between senior officials; the cooperation has not reached the expected sectorial dimension and, especially, did not affect the civil society, especially because of internal political factors during the next period. The goal of integration into NATO gave a new impetus to the cooperation of the countries by bringing a systematic cooperation between the Ministers of Defence and of Foreign Affairs. However, only the Prime Ministers meet regularly and the cooperation has not really involved other actors.

With the revitalization of the cooperation of the Visegrád Group in 1998, the cooperation was extended to other levels, including the civil society. This effort resulted in the adoption of the operating mechanisms mentioned above. The process of accession to the EU has also had a significant impact on the systematisation of cooperation,

as each country had to adopt (quickly) a large number of reforms, which led them to consult each other more extensively.

The negotiations with the EU then increased the cooperation in the political domain with a higher role for national coordinators. The accession of the four countries in 2004 has changed very little in the cooperation mechanisms, but gave more opportunities for new areas of cooperation. The European agenda has become the major topic of the meetings at all levels. The representatives of the Visegrád Group can now meet each other during the meeting of the European Council and of the Council of Ministers, which is manifested by the number of meetings and their periodicity.

The activities of the V4 countries have also been expanded to Eastern Europe and to the Balkans, including the activities of IVF that are more successful for some initiatives than the Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

It seems important for the Visegrád to retain this flexibility that can be considered as one of the most remarkable features of this regional cooperation. The V4 succeed where the EU seems to have difficulties to evolve: the criticism of bureaucracy and of red tape inside the EU is still very bitter. While the V4, with this flexibility, is mostly a political alliance, the EU, with its administration, obviously necessary, is often seen by most Europeans as a bureaucratic machine rather than as a political entity.

This flexibility, however, is both a great advantage and a disadvantage. For some, the flexibility allows the group to react quickly to current contexts and to be able to adapt to different situations. However, if this flexibility, to some extent, can avert the danger of the “ritual of cooperation”, even if it seems difficult to avoid completely, there are many who accuse the group of countries of Visegrád of not speaking with one voice about issues of the European agenda. The cooperation depends indeed much on the current internal political situation in each country which, as already noted, does not have the same weight in the European Union. This element could be the greatest danger to future cooperation.⁹

Among other features, it is important also to include the “unwillingness” of the V4 to spread to other countries, even if the question of enlargement of the Visegrád Group was discussed on several occasions, which was particularly the case for Slovenia, Austria and the Ukraine. The instrument “V4+” then appeared to be sufficient to maintain relations with third countries, especially developed relationships through cross-border projects, or even mobility programs funded by IVF.

Nobody today can say that the Visegrád Group has not acquired a solid reputation and has not attracted interest from other countries and regions of UE, from potential or official candidates or from “neighbour” countries.

In the period preceding the accession to the European Union, cooperation with the Benelux, already mentioned, in particular, has played a very important role, especially in relation to skills and know-how to be member of the EU. After the accession to the EU, the V4 has approached B3, that is to say, the three Baltic countries: Estonia, Latvia

⁹ M. Brusis, ‘Prospects of Visegrád Cooperation in an Enlarged European Union’ in M. Štátný (ed.), *Visegrad Countries in an Enlarged Trans-Atlantic Community*, Bratislava 2002, pp. 67-84.

and Lithuania and then sought concrete opportunities for cooperation. Gradually, the group has become more important as “model” for the creation of other regional groupings in Europe, South and East. It should be noted that the evolution of this model does not lead to an exclusive: the approximation of V4 with other countries did not prevent each member of the group to agree on bilateral agreements with the Baltic States, for example. The bilateral cooperation combines with the multilateral and it is not a model like matrioshki, but with articulations. One of the issues to be analysed is that of the contribution of regional arrangements for the functioning of the European Union. For some “small” countries, in particular, regional cooperation, from concrete and realistic objectives, avoiding a “dilution” of the representation in instances, at least until that the election for the European Parliament will be organised on a European basis (currently, each European citizen votes for an MEP from the same national citizenship and not for another European citizen regardless of his national citizenship).

