

Existence and signification of the Visegrad Group in the perspective of its citizens

Lenka Václavíková Helšusová
Gabal, Analysis & Consulting

So called the „Visegrad Group” originates in the year 1991. Representatives of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland intended to create an organization representing and allowing more intensive relations among these countries connected particularly by regional, historical and cultural similarities as well as similar inherited problems of the so called former Socialist countries. There were, however, many as important issues dividing the countries. A split of one particular country represents a good example of these. Creation of the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993 also deeply influenced the name of the “club” – the Visegrad Four.

It is a long-term problem of the Visegrad Group to transform the aspirations and proclamations of its politics into reality. How is one to convince the citizens that they constitute a specific region with its specific problems solving of which can be shared? How is one to demonstrate to Slovaks, Hungarians, Czechs and Poles that shared problem-solving could be advantageous?

Let us have a look on citizens of the member countries and their conceiving and understanding of the Visegrad Group after 10 and 12 years its existence.¹

Awareness of the existence and importance of the Visegrad Group

The fact whether people are aware of the Visegrad Group’s existence represents one of the most important questions. Most of people aware of the “club” live in Slovakia. Comparing to other countries, Slovak citizens have definitely the strongest motivation and orientation toward the Visegrad Group. However, there are specific problems in which Poland and Hungary follow Slovakia. It occurs in these countries more often than it does in the Czech Republic.

One of the factors determining the strong Slovak orientation toward the Visegrad Group is very likely the long-term delay between the entrance of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary into NATO in 1999 and the Slovak invitation in 2003. The entrance of the above mentioned countries was considered an affirmation of their affiliation to the West. Cooperation with Western European countries and North America represented a confirmation

¹ Explored data from sociological survey “Visegrad cooperation as seen by the citizens of four countries” conducted in 2001 and 2003 in all Visegrad group countries. Project coordinator: Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava.

of the former Socialist countries' new status.² Slovakia, lacking such status, strived for cooperation within the Visegrad Four. At the given situation, developing contacts with its neighbors represented connection with the West. That is why the Slovak citizens have been better and more intensively informed about such activities and why the Slovak society is more intensively motivated to cooperate with other Visegrad Group countries. Another important factor affecting the Slovak orientation on the Visegrad Group is former Czech and Slovak connection mentioned above. Information on the Czech Republic available in Slovakia has always been of better quality and followed more closely than vice versa. The attitudes toward the Visegrad Group are sometimes influenced by disparagement on the side of the Czech Republic, respectively on a part of the Czech public and political representatives.

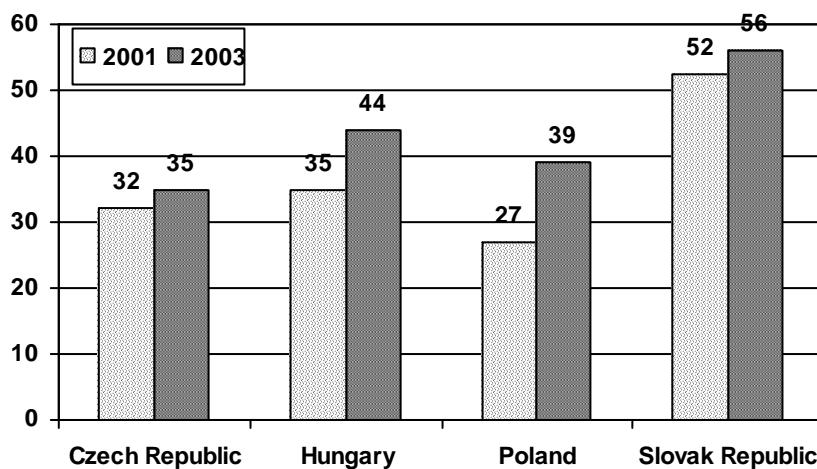
More than half of the Slovak citizens knew what the Visegrad Group was both in 2001 and 2003. None of other three countries reaches such figures. In the year 2001 it was Poland having citizens the least aware of the Visegrad Group existence, however Czech and Hungarian results were not much better. About one third of their citizens knew what the Visegrad Group was.

