

25 Years of Visegrád Cooperation: A Growing Power within the EU

Opening Session

Distinguished Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to take part in today's conference on the occasion of the **25th anniversary of the Visegrád-Group**. I would like to thank the **Czech Visegrád-Presidency**, represented here by Ambassador Jan Sechter, for having taken the initiative to organise this gathering in Vienna.

An anniversary is a perfect occasion for reflection about both past experiences and future outlooks. I trust that this conference will make good use of that opportunity, and I am very pleased to contribute with a few opening thoughts.

When the Visegrád Group was founded on **15th February 1991** at a meeting of President Václav **Havel**, President Lech **Wałęsa** and Prime Minister József **Antall**, a major aim was to harmonize efforts and assist each other during the period of political and economic transition, with the key goal of integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

After having achieved this goal by joining NATO and acceding to the EU, the Visegrád countries moved towards jointly strengthening and promoting their interests within the EU and NATO.

Over the past 25 years, the Visegrád Group has evolved into a **successful format of cooperation** and a **well-known political brand**. Considering that the V4 countries – despite many similarities - are by no means a homogenous group, this is a remarkable outcome. And while different views and positions among them are quite obvious from time to time, divergences have never prevented the Visegrád 4 from keeping to cooperate closely on matters of common concern.

I think that one of the Visegrád Group's strengths is their awareness of the fact that in Central European historical experience **significant fault lines are as much of a reality as deep-rooted historical and cultural links**. In the history of the Visegrád Group, with all its ups and downs, you can see **idealism as well as realism** in their efforts to overcome divisions. At its best, the Group managed to balance the two.

In this respect, it is worthwhile taking a look at the **Visegrád Declaration of 1991**, a document that in parts clearly bears the handwriting of the late Vaclav Havel.

While stating the aims of political, economic and cultural cooperation, and the goals of transformation and European integration, the Declaration also underlines the ethical dimension of the Visegrád endeavour by referring to “**universal human values**” as the basis for a cooperation that is “**free of hatred, nationalism, xenophobia, and local strife**”.

It is important to remember that these words were written against the backdrop of the grave **crisis emerging in Yugoslavia** at the time and a very **volatile situation in the Soviet Union, most notably in the Baltic States**. If you will, the seamless continuation of the Visegrád cooperation after the peaceful separation of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993 is in itself proof of the spirit expressed in the Declaration of 1991.

At their extraordinary summit on 15th February this year in Prague, the prime ministers of the Visegrád countries highlighted the Group’s **contribution to European integration, stability and security and their determination to continue making "Europe stronger, more prosperous and more democratic"**.

They also reiterated their commitment to advocate **EU enlargement**. Having themselves achieved sweeping political and economic transformations in the past decades, the Visegrád Group’s readiness to assist countries in transition in South East and Eastern Europe is particularly valuable. Austria, therefore, very much appreciates the fruitful exchange and cooperation with the Visegrád 4 on the **enlargement process concerning the Western Balkans countries**.

Taking into account our **joint concern regarding those countries in our neighbourhood**, it is not surprising that we take an increasingly similar approach regarding border management and the fight against illegal migration along the Western Balkans route, the events of 2015, and the still prevailing circumstances.

Austria hosts **one of the highest per-capita numbers of asylum seekers among EU countries**. This is part of a long history of receiving and assisting people fleeing from war, torture and persecution that also included altogether over 370.000 Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks and Poles who fled their countries in 1956, 1968 and 1980/81, respectively.

As one of the most affected countries in Europe, Austria insists that the refugee crisis requires **common, consolidated and solidary action of the EU member states**, including measures directed at countries of origin, transit and destination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Following the EU enlargement of 2004, **cooperation and daily exchange** between Austria and the new EU members in its immediate and close neighbourhood became **ever closer** at all levels. In economic terms, Austria is very tightly linked to her Central European neighbours by the **flow of trade and services** as well as by large **investments**.

Over and above, **promoting good neighbourhood** is in Austria's view an important and **dynamic element of European integration**. This applies to bilateral relations as well as to the cooperation in various regional formats aimed at **developing and implementing projects** which lead to a concrete deepening of integration in the heart of Europe. The advantages of such cross-border cooperation appear quite obvious to us in a number of **practical fields**.

Austria has, therefore, always highly valued the opportunity to participate in extended **meetings of the Visegrád Group at various levels on various matters of shared interest**, including domestic security, infrastructure, energy security, transport, health and agriculture.

This being said, we clearly see **scope to further develop and intensify our practical cooperation** with the Visegrád Group on regional and European questions, especially when it comes to strengthen the Central European region in terms of competitiveness and innovation capacity. Building on the achievements of integration, we are ready to explore new avenues with the Visegrád Group in this regard.

With this, I would like to wish all participants in this conference today a stimulating, lively exchange of views. Thank you for your attention.