

The Visegrad Group and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)

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The Visegrad Group and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)

The Visegrad Group was created with the aim of moving away from Communism and implementing the reforms required for full membership of the Euro-Atlantic institutions. It was established on 15 February 1991 at a meeting attended by József Antall, Prime Minister of Hungary, Lech Wałęsa, President of Poland, and Václav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, in the Hungarian town of Visegrád.

The origins of the Visegrad Group can be traced back to 1335, when John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, Charles I, King of Hungary, and Casimir III, King of Poland, met in Visegrád to strengthen relations and cooperation between the three kingdoms of Central Europe. The 1991 Visegrad Declaration is part of this tradition of cooperation between neighbouring countries with a common destiny. Following the division of Czechoslovakia into two separate States on 1 January 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia became the third and fourth members of the Group. The 'Visegrad Triangle' (Budapest, Prague and Warsaw) therefore became the 'Visegrad 4' or 'V4' (Budapest, Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw).

These four countries, with their geographical, cultural and historical ties and their similar views on the future of Central Europe after the collapse of the Communist regimes, developed close political and economic cooperation so that they would be better equipped to defend their common interests at European level. The Group's active role was confirmed by the convening of a considerable number of Summits at various levels, in particular the meeting of the Prime Ministers, which takes place once a year in the country holding the Presidency of the Group. Each member country holds the rotating Presidency for a one-year period and is responsible for drafting an annual plan of action. The only permanent structure associated with the Group is the Visegrad Fund, which was set up in 2000 and has its seat in Bratislava; this is mainly intended for the funding of NGO projects and to promote intercultural exchanges between the member countries.

The concerted action of V4 rapidly contributed to the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact, the dissolution of Comecon and the strengthening of the transition process to democracy. One of the aims of the Visegrad Group was to stimulate trade between the signatory States. To this end, on 21 December 1991 in Kraków, the Heads of State or Government signed the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which came into force on 1 March 1993. This free-trade area, a showcase for regional cooperation in Central Europe, was gradually established over a five-year period and later extended to include the countries of South East Europe. Slovenia acceded to CEFTA in 1996, Romania in 1997, Bulgaria in 1998, Croatia in 2003, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2006, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, UNMIK, Albania and Moldova in 2007. CEFTA was intended to be a transitional organisation which prepared countries for full membership of the European Union. Upon accession to the EU on 1 May 2004, the members of the Visegrad Group, along with Slovenia, left CEFTA. Bulgaria and Romania left CEFTA on 1 January 2007 when they acceded to the EU.

The arrival of Slovakia in 1993, a country with an authoritarian regime, hindered the efficient operation of the Group and led to a deterioration in its relations with the European Union. Instead of working together to defend their common interests during the accession negotiations with the EU, the V4 countries entered into competition with each other, vying for the favours of the European Union and for a possible speedy accession. The changes in

leadership in the Visegrad Group countries in 1997 resulted in renewed cooperation within the Group and led to the signing of a new text on 21 October 1998 which sought to revive the cooperation process. This cooperation was particularly reflected in the accession of the members of the Visegrad Group to NATO in 1999. Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic then supported Slovakia, economically less advanced than its partners, in its efforts to accede to the European Union at the same time as the other members of the Group.

After their accession to the European Union, the Member States of V4 continued their efforts to speak with one voice within the EU. The Visegrad Group's priorities include the establishment of links with other regional organisations such as Benelux; addressing a number of common challenges (the emigration of their citizens to Western Europe and immigration from Ukraine and the Balkans to their regions); and the strengthening of their cooperation in the fields of energy, tourism and justice. V4 is also keen to improve its internal coordination so that it is in a better position to be able to influence the EU's guidelines. Finally, the Visegrad Group also hopes to serve as a model for the transition to democracy in the Balkan countries.