The interest in V4, its history and its operation, is real, because it is not only a symbolic or political significance, but also economic, as evidenced for example the Free Trade Agreement Central European (CEFTA). Originally consisting of the V4 countries, the agreement was expanded between 1992 and 2007 in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including the Balkans. CEFTA may well be legitimately, according to Tomáš Strážay,¹⁰ considered as a true “export product”, the more important part of the Visegrád Group.

MULTIREGIONAL EUROPE

Europe, and within the European Union, is richer than poor from its fragmentation and its diversity, but this fragmentation in the context of a particular confederation of 28 states is difficult to articulate with the results of evolutions and histories, also that of the outsourcing of a large part of the daily community management to the European Commission, and of the monetary policy to the European Central Bank. Of course, the Member States retain their powers and skills on many important policy issues, such as defence or foreign policy, but a significant portion of their sovereignty is now “abandoned”, for some, “granted”, for others, to the political organisation of the European Union.

The recent examples of trying to find solutions to the Irish, Portuguese or Greek budget problems showed the fragility of the system, between de facto the euro zone and the non-euro zone, transforming in periphery some member states. The governance of the Union, despite recent advances, remains effective with difficulties, the important decisions involve a consensus and finding a mutually acceptable solution, which often produces few optimal results.

¹⁰ T. Strážay, ‘Inspirující Visegrád alebo Výročné zamýšlení nad možnosťami exportu visegrádskeho modelu’, *Mezinárodní politika*, No. 3 (2011), at <<http://ustavmezinarodnichvztahu.cz/article/inspirujici-visegrad-alebo-vyrocnne-zamyslenie-nad-moznostami-exportu-visegradskeho-modelu>>, 9 November 2013.

In this context, the Euro crisis translated into and/or causes a crisis of confidence more generally. The Member States which belong the euro zone or not, challenge a denial of independence and are often reluctant to create a genuine common front. The regionalisation and the development of political alliances is an institutional response to this situation.

Europe can indeed evolve into a set of regionalised groups which may have different ideas about topics such as security or economic issues, but also have the possibility to organise within their member countries some reflection and analyses and a preparation for more global decisions. In addition, these groups may have overlapping regionalised contours, because countries can belong to several groups, from a geopolitical as economical point of view.

It is essential to abandon the centre/periphery pattern to be able to pursue the European integration and the articulation of regional groups could avoid this dichotomy. It is fairly easy to predict which regional groups could be developed because, firstly, some exist now, and, on the other hand, the relations between European countries, including official and potential candidates to the European Union, are in development. The euro area itself is a group, of course, largely under German influence, but other groups are juxtaposed, for example if we consider the area of very high economic dependence on Germany. The issue of the relations with Russia also allows defining a part of some regional groups (including the V4 or the Nordic countries).

A move towards strengthening German hegemony (or the hypothetical Franco-German couple) would certainly render European integration, particularly economic, more accomplished. But at the cost of a political disintegration which ultimately could endanger European integration itself as the European citizenship is still to be installed, in rights as in duties!

A MODEL TO EXPORT IN THE BALKANS?

An observer of the V4 group, of its evolution and its relevance, could easily, in this process, propose a similar model to be mobilised for a regional alliance with the Balkan countries, linking, for example, the Western Balkans with other countries which are already members of EU. The interest would be, for some, especially to enjoy the experience for their own accession to the European Union, for others to achieve a zone of influence likely to strengthen their position within the Union.

The initiative “Western Balkans” was presented at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in November 2000 in Zagreb. It was then for the European Union to declare the “open door” to the countries of the region and to affirm the importance of the stabilisation and association process launched in 1999. The Kosovo war had just ended and the post-Yugoslav space was seen as a particular region in southern Europe despite cultural difficulty in specifying the area of the “Western Balkans”. The main reason, of course, was to finish (finally) with history, to digest the disintegration of Yugoslavia, to end the conflicts and insecurity. The prospect of a rapprochement between the countries of EU

and the countries with a “vocation” to integration was seen as a remedy to the problems of the region experiencing dramatic situations: institutional instability, high political risk, weak governments, corruption, organised crime, ethnic conflict, discrimination of minorities...

