

The Visegrád Group: An Overview

Associate Professor Dr. Suthachai Yimprasert
Lecturer, Department of History
Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University

The Visegrád Group is an international alliance which comprises four countries in Central Europe: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. This regional integration, which aims at consolidating the collaboration among the member countries in military, economic and energy affairs, was established after the dissolution of Communism in 1989.

The Visegrád Group was established on 15 February 1991 at a summit of three leaders: Václav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, József Antall, Prime Minister of Hungary, and Lech Wałęsa, President of Poland. The meeting was held in an ancient castle in a town called Visegrád (or "*Fellegvár*" in Magyar language) in Hungary. Later, in 1993, Czechoslovakia dissolved into two countries: the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. This event led to the formation of the Visegrád Group of four member countries. All of the Visegrád members became part of the European Union on 1 May 2004.

Visegrád, the venue of the historic 1991 meeting which lends its name to this Central European alliance, bears historical significance. In November 1335, the Kings of the three kingdoms convened at the Visegrád castle. It was King Charles I (*Károly Róbert*; 1288–1342) of Hungary and Croatia who masterminded this conference of kings. King Charles I saw the importance of the strategic location of Visegrád, a beautiful castle town located on the banks of the Danube, and therefore established his royal court in this town since the year 1323. King Charles I invited John of Luxemburg (Jan Lucemburský; 1296-1346), King of Bohemia, and Casimir III the Great (*Kazimierz III Wielki*; 1310-1370) of Poland to Visegrád. The historic meeting lasted two months until the kings agreed to end their countries' disputes and to collaborate in resisting the power of the Habsburg's Austrian Empire and Ludwig of Bavaria's Holy Roman Empire. Apart from military affairs, the kings agreed to re-establish alternative trade routes which were meant to avoid the old routes via Vienna, the Austrian Empire. After the first meeting, the kings reconvened at the Visegrád castle in 1339.

The early Visegrád integration efforts ended after the death of King Charles I in 1342. Battles for the thrones and territorial disputes hindered

collaboration among the empires. Moreover, their project to establish new trade routes through Northern Europe was met with failure due to the logistics and construction challenges, the requirement of high financial capital, and the dominance of the Teutonic knights. Despite its failure, the early Visegrád integration, which aimed to end political conflicts, nevertheless remained the ultimate dream for European leaders and diplomats in the next centuries.

The birth of the modern-day Visegrád collaboration can therefore be seen as a renewed attempt to resolve international conflict. The Visegrád member countries were motivated by their shared goals to transcend the allocated label of "Eastern Bloc", communist satellite states of the Soviet Union, and to re-establish themselves as liberal democratic countries in Central Europe. The Visegrád group seeks to transcend their historical conflicts and present-day disputes and strengthen their regional collaboration. The group also hopes to forge economic cooperation for the European Union integration.

The establishment of the Visegrád group ushered in high economic growth among the four member countries, transforming them into economic power, of which economic growth ranked sixth in Europe. After the fall of Communism, the Czech Republic and Hungary, saw the rise of tourism industry, which generated tremendous income. Poland and Slovakia, likewise, witnessed an ever-growing tourism industry.

The Czech Republic currently has a GDP of around 3.1 hundred billion US dollars. In the Middle Ages, the present-day Czech Republic was the location of the Bohemian Empire and the birthplace of the Hussite movement (1420-1434), which was the first attempt in religious reform. Later, in 1526, Bohemia became part of the Habsburg's Austrian Empire until the end of the First World War, when the Czechs and the Slovaks gained independence. In the period before the Second World War, Czechoslovakia was a progressive industrial country in Europe. However, the atrocities of war and of being under the rule of the Communist regime for 41 years hindered the country's development process. It was after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 that Czechoslovakia returned to a country which practises free economy and resumed status of a progressive industrial country, especially in terms of mechanical industry, chemical product industry and glassware industry. It became the manufacturer of Škoda cars, of which production is based in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. Prague, one of Europe's most beautiful cities, is claimed to have been built between seven hills. Prague is also known as the *City of a Hundred Spires* for its many churches and its landmark site, the majestic Prague Castle. Since the City of Prague was not destroyed during the Second World War,

the original art and architecture have been wonderfully preserved.

Located in the heart of Europe, Hungary has a GDP of around 2 hundred billion US dollars. It is one of the countries in Europe with high development, rapid growth in industry and high foreign investment rate with most investors coming from Western Europe and from Russia. An ancient country, the present-day Hungary was the settlement of the Magyars who established the Kingdom of Hungary in the Middle Ages. Since 1527, Hungary was part of the Habsburg's Austrian Empire. After the First World War, Hungary became an independent country. In 1947, Hungary became a communist country until the end of Communism in 1989. Hungary was the first country to spur the collapse of the Iron Curtain as it dismantled the 150-mile border fence with Austria on 2 May 1989.

Among the Visegrád members, Poland is the largest and most populated country in Eastern Europe. Poland also has the largest economy, with a GDP of around 8.2 hundred billion US Dollars, the average economic growth of around 3 percent and the largest agricultural production, earning its name the "bread basket" of Europe. Poland is the main producer of wheat, barley, potato and beetroot. It is also the main producer and distributor of meat in Europe. An ancient kingdom since the Middle Ages, the Kingdom of Poland and its territory were divided by Russia and Prussia. Therefore, between 1772 and 1795, Poland was temporarily obliterated from the map. After the Napoleonic wars, Poland was part of the Russian Empire. The people of Poland had always fought for their independence and gained their independence after the end of the First World War. Shortly afterwards, Poland's independence was threatened by the Nazi regime. This threat culminated in the German invasion of Poland in 1939, which marked the beginning of the Second World War. After the Second World War, Poland became a communist country. It was after the fall of Communism in 1989 that Poland resumed its status as a liberal democratic country.

Slovakia, with a GDP of around 1.3 hundred billion US dollars, is the smallest country of all the Visegrád group members. Nevertheless, Slovakia, with Bratislava as its capital city, is rapidly growing as an industrial country and as one of the important exporters of agricultural products in Europe. The country also thrives on its burgeoning tourism industry. The northern part of the country, where the picturesque Carpathian mountain range is located, has been a popular tourist and skiing destination. The Slovaks have developed their own language and culture. Their territory was once part of the Hungarian Empire. After the First World War, Slovakia, Bohemia and Moravia formed the new state of Czechoslovakia. In 1939, when Germany invaded the Czech lands, Slovakia joined the Axis Powers and, in effect, became an independent country. After the Second World War, Slovakia

became part of Czechoslovakia under the Communist regime until it peacefully gained its national independence in 1993.

These four different countries joined together as one with the establishment of the Visegrád group. The Visegrád group's first role can be seen played out in the members' fruitful negotiations with NATO and the European Union. Afterwards, collaboration between the members has progressed slowly as each member chose its own path towards European Union integration. The cooperation between members was strengthened in 1998 at the summit of leaders, of which main objective was to accelerate as well as develop other channels of collaboration within the Visegrád group.

The establishment of the Visegrád Fund in 1999 is a testimony of the height of the Visegrád members' cooperation. The Fund allocates around eight million euros per year to boost research, education, as well as art and culture. The Visegrád Fund also promotes humanitarian activities by civilians or by private development organisations from not only the Visegrád countries but also the Balkan countries and beyond.