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IWONA PAWLAS

University of Economics in Katowice, Poland

THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES AND EUROPEAN UNION MEMBERSHIP - SELECTED ISSUES

Abstract:

The Visegrad Group consists of four Central European states: Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. They started the accession procedure in mid 1990s and joined the European Union in May 2004. The aim of the paper is to analyse the economic, social and political impact of European Union membership on Visegrad countries. Key advantages resulting from the accession to the European Union were presented, including positive net position towards EU budget, participation in EU Policy of Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion and Common Agricultural Policy, as well as export opportunities and increase in GDP per capita. In addition to that population trends, situation on the market of labour and net migration in four Visegrad countries were studied.

Keywords:

Visegrad Group; European Union; regional economic integration

JEL Classification: F00

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Introduction

In February 1991 the Visegrad Triangle was formed by Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In 1993, after the disintegration (dissolution) of Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia became members of the Visegrad Group (also known as Visegrad Four (V4). The formation of the Visegrad Group was motivated by a couple of reasons, in that: desire to introduce economic, social and political transition, need to overcome historic animosities between Central European countries, belief that through joint efforts it will be easier to achieve the common goals, i.e. to join the European integration as well as proximity of ideas of political elites in the V4 states in the beginning of 1990s.

Since early 1990s the V4 states have perceived integration with the European Union as a priority. Numerous activities of the Visegrad Group have aimed at strengthening stability in Central European region. In addition to that the V4 states have perceived regional cooperation as a challenge and its success as the best proof of their ability to integrate also into such structures as the European Union. The V4 states finally joined the European Union in May 2004. They constitute an important region in the EU. It seems vital to study the impact of EU membership on Visegrad economies and to analyse the changes in economic situation in V4 countries after 2004.

1. History of relations between Visegrad Group Countries and European Union

Visegrad Group countries, i.e. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia form the core of Central Europe. They represent considerably young democracies and young market economies. The process of integration of V4 with the European Union took more than a decade. It started in December 1991 when Europe Agreements were signed by Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary with the European Communities. Later dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia made it necessary to negotiate and conclude separate Europe Agreements with the two successor independent states. They were signed in October 1993 and came into operation in February 1995. The Europe Agreements served as a legal basis for co-operation between V4 states and the European Union before their accession to the EU. They aimed at providing legal framework for political dialogue, promoting the expansion of trade and economic relations between the parties, providing a basis for financial and technical assistance of the European Communities to the associated countries, as well as supporting gradual integration of V4 into the European Union.

Table 1. Visegrad 4 countries and their relations with the European Union

Country	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Europe Agreement	16th Dec., 1991*	16th Dec., 1991	16th Dec., 1991	16th Dec., 1991*
Official application for EU membership	17th Jan., 1996	1st April, 1994	8th April, 1994	27th June, 1995
Start of pre-accession negotiations	31st March, 1998	31st March, 1998	31st March, 1998	March 2000
Start of accession negotiations	1998	1998	10th Nov., 1998	2002
End of accession negotiations	13th Dec., 2002	13th Dec., 2002	13th Dec., 2002	13th Dec., 2002

Signing Accession Treaty	16th April, 2003	16th April, 2003	16th April, 2003	16th April, 2003
Accession to EU	1st May, 2004	1st May, 2004	1st May, 2004	1st May, 2004
Euro adoption	Not yet	Not yet	Not yet	1st Jan., 2009
Presidency in the Council	Jan.-June, 2009	Jan.-June, 2011	July-Dec., 2011	July-Dec., 2016

** - as Czechoslovakia; separate Europe Agreements were signed by both the Czech Republic and Slovakia in October 1993 and they came into force on 1st February, 1995.*
Source: Own elaboration.

V4 countries were not satisfied with being just associated with the European Communities, therefore in mid 1990s official applications for EU membership were presented. Quite surprisingly Hungary was the first V4 country to apply for full membership. Hungarian application was officially presented on 1st April, 1994. Poland officially applied for EU membership on 8th April, 1994. Slovakia did so in June 1995. The Czech Republic's application was officially presented in Brussels in the beginning of 1996. During the Luxembourg Summit of the European Council (in December 1997) the decision was taken that Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were ready for negotiations and those three Visegrad Group states started pre-accession negotiations concerning their membership in the European Union in March 1998 (together with other Luxembourg Group states, i.e. Slovenia, Estonia and Cyprus). In December 1999 during the Helsinki Summit of the European Council it was agreed that Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia and Malta would start negotiations concerning their membership in the EU. The pre-accession negotiations with Helsinki Group states (in that Slovakia) began in March 2000.