Extensive changes occurred in Poland and Hungary in 2003 when number of informed citizens rose. It was an increase of 12% in Poland and 9 % in Hungary. This remarkable rise may be observed in the context of the EU. Citizens from the Visegrad Group member countries were often forced to deal with such questions as if it is good to enter together with some other countries, whether to create an interest Group supporting the interests of Central European countries etc. As a result of this situation the political climate in some countries changed media are forced to reflect these topics and public is more often exposed to such information.

In spite of the fact the Czech Republic lacked behind as far as the awareness of the Visegrad Group is concerned, had the survey been carried out at the end of 2003, the results would have probably been much better. The current Social Democratic government is dealing with the topic of Visegrad Group more intensively than it used to be done before. The overall attitude toward the Visegrad Group initiatives is changing. The President of the Czech Republic, originally a major critic of some of the club's principals, considers some joint activities possible and positive. The latest events may be indicating a shift within the political rhetoric and the Visegrad Group evaluation, welcomed by Czech citizens.

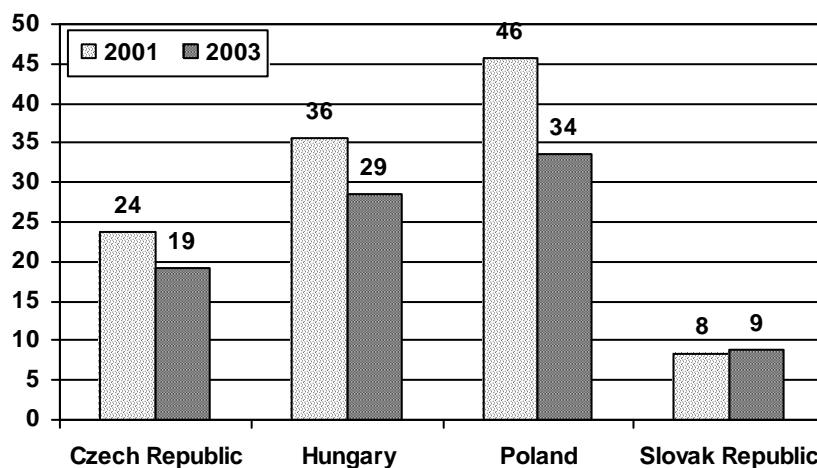
² For example, the Czech Republic's entry into NATO caused a switch in the relations toward Germany within a part of the Czech society. Germany was traditionally perceived through a problematic perspective. In the new situation when Germany became our partner in NATO, a certain part of Czech society is able to consider it a positive development. See. Gabal, I., Helšusová, L., Szayna, T.,S., *The impact of NATO Membership in the Czech Republic: Changing Czech viewes of Security, Military and Defence*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2002

I HAVE HEARD ABOUT VISEGRAD GROUP AND I KNOW WHAT IT IS (%)



Regarding the question: “*Have you ever heard about the Visegrad Group?*” respondents had a choice of two positive answers: „yes, *I have and I know what it is*” and “*yes, I have but I don't really know what it is*”. As far as awareness of the Visegrad Group is concerned – respondent has heard about the “club” and knows what it means. There is an increasing number of these answers. However it is crucial that in all countries there is a stable number of respondents who have heard about the Visegrad Group but do not know what it means. Therefore in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic the number of citizens who have heard about the Visegrad Group is rising, or the number of those who have never heard about it is declining.

I HAVE NEVER HEARD ABOUT VISEGRAD GROUP (%)

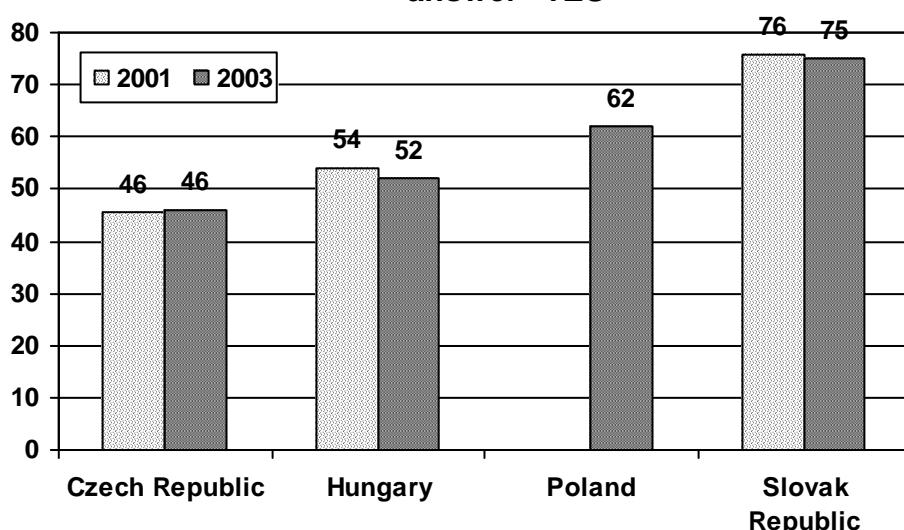


Importance of the cooperation

To evaluate context and areas of the Visegrad Group cooperation it is important to clarify where people see the meaning of existence of such organization. Citizens of the four countries were questioned whether cooperation among the four countries is still important and has a mission to fulfill.

It was again the Slovak Republic that experienced the most significant ratio of people believing in the real sense of the Visegrad Group existence. A comparison of Slovakia and the Czech Republic serves as an excellent example. Three thirds of Slovaks have no doubts about the sense of the Visegrad Group existence, contrary to the situation in the Czech Republic where it is not even one half of the population. Situation is not much better in Hungary either. Poles were questioned about this issue in the year 2003 survey only but about two thirds of them considered the Visegrad Group existence important. It is worth pointing out that the opinion about sense and importance of the Visegrad Group did not radically change within past two years in all countries allowing time comparison. Although the results in Slovakia and Poland may be considered satisfactory, the Visegrad Group will need to fight hard to gain other countries' favor, especially in the case of the Czech Republic and Hungary.

**IS THE COOPERATION AMONG THE VISEGRAD
GROUP COUNTRIES STILL IMPORTANT
AND HAS A MISSION TO FULFILL? (%)
answer "YES"**



Reasons for cooperation

Regarding the reasons that should become the base of cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries and their citizens, Slovaks and Poles prefer the argument of common geographic position of Visegrad Group countries. According to the data in the Czech Republic, it is slightly prevailing that the main reason for cooperation is the common history. Hungarians see as the most crucial reason the importance of common EU entry.

Feeling that we all live together in one locality and also share similar experience from the past is the phenomena which could bring the citizens of Visegrad Group countries together. Both these answers have had a significant position in opinions of citizens of all countries in the years of research. Factor analysis on the Czech data shows that these two reasons are perceived by the Czech public as a very strong and joint principle. Geographic position is clearly the fixed point. Regarding the historical facts we can say that right the opinions and their evaluation could also divide us very easily and very fast. There is one recent example – the initiative of the Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski and German President Johannes Rau calling for European dialogue about history of transmigration of nations, their retreat and expulsion in 20th century in Europe.³ Such activity raised negative and whine reaction of Czech politicians at the beginning because of the suspect of opening the discussion about the expulsion of Germans from the then Czechoslovak territory at the end of the 2nd World War.