A mistake, it seems, was to consider this region as others and not to consider, before implementing a process of democratic transition that it must address other issues because nationalism and an evolution of values related to ethnic policies have led to a significant drift of the objectives of this transition. The example of Bosnia-Herzegovina established in 1995 is indicative of this situation: only the presence of international forces guarantees the maintenance of a fragile federal government.

So it seems that maintaining a sense of territorial differentiation of the Western Balkans is counterproductive. The establishment of alliances including other geographically-close Member States could allow to go beyond the objectives of stabilisation and reconstruction, to be able to accelerate the reform process towards EU integration. Indeed, even if the accession of these countries remains a relatively distant prospect, at least for some, this condition is important for the stability in the region in the framework of a democratic transition.

Already the association agreements between the EU and these countries have become the Stabilisation and Association Process and highlight the importance of building relationships of “good neighbours” with neighbouring countries. The stability is of course a prerequisite that should strengthen membership negotiations with the European Union. The role of Bulgaria, particularly in relation to the good neighbourly relations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, is obvious. Bulgaria has proposed two other legitimate conditions (establishing relations of cooperation and of joint working groups) and the establishment of annual intergovernmental meetings.

More generally, the establishment of bilateral relations with Macedonia (official candidate country since December 17, 2005), Montenegro (since 17 December 2010) and Serbia (since 1 March 2012), could be an approach to developing the establishment of a regional alliance, both in inspiration from the V4 and with obvious differences, because it is good, at first, to contribute to the accession negotiations with the countries concerned, but also, by synergy, to accompany the development of the European integration of Bulgaria itself.

Indeed, it seems pointless to continue to want to oppose further integration and enlargement of the European Union. It is time for Bulgaria, in particular, to become an actor in the European Union, to take initiatives in particular in the framework of European programs, to abandon this logic of periphery leading *de facto* to some restraint. Also, when accompanying the European integration, it is possible to achieve a necessary deepening and speeding up the pace.

It is also necessary to measure the level of interdependence necessary to achieve the desired policy objectives. That is one of the lessons of the economic crisis and the debate on solidarity within the euro area continues. On the one hand, integration is desired, quickly, especially for stability and security, on the other hand, many governments

expressed reservations about future enlargements, sometimes arguing about the need for deepening or on the artificial character of the democratic transition. In addition, this position does not solve the crisis and cannot avoid the risks.

In conclusion, the V4 group could not obviously be a “model” because it is illusory to mechanically transpose such an alliance determined by history, geography, as by politics, but it can be an inspiration to an alliance of a new type in the Balkans, involving Bulgaria and/or Romania and/or Greece in particular. This is both to demonstrate the reality of the changes made within the V4 in the democratic transition process and to take into account that the differences in size of the 4 countries did not constitute a real obstacle. In addition, the establishment of such regional alliances is quite in line with the objectives of the V4 group itself: to achieve through cooperation the democratic development and stability across all Europe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Official Documents

- Annex to the Content of Visegrad Cooperation*, 2002, The Visegrad Group, at <<http://old.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=941&articleID=9559&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>>.
- 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 (Bratislava, 15 February 2011)*, The Visegrad Group, at <<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava>>.
- Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 1999*, The Visegrad Group, at <<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/contents-of-visegrad-110412>>.
- 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 (The Kroměříž Declaration), The Visegrad Group, at <<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/declaration-of-prime>>.
- Program slovenského predsedníctva vyšehradskej skupiny – V4 (Júl 2010 – Jún 2011), Efektívny Vyšehrad – kontinuita, súdržnosť, solidarita, informovanosť*, at <<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?Docid=137?>>.
- Vyšehradská spolupráca*, Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky, at <http://www.foreign.gov.sk/sk/zahranicna__politika/vysehradska_spolupraca-vysehradska_spolupraca>.
- Bilčík V., Strážay T., *Fungovanie Vyšehradskej štvorky pred a po vstupe jej členov do Európskej únie*, Bratislava 2006, Výskumné centrum Slovenskej spoločnosti pre zahraničnú politiku, at <<http://www.sfpa.sk/dokumenty/publikacie/116>>.
- Brusis M., ‘Prospects of Visegrad Cooperation in an Enlarged European Union’, in *Visegrad Countries in an Enlarged Trans-Atlantic Community*, ed. by M. Šťastný, Bratislava 2002.
- Čajka P., Terem P., Iždinský D., *The Dynamics of the Transformation Processes in Central Europe (The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland)*, Banská Bystrica 2008.