Due to the fact that Slovakia was quite efficient during the negotiation process, it managed to finish the accession negotiations together with other Visegrad Group states on 13th December, 2002 in Copenhagen. The Accession Treaty between V4 states and the EU was signed on 16th April, 2003 in Athens and they all joined the European Union structures on 1st May, 2004 (together with six other states, namely: Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Malta, and Cyprus who also finished negotiation process in Copenhagen in December 2002). Since then they have been treated as full members of the European Union and had the right to participate in the creation of the EU future (Pelkmans 2006).

Slovakia is the only V4 state to participate in the 3rd stage of Economic and Monetary Union. It adopted euro in 2009. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are obliged to enter Euro zone as soon as they meet all convergence criteria. For now, however, it is hard to say when exactly it may happen (partly due to a complicated situation in Euro zone, connected mostly with the Greek crisis and a likely Grexit).

Political advantages stemming from EU membership include the possibility to actively create the future of European integration. V4 representatives work in all EU institutions – Council of the European Union, European Council, European Commission, European Parliament, but also in Committee of the Regions, Economic and Social Committee, Court of Justice of the EU, General Court, Court of Auditors (Instytut Spraw Publicznych 2004).

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Being responsible for Presidency in the Council is considered an important aspect of EU membership. According to the formally and legally adopted calendar of Presidency (Council 2007), the Czech Republic was the first V4 member state to play this role. The Czech Republic was responsible for Presidency of the Council of the EU between January and June of 2009. The Czech Republic co-operated strongly with France and Sweden within the Trio Presidency. The three priorities of the Czech Presidency were: Economy, Energy and External relations. A competitive and open Europe was treated as a crucial priority and concentrated on further deepening of the internal market by enhancing the four freedoms and better management of innovation policy. With regard to the area of energy and climate change they focused on energy security, in that strengthening reliability of delivery and promoting the creation of external energy policy. Finally, with respect to EU external action, the following fields were promoted by the Czech Republic during its Presidency: Euro-Atlantic relations, Eastern Partnership, openness and further enlargement of the European Union (Drulak 2008).

Hungary was the second V4 state to play the role of Presidency of the Council of the EU. Hungarian Presidency took place between January and June 2011. Hungary formed the Trio Presidency together with Spain and Belgium. The agenda of Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU focused on four main topics: growth and employment for preserving the European social model (small and medium enterprises, demography and family policy, fighting poverty), Stronger Europe (food, energy, water), Citizen friendly European Union (implementation of the Stockholm Programme, promoting cultural diversity in the EU), and finally Enlargement and neighbourhood policy (Croatia and Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership) (http://www.eu2011.hu/priorities-hungarian-presidency).

Hungary handed over the Presidency to Poland. Poland was presiding the Council of the EU from July to December 2011. Poland formed the Trio Presidency with Denmark and Cyprus. Among the priorities of the Polish Presidency one could find: The EU leaving the crisis (achieved by the deepening of the internal market, ambitious EU budget - Multiannual Financial Framework 2014 – 2020 - and comprehensive use of the EU's intellectual capital; The EU and its external partners/neighbourhood (construed as a reinforcement of the Eastern Partnership and expansion of the EU) and finally Safe Europe (implemented through the Common Security and Defence Policy and external energy policy of the EU) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2011; Pawlas 2012).

According to the adopted timetable of Presidency Slovakia will lead the EU during the second half of 2016 and it will form the Trio Presidency together with the Netherlands and Malta. The consultations of Slovak, Maltese and Dutch representatives have already begun (meetings were held in March and June 2015).

It seems easily visible that the priorities of V4 states were strongly determined by internal and external challenges facing the European Union. One should, however, point out the fact that the priorities were partly derived from specific internal problems and geopolitical location of each V4 state.

2. Impact of EU membership on Visegrad Group Countries with focus on transfers from the EU budget and net position towards the EU budget

The Visegrad Group countries joined the European Union as relatively poor countries, characterised by a low level of per capita GDP as compared to the rest of the EU (especially EU15 countries). Therefore positive net position towards the EU budget has been observed since the very first year of their membership in the EU (Hallet and Keereman 2005). The EU transfers represent an important injection into the economy of the Visegrad Group countries. Table 2 presents commitments from the EU budget for Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia. Commitments for Poland increased from EUR 6584 million in 2004 to EUR 14331 million in 2013; in total they amounted to EUR 100200 million for the period 2004-2013. Commitments from the EU budget for Hungary rose from EUR 1764 million in 2004 to EUR 5351 million in 2013. From 2004 to 2013 the EU budget committed as much as EUR 39112 million to Hungary. A similar level of commitments from the EU budget o he Czech Republic was noted: EU commitments amounted to EUR 1627 million in 2004 and they reached EUR 4826 million in 2013. In total the commitments from the EU budget to the Czech Republic for he period 2004-2013 amounted to EUR 36454 million. In the case of Slovakia commitments from the EU budget ranged from EUR 946 million in 2004 to EUR 2421 million in 2013 and in total they amounted to EUR 17962 million (see table 2).