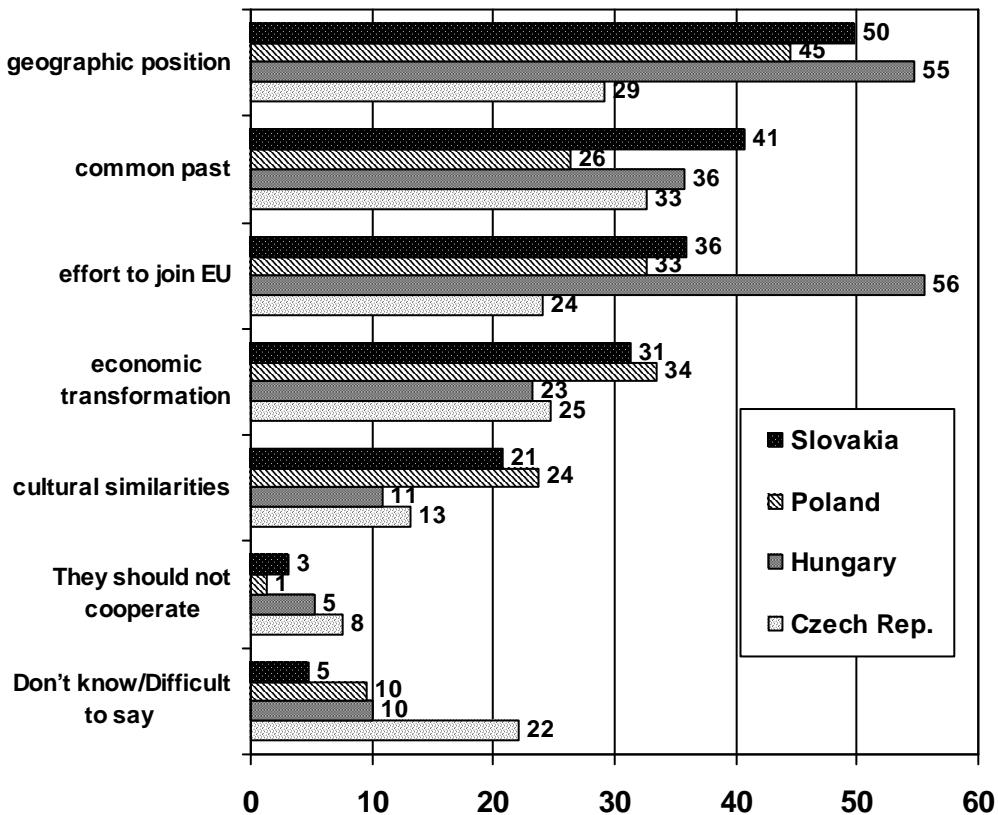
Czechs also perceive the context of economic transformation and joining the EU as further common operating factor that could become a good reason for cooperation in the Visegrad Group.

Polish and Slovak data shows a different construction of reasons for cooperation of the Visegrad Group. As shows the structure of answers the individual reasons are perceived separately. The idea of joining the EU as a reason for cooperation of the Visegrad Group intertwines at the same time with the other factors of cooperation in Slovak and Polish public opinion. In other words, the argument of common joining of the EU as a motivation for cooperation is connected with the majority of all other reasons that are mutually perceived separately.

What makes Hungarian attitude different from the one of other countries' is that Hungarians are in relatively wide agreement regarding the reasons for cooperation – it is geographic position as well as the common EU entry.

³ October 29, 2003 in Gdansk.

**WHY SHOULD VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES
COOPERATE TOGETHER? (%)**
year 2003



When comparing data with the year 2001, opinion that common entry into the EU is the main reason for cooperation declined (by 10%). Similar change occurred in Slovakia (8% decline). In Hungary, on the contrary, there is a growth of answers stressing the argument of common joining of the EU (16% increase) and also common history (9% increase).

Using comparable predicaments from the year 2001, in Poland the number of people believing that the most important reason for cooperation of the Visegrad Group is the similar geographic position of these countries has increased (11% increase).

We can state that inhabitants of the Visegrad Group countries see some reasons for cooperation. But we cannot regard these opinions as clean-cut. A question remains into what extend we can rely on them To be specific, the figures representing different opinions in the Czech Republic for example are strongly influenced by large number of people who try hard to find some reasons for cooperation that would be the right ones but do not manage it. (22% people who say they do not know why countries of the Visegrad Group should cooperate).

Specific fields of cooperation

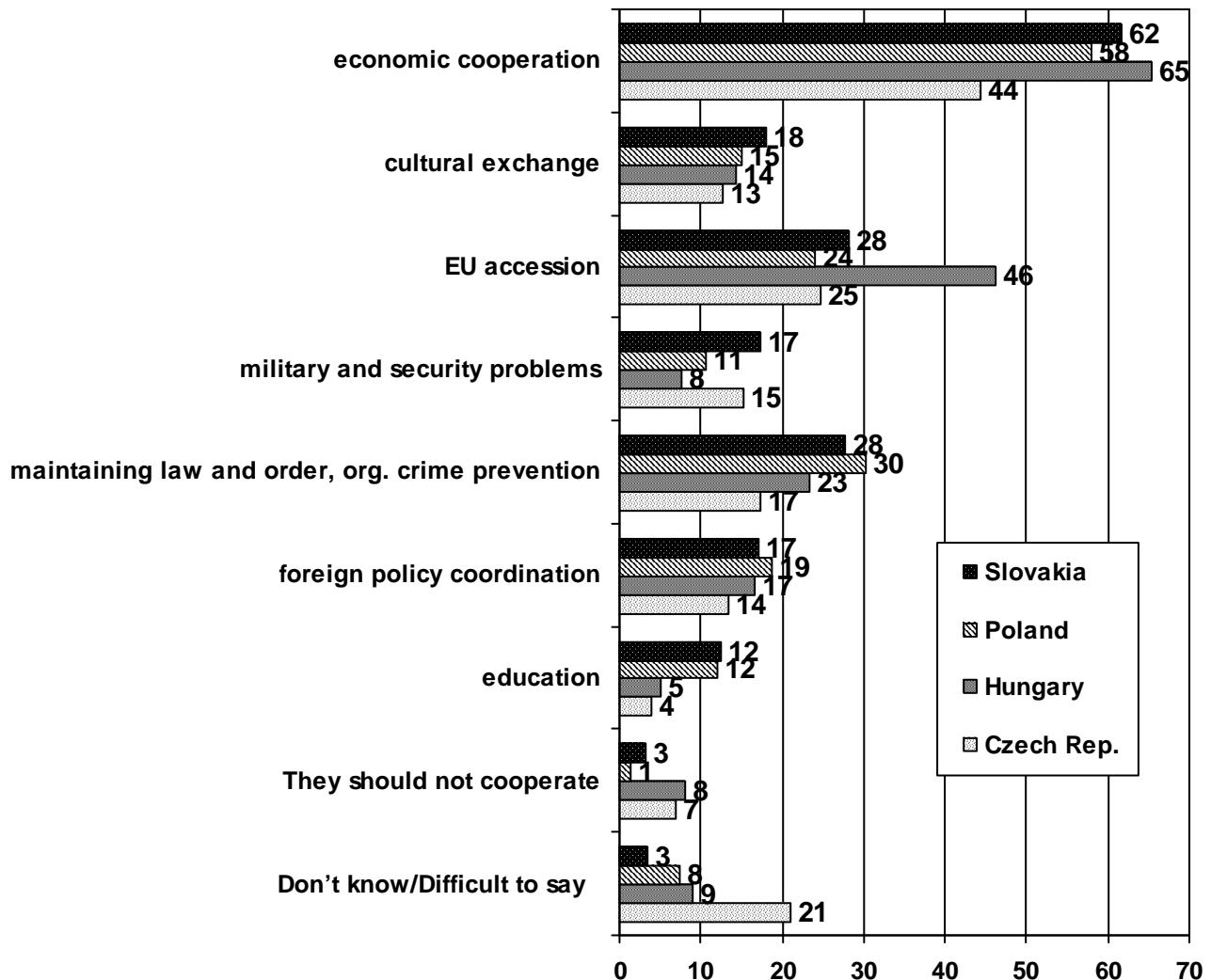
At the moment it is very important for the Visegrad Group to deal with such issue as how to fulfill the existence of such Group. Questions connected with this topic very often arise when thinking about the entrance into the EU.

Economic cooperation is by majority of the Visegrad Group citizens seen as the most important way of cooperation. Besides that Slovakia stresses justice and order maintaining and common efforts regarding the EU entry. Hungary together with the Czech Republic consider the EU entry as the second most important. However, it is so with different intensity. Poland as well as Slovakia regard justice and order maintaining the second most important after economic cooperation.

Public opinion in the Czech Republic perceives economic cooperation and the EU entry cooperation in interconnection. Similar situation can be observed in the area of education and cultural cooperation. The structure of answers in other countries is a lot more differentiated. Respondents from Slovakia perceive the options as independent issues. Polish respondents, when considering possible cooperation, specifically contradict cooperation on order maintenance and cooperation on common foreign policy. The leading role in decision about prospective cooperation is held by a question whether preferably tackle mutual relations within the Visegrad Group countries or whether aim at common foreign policy. The second strongest attitude that can be traced in the opinions of Polish citizens is the contraposition of the area of education and economic development. The questions whether work on common economic transformation or concentrate on improvement in educational systems represents a traditional problem even in other countries. It is so probably because of the fact that even the political representatives do not consider these spheres to be intertwined.

Significant changes between the years 2001 and 2003 occurred especially in Hungary. There is an increasing number of those who consider the economic cooperation, entrance to the EU and cultural cooperation to be the main areas of prospective cooperation. On the contrary the urgency of military and security cooperation has declined. The changes in Hungary are mostly to the detriment of the group which had no idea about possible suitable cooperation area in 2001. In Slovakia the importance of the EU entry cooperation also declined. Figures for other options in other countries have not experienced significant changes within the two above mentioned years.

IN WHAT FIELDS SHOULD VISEGRAD COUNTRIES COOPERATE MORE CLOSELY?(%)
year 2003



Individual countries of the Visegrad Group are dealing with very heterogeneous problems. In spite of many similarities, their domestic and international politics are too heterogeneous. It prevents their citizens to have common perspective regarding the Visegrad Group. On the one hand a part of citizens considers the Visegrad Group to have a great importance, which is first of all the case in Slovakia. On the other hand others stay unconcerned and uninformed – such as citizens of the Czech Republic or Hungary. Although the situation from the point of view of awareness of the Visegrad Group is improving, the majority of citizens in individual countries having no idea what the Visegrad Group means is significant. All the other answers regarding the form of cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries originate rather in personal opinions about the homogeneous or heterogeneous

features of members states and their citizens. The people who have no idea about what does Visegrad Group mean form their attitudes toward Visegrad Group advisability and possible orientation of realization only on the basis of their perception of their own country, the adjacent countries in the view of interrelationships and also the process of communication during entrance negotiations with EU.

Brief conclusions:

- Awareness of the existence and meaning of Visegrad Group has grown in Hungary and Poland rapidly in last two years.
- Awareness of the existence and meaning of Visegrad Group is the lowest in the Czech Republic and still in Poland. Also the most people who have never heard about Visegrad Group are in Poland.
- Visegrad Group is perceived mostly by Slovaks and mostly by people who are more consciousness of the international issues.
- Slovaks perceives Visegrad Group the most useful, Czech's do the opposite.
- The awareness of Visegrad Group is connected with higher education. Also men know more often about Visegrad Group.
- Perception of Visegrad Group is by most people in Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary complicated by their ignorance about the existence of Visegrad Group.
- Hungarians are those who believe in importance of joining EU and geographic position as reasons for Visegrad cooperation the most.
- People who understand what does Visegrad Group means see the colorful spectrum of activities and ideas linked with these organizations.
- There is a lot of work which has to be done to bring the Visegrad Group alive in mind of more citizens of member states and give them the sense of this specific region.

PhDr. Lenka Václavíková Helšusová

Graduate from the Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Arts with Master Degree in Sociology, in 2000. Also graduate in Bachelor Studies of Humanities at Faculty of Education, Charles University, in 1998. In 1999, one semester program in Washington, D.C. at American University, Washington Semester Program - Peace and Conflict Resolution, including an internship in Center for Strategic and International Studies and field trip in Great Britain and Republic of Ireland, focused on resolving conflict in Northern Ireland.

Since 2001 student at PhD. studies in Sociology at Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Arts. PhDr. since 2001.

She is a member of Department of Philosophy at Faculty of Education at Technical University in Liberec. External worker of Gabal, Analysis & Consulting and Department of Gender and Sociology at Sociological Institute of Czech Academy of Science.