- Havel V., 'The Visegrad Dream Still Relevant Today', in *The Visegrad Group – A Central European Constellation*, ed. by A. Jagodziński, Bratislava 2006, International Visegrad Fund, at <http://visegradfund.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/download/Central_European_Constellation.pdf>.
- Kollár M., Mesežnikov G., eds., *Slovensko 2002. Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, Bratislava 2002, *Edícia Slovensko v Pohybe*.
- Kořan M., 'Visegrádská spolupráce, Rakousko, Polsko a Slovensko v české zahraniční politice', in idem (ed.), *Česká zahraniční politika v roce 2008. Analýza ÚMV*, Praha 2009.
- Koudar J., *Visegrádská skupina po vstupu jejích členů do Evropské unie* (Thesis/Dissertation), Brno 2012, Masarykova univerzita, Fakulta sociálních studií, at <http://is.muni.cz/th/263401/fss_m/>.
- Lukac P., 'Pourquoi les Slovaques ont-ils besoin de Visegrád? Dossier "Slovaquie, le poids des héritages"', *Regard sur l'Est* (1 May 2000), at <http://www.regard-est.com/home/breve_contenu.php?id=124>.
- Lukáč P., 'Regionálna spolupráca v strednej Európe na začiatku 21. storočia – nové podoby a nové výzvy', in *Ročenka zahraničnej politiky Slovenskej republiky 2001*, ed. by A. Kotvanová, A. Szép, Bratislava 2002.
- Lukáč P., *Vyšehradská štvorka*, Banská Bystrica 2004.
- Michault M., *Le groupe de Visegrad a-t-il encore une utilité?* (9 November 2006), Nouvelle Europe, at <<http://www.nouvelle-europe.eu/node/45>>.
- Sladičková E., "Inštitucionálny" vývoj vyšehradskej spolupráce, jej možnosti, limity a perspektívy (bakalarka praca), Brno 2009, Masarykova univerzita, Fakulta sociálních studií, at <http://is.muni.cz/th/273908/fss_b/bakalarka_praca.pdf>.
- Strážay T., 'Inspirující Visegrád alebo Výročné zamýšlení nad možnosťami exportu visegrádského modelu', *Mezinárodní politika*, No. 3 (2011), at <<http://ustavmezinarodnichvztahu.cz/article/inspirujici-visegrad-alebo-vyrocnne-zamyslenie-nad-moznostami-exportu-visegradskkeho-modelu>>.
- Strážay T., 'Vyšehrad 2008: dynamická regionálna platforma s pridanou hodnotou pre EÚ', in *Ročenka zahraničnej politiky Slovenskej republiky 2008*, ed. by P. Brezáni, Bratislava 2009.
- Vykoukal J. [et al.], *Visegrád. Možnosti a meze stredoevropské spolupráce*, Praha 2003, *Edice Bod*.

Mária ROŠTEKOVÁ is Assistant Professor in International Relations, Matej Bel University, Banska Bystrica (Slovakia).

Gilles ROUET is Professor in International Relations, Matej Bel University, Banska Bystrica (Slovakia) and in Management of Education in University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne. Ad personam Jean Monnet Chair and member of the Laboratoire de recherche en management LAREQUOI, Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines.