

No 16



**INSTYTUT SPRAW PUBLICZNYCH**  
THE INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

# Analyses & Opinions

Analizy i Opinie

**Yes to Visegrad**

**Mateusz Falkowski**  
**Patrycja Bukalska**  
**Grzegorz Gromadzki**

# Yes to Visegrad

*Mateusz Falkowski, Patrycja Bukalska, Grzegorz Gromadzki*

- *Despite the fact that collaboration between Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary within the Visegrad Group has not been highly institutionalized, the level of awareness of the Group's existence and knowledge of its nature is growing in all four countries. There is also social support, particularly in Poland and Slovakia, for the idea of continued Visegrad collaboration after Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary join the European Union.*
- *More than one half of Slovaks, Poles and Hungarians, and almost one half of Czechs, want continued collaboration within the framework of the Visegrad Group after their countries join the EU. What is more, a significant proportion of Visegrad Group societies considers that their country should not limit itself to defending its own national interests in the EU but should also take into account the interests of other Visegrad Group members. This opinion is shared by more than one half of adult Polish and Slovak citizens, 36% of Czechs and 40% of Hungarians.*
- *Politicians should take advantage of the capital represented by the popular interest in regional cooperation in Central Europe and try to redefine the areas and forms of joint action even before Visegrad Group countries join the European Union. A joint policy with respect to Eastern neighbours, particularly Ukraine, which shares its border with three Visegrad Group countries – Poland, Slovakia and Hungary – should be one of such areas.*
- *Many divergences of interest between Visegrad Group countries appeared during accession negotiations. Such differences and various strategies of adaptation to European Union conditions will continue to occur also after these countries join the EU. On the other hand, there exists a popular interest in collaboration with neighbours in the Visegrad Group. We propose to move the centre of gravity of Visegrad collaboration even further in the direction of social, cultural and scientific projects. To this end, it would be worth while to prop up the Visegrad Fund and increase the pool of money available from that organisation in the form of grants and scholarships.*

As many as 13 years ago, in February 1991, presidents of Poland and Czechoslovakia and the prime minister of Hungary announced at Visegrad Castle their countries' intention to collaborate within the Visegrad Group on the way to becoming NATO and European Union members. The group consists of four countries since Czechoslovakia split in two in 1993: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. In six months they will all join the European Union and, consequently, since they are also NATO members (except Slovakia, which was invited to join only in November 2002), they will be able to celebrate having achieved the objectives they have set for themselves in 1991. At the same time, the process of EU accession negotiations showed that Visegrad Group members did not always share a community of interests and their collaboration was at times put to a difficult test.

The time of accession negotiations was not propitious to a debate on the sense, shape and role of future collaboration within the Visegrad Group; it was rather a time of exposed conflicts and differences of interest. One should also assume that in the initial years of membership in the European Union our countries, their elites and societies will be faced with many European challenges and problems, and will somewhat naturally focus their attention on building alliances with old EU member-states and adapting their political and administrative systems to new European Union conditions. This may be conducive to a particular rivalry and Visegrad collaboration may, but not must, become secondary as a result.

Is weaker Visegrad collaboration bad? It can be said that the very act of joining the EU will create a situation where each candidate country collaborates closer with each member of the future Union than it

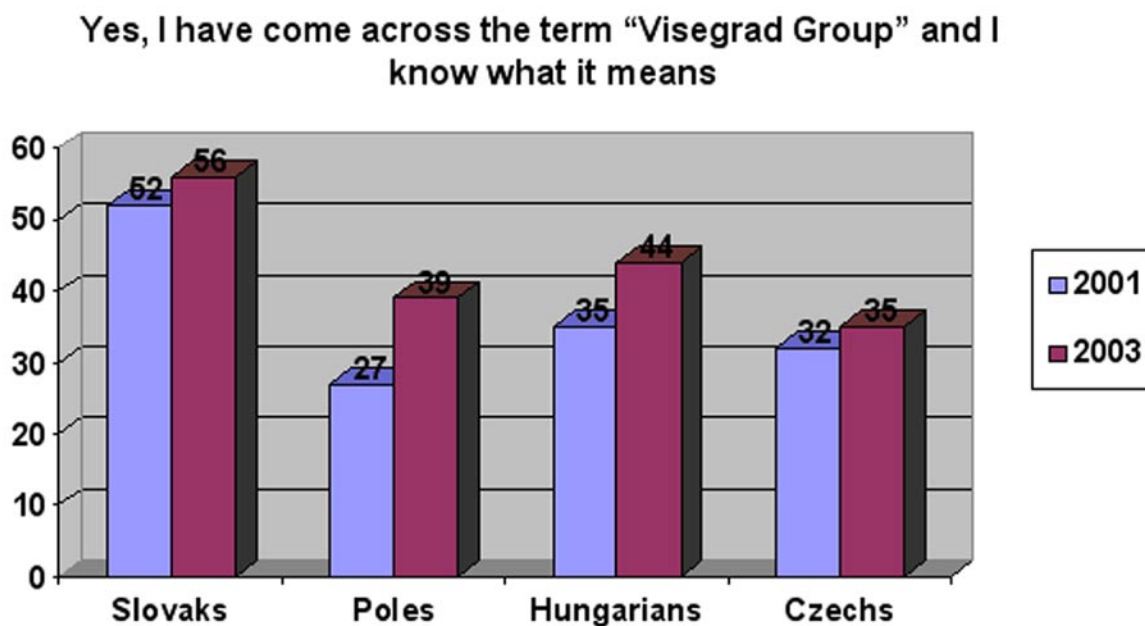
has been to date. While this is true, we nevertheless believe that regional collaboration is particularly valuable and deserving of particular support. As shown by research conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw, Institute of Public Affairs in Bratislava, Gabal Analysis and Consulting in Prague and World Economy Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest, this opinion is shared not only by the elites but also, to a large degree, by societies of the Visegrad countries.

Six months are left before we join the European Union. This is a good moment for another quiet reflection on the possible future of the Visegrad Group, on the purpose of regional collaboration between our countries in an enlarged Union. It is better to do it now than during the initial hectic months and years of EU membership. Indeed, the situation requires redefining the areas and forms of collaboration. Visegrad Group countries should draw up a new framework of collaboration or decide that, in the face of divergent interests, that collaboration is nothing more than a political declaration. When discussing these issues, politicians of all four countries should bear in mind that there exists a popular consent to Visegrad collaboration in an enlarged European Union. Societies of the four countries are increasingly aware of the existence of the Visegrad Group and increasingly accept collaboration within that organization, often even agreeing on the need to give precedence to collaboration and compromise between Visegrad Group members over their own national interests.

## Knowledge about the Visegrad Group is growing

The awareness of the existence of the Visegrad Group and knowledge of it (confirmed by respondents themselves) has grown in the past two years in all Visegrad countries. The number of people who have heard of the Visegrad Group and declare their knowledge of it has grown particularly strongly in Poland (from 27% to 39%) and Hungary (from 35% to 44%).

Chart 1. Have you ever come across the term “Visegrad Group”?\*



\*Data: Institute of Public Affairs; replies had to fit into one of three categories: “Yes, I have come across it and I know what it means”, “Yes, I have come across it but I don’t know what it means” and “No, I have never come across it”.

It should be stressed that in Poland, for example, that process does not only apply to well educated residents of larger urban centres but is equally spread across the population spectrum. No socio-demographic variables affected the growth of the knowledge of the Visegrad Group or awareness of its existence.

The Visegrad Group is best known in Slovakia. This is linked to the fact that the group was more politically important to Slovakia, which was invited to join NATO and became an EU candidate member later than the other countries, and which looked at the Visegrad agreement as a sort of bridge to Western institutions. The lower level of identification of

the Visegrad Group among Poles, Hungarians and Czechs, and the relatively high importance given to it by Slovaks, is also affected by the fact that Visegrad cooperation is not institutionalized and is primarily based on irregular intergovernmental consultations. Indeed, the only institution of the group (International Visegrad Fund) is based in Slovakia and there have been attempts to establish

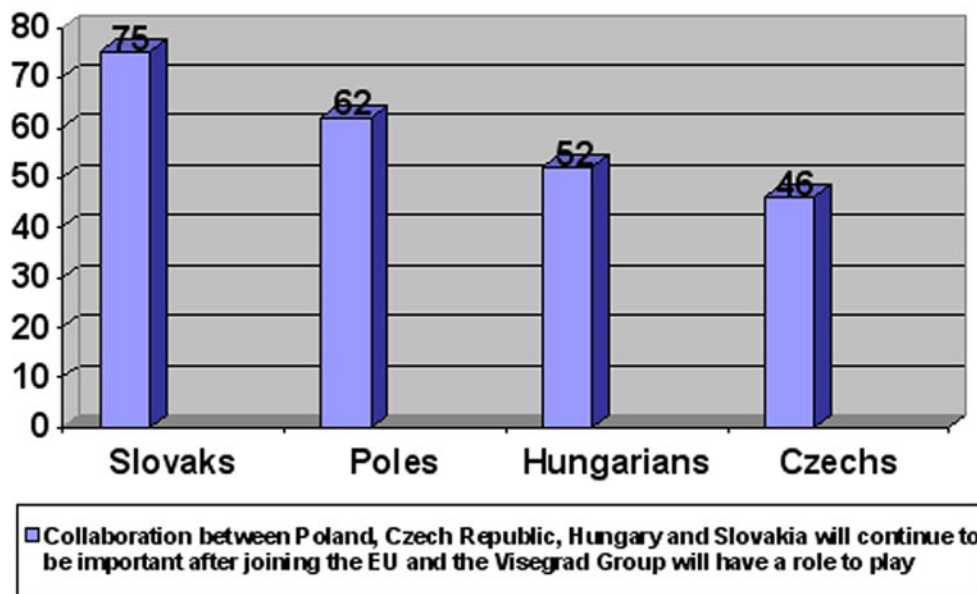
a formal and permanent secretariat of the group in Bratislava. All this may have contributed to the Visegrad Group having more significance in the Slovak society than elsewhere. To sum it up, there is a perceivable growth of the “presence” of the Visegrad Group in all four countries (a more cautious approach must be used when assessing the “knowledge” of it).

## We want to collaborate also after joining the European Union

**M**ore than one half of Slovak, Polish and Hungarian citizens want to continue collaboration within the Visegrad Group after their countries join the EU.

The need for regional collaboration within the European Union is also declared by almost one half of Czech respondents.

Chart 2. Collaboration between Central European countries – Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia -within the framework of the Visegrad Group was initiated in the early 1990s. Do you think that, after joining the European Union, Poland’s collaboration with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia will continue to be important and that the Visegrad Group will have a role to play?



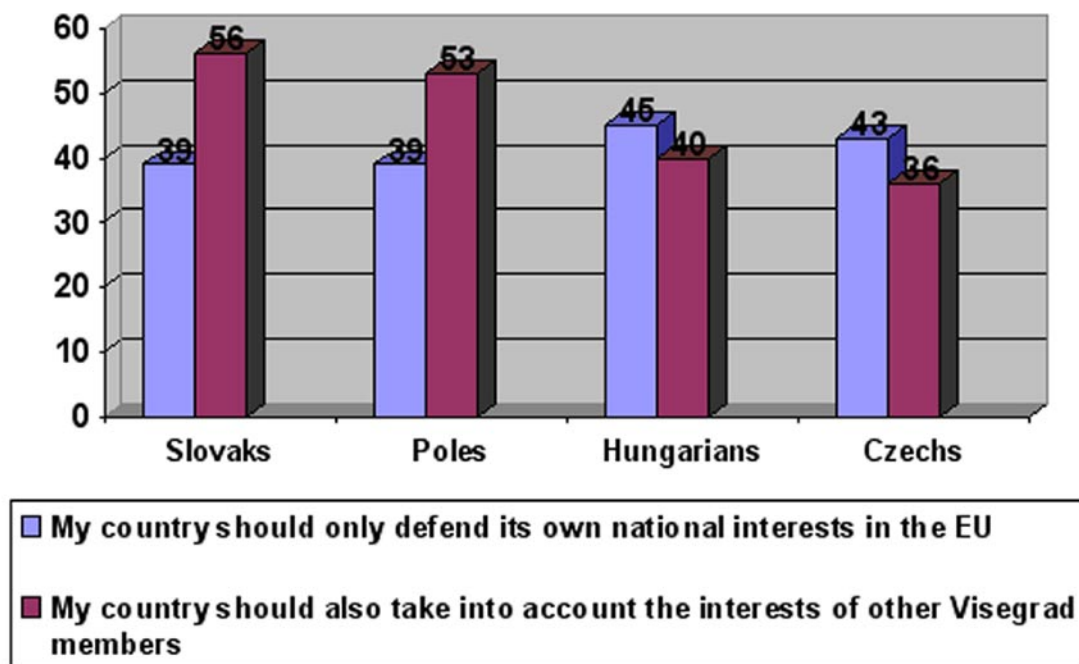
Data: Institute of Public Affairs, 2003

## Identification of regional interests

When Poles, Slovaks, Czechs and Hungarians declare the importance of regional collaboration between Central European countries they do not refer only

to its general aspect. Indeed, a large proportion of respondents identifies not only national interests but regional interests as well.

Chart 3. Should a country (Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary) defend only its own interests in the European Union or should it also take into account the interests of other Visegrad Group members? Which of the following statements reflects your opinion the best?



Data: Institute of Public Affairs, 2003

More than one half of Poles and Slovaks considers that their country's EU policy should also take into account the interests of the other Visegrad Group

countries and not only its own. It should be stressed that this opinion is also shared by a significant portion of more individualistic Czechs and Hungarians.

## How to shape Visegrad collaboration within the European Union?

Public opinion studies show that there is popular support on which politicians can build Visegrad collaboration. Societies in the Visegrad Group want to collaborate with one another. At the same time, the process of accession negotiations showed that, the truth be told, the Visegrad Group was unable to do more than engage in routine political consultations. It did not create any joint Central European policy with respect to the European Union, all to the contrary – dissonances and even a certain incompatibility of interests referred precisely to integration issues. For various reasons, the influence of the Visegrad Group on European policy was minimal during accession negotiations and limited to routine consultations. It seems that more was expected of Visegrad's political role – first of all in Poland and Slovakia - hence the disappointment. To prevent it in the future, politicians must also react to popular expectations and sketch a realistic plan of action for Visegrad collaboration in the European Union. Consequently, we propose three recommendations for the development of Visegrad collaboration in the European Union:

- Firstly, one must be realistic and come to terms with the fact that the Visegrad Group is first and foremost a mechanism for political consultation. Therefore, making that mechanism as effective as possible should be a priority.
- Secondly, since we believe that the Visegrad Group should be more than a forum of political consultation and take political initiative as well, and since we are aware of the difficulties and frequent incompatibility of interests, we

suggest focusing on one or two initiatives, and continuing to deal with other issues by way of political consultation. The EU eastward policy, particularly with respect to Ukraine, could become a good object of that political focus. It seems that, on this issue, the interests of Visegrad Group countries converge, their expertise and popular support are high, and the issue is prestigious and an object of deliberations in the European Union.

- Thirdly, the notion that the Visegrad Group is only a forum for political consultation has become too dominant in the public perception of the organization. Politicians underestimated the social dimension of Visegrad relations, particularly in the early 1990s. In this context, the popular awareness of the Group's existence is outright astonishing. Studies show that societies of the four countries are aware of the existence of a regional collaboration framework and support its continuation after they join the European Union. Politicians must respond to public expectations and bring Visegrad collaboration closer to the people, for example by propping up the Visegrad Fund and promoting cultural exchange, scholarships, and joint projects.

The public opinion study “Visegrad Cooperation as Seen by the Citizens of Four Countries” was conducted in 2001 and 2003 by the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw, Institute of Public Affairs in Bratislava, Institute of World Economy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Gabal Analysis and Consulting in Prague. The study was prepared by Olga Gyarfasova, Mateusz Falkowski, Lenka Helusova and Andras Backas. The project was supported by the International Visegrad Fund. The Institute of Public Affairs will soon publish a detailed analysis of study results.

The first poll was conducted in November and December 2001 on a group representative of the adult population of the given country (Czech Republic n=1318, Hungary n=1013, Slovakia n=1002, Poland n=1002). The second poll was conducted in May-July 2003 on a group representative of the adult population of the given country (Czech Republic n=1226, Hungary n=1014, Slovakia n=1008, Poland n=1034). In Poland, both field studies were conducted by Sopocka Pracownia Badań Społecznych.

**PATRYCJA BUKALSKA** is an analyst with the Centre for Eastern Studies specializing in Vysegrad Group countries. **MATEUSZ FALKOWSKI** is an analyst with the Institute of Public Affairs, sociologist and co-author of the studies discussed in this paper. **GRZEGORZ GROMADZKI** is an analyst collaborating with institutions such as Stefan Batory Foundation. He specializes in the eastward policy of the enlarging European Union.

**Analyses & Opinions  
No 16, november 2003**

Editor: Mateusz Falkowski  
Layout design: Andrzej Jasiocha  
e-mail: jasio70@interia.pl

Institute of Public Affairs  
Address: 5 Szpitalna St., # 22  
00-031 Warsaw, Poland  
e-mail: isp@isp.org.pl  
www.isp.org.pl