Table 2. . Visegrad countries and commitments from the EU budget (EUR million, 2004 prices).

Country	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
2004	1627	1764	6584	946
2005	1915	2107	8165	1057
2006	2028	2377	9062	1187
2007	3998	4090	11118	1825
2008	4140	4270	11711	1907
2009	4255	4465	12300	1995
2010	4413	4681	12587	2101
2011	4558	4891	13177	2208
2012	4694	5116	13753	2315
2013	4826	5351	14331	2421

Source: Rosenberg and Sierhej (2007).

Table 3. Visegrad countries' net position towards EU budget (EUR million)

Country	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
2004	178.0	270.0	1404.0	173.0
2005	293.0	490.0	2614.0	297.0
2006	386.2	1115.0	2997.6	323.2
2007	656.7	1605.9	5136.4	617.8
2008	1178.0	1111.7	4441.7	725.6
2009	1702.5	2719.4	6337.1	542.1
2010	2079.3	2748.4	8427.1	1349.6
2011	1455.2	4418.3	10975.1	1160.6
2012	3045.2	3280.4	11997.2	1597.0
2013	3401.1	4654.5	12237.1	1287.4

Source: EU Information Centre Danish Parliament (2015) and Landesmann & Richter (2003).

In order to analyse a real financial impact of EU membership on V4 economies one should take into account not only transfers from the EU budget but also net position towards the EU budget. Net financial effect of EU membership for V4 countries expressed in million EUR is presented in table 3, while their net position towards the EU budget as % of their GNI is shown in table 4.

Poland is the biggest net beneficiary of all EU member states. From 2004 to 2013 the net financial effect of Poland's membership in the EU was almost EUR 67 billion – it rose from EUR 1.4 billion in 2004 to EUR 12.2 billion in 2013. The Hungarian net position towards the EU budget increased from EUR 270 million in 2004 to EUR 4.6 billion in 2013. In the case of the Czech Republic the net financial effect of EU membership ranged from EUR 178 million in 2004 to EUR 3.4 billion in 2013. Slovakia's net position towards the EU budget increase from EUR 173 million in 2004 o EUR 1.3 billion in 2013. Total real net financial effect of Hungarian membership in the EU for the period 2004-2013 amounted to EUR 17.8 billion; for the Czech Republic it was almost EUR 8 billion and in the case of Slovakia – EUR 5.2 billion ("The Telegraph" 2015).

Table 4. Visegrad countries' net position towards the EU budget (% GNI)

Country	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
2004	0.20	0.37	0.60	0.56
2005	0.31	0.64	1.08	0.92
2006	0.36	1.31	1.13	0.75
2007	0.55	1.71	1.71	1.16
2008	0.83	1.12	1.25	1.15
2009	1.32	3.08	2.12	0.87
2010	1.53	2.94	2.47	2.07
2011	1.01	4.67	3.10	1.71
2012	2.14	3.59	3.30	2.28
2013	2.44	5.33	3.29	1.83

Source: EU Information Centre Danish Parliamen (2015) and Baldwin (2003).

As mentioned above, EU membership has brought huge financial benefits to V4 countries. Most EU transfers and subsidies were connected with participation in EU

Policy of Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion and Common Agricultural Policy. For the budgeting period 2007-2013 Visegrad Group countries were granted EUR 130 billion for Cohesion Policy alone. The vast majority of projects implemented as part of Cohesion Policy aimed at transport infrastructure, environmental protection, small and medium enterprises' promotion, human capital development and strengthening overall competitiveness of V4 economies. Common Agricultural Policy improved financial situation of farmers in Visegrad Group countries and positively influenced agricultural landscape thanks to adoption of new technologies in the region (ERSTE GROUP 2014).

3. Economic situation in Visegrad Countries in 2004 and 2013 – comparative analysis

European Union membership has had positive effect on economic performance on Visegrad Group economies. Within the first decade of EU membership key economic indicators of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic improved considerably. From 2004 to 2013 per capita GDP in the Czech Republic increased from US$ 16800 (PPP) to US$ 26300 (PPP). In the case of Hungary per capita GDP rose from US$ 14900 (PPP) to US$ 19800 (PPP). An even higher growth was experienced by the Polish economy where per capita GDP increased from US$ 12000 (PPP) to US$ 21000 (PPP) in the analysed period of time. Between 2004 and 2013 Slovakia's per capita GDP rose from US$ 14500 (PPP) to US$ 24700. The average for the EU equalled US$ 28100 in 2004 and as much as US$ 34500 in 2013. Per capita GDP in the Czech Republic represented 59.8% of the EU average in 2004 and % 76.3% in 2013. In Poland it was 42.7% and 62% respectively. In the case of Slovakia per capita GDP rose from 51.6% to 71.6% of the EU average. Hungarian per capita GDP represented 53% of the EU average in 2004 and 57.4% in 2013. The most significant rise was observed for the Polish economy – by as much as 20 percentage points (see table 5).

GDP real growth rate in V4 countries was much higher than the EU average for both 2004 and 2013. In 2004 it amounted to 4.65%, while for the EU – 2.4%. In 2013 GDP real growth rate for V4 economies equalled 0.43% and for the EU it was only 0.10%. Poland remained the leading with respect to GDP real growth rate among the V4 in both 2004 and 2013 (5.6% and 1.6% respectively) (see table 6).

Table 5. Per capita GDP (PPP US$)

Country	2004	2013
Czech Republic	16800	26300
Hungary	14900	19800
Poland	12000	21100
Slovakia	14500	24700
EU	28100	34500

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015) and own calculations.

Table 6. GDP real growth rate (%)

Country	2004	2013
Czech Republic	3.70	-0.90
Hungary	3.90	0.20
Poland	5.60	1.60
Slovakia	5.30	0.80
V4	4.65	0.43
EU	2.40	0.10

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015) and own calculations.

The situation on the market of labour in V4 countries in 2004 was much worse than on average in the EU. Unemployment rate in V4 amounted to 12.3% (while for the EU it was just 9.5%). The most difficult situation was observed in Poland where unemployment rate amounted to 19.5% (It was the highest level of all 25 EU member countries in 2004). In 2013 unemployment rate for V4 was close o the EU average – 10.6% and 10.5% respectively. A similar level of unemployment was characeristic for boh Poland (10.3%) and Hungary (10.5%). Only in Slovakia unemployment rate was higher than the EU average in 2013 (14.4%). The best situation was noted for the Czech Republic where unemployment rate was 7.1% (see table 7).

Table 7. Unemployment rate (%)

Country	2004	2013
Czech Republic	10.6	7.1
Hungary	5.9	10.5
Poland	19.5	10.3
Slovakia	13.1	14.4
V4	12.3	10.6
EU	9.5	10.5

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015) and own calculations.

Another important aspect that should be considered is employment rate for the age group 20 to 64 years. According to Strategy “Europe 2020” unemployment rate for the EU is to reach 75% by the year 2020. In 2013 the average employment rate for the EU was 68.4%, while the one for V4 amounted to 66.4%. Only in the case of the Czech Republic employment rate was higher than the EU average – 72.5%; in other V4 countries it ranged from 63% to 65% (see table 8).

Table 8. Employment rate for the age group 20 to 64 (%)

Country	2013	Europe 2020 target
Czech Republic	72.5	75.0
Hungary	63.0	75.0
Poland	64.9	71.0
Slovakia	65.0	72.0
V4	66.4	-
EU	68.4	75.0

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015) and own calculations.

A several year period of financial crisis and economic instability adversely affected public finance sector in most EU member states. The problems were reflected in rising public debt (both in absolute terms and as % GDP). In the EU public debt amounted to 62.2% in 2004 and in 2013 it exceeded 90%. The situation in three out of four Visegrad Group states was much better than the EU average. Both in 2004 and in 2013 public debt in Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic did not exceed 60% GDP. Only in the case of Hungary the situation of public finance sector deteriorated significantly in the analysed period of time – public debt in Hungary reached 80% in 2013 (see table 9).

Table 9. Public debt (% GDP)

Country	2004	2013
Czech Republic	33.5	48.8
Hungary	58.3	79.8
Poland	49.9	48.2
Slovakia	46.6	55.5
EU	62.2	91.1

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015), Central Statistical Office (2014), EUROSTAT (2015) and own calculations.

Accession to the EU resulted in better conditions for the engagement of V4 countries in international trade. Therefore one can observe positive changes with regard to export activity of the analysed economies. The value of V4 exports in 2013 amounted to EUR 539.4 billion while in 2004 it was EUR 167.11. For the Czech Republic and Poland exports more than tripled. Poland's exports increased from EUR 57.6 billion to EUR 202.3 billion. Exports of the Czech Republic amounted to EUR 46.8 billion in 2004 and to as much as EUR 161.4 billion in 2013. The dynamics of Slovakia's export activity was the highest; the value of its exports almost quadrupled: Slovakia's exports rose from EUR 21.25 billion to EUR 82.70 billion. In the case of Hungary the dynamics in exports was the lowest. The value of Hungarian exports doubled in he analysed period of time: it increased from EUR 42 billion to EUR 93 billion (see table 10).

One can also observe some positive changes with respect to life expectancy at birth and infant mortality (deaths per 1000 life births) (see tables 11 and 12). Life expectancy in V4 countries rose by 2.7 years (from 74.1 in 2004 to 76.8 in 2013). One should, however, note that it was and still is lower than EU average. In 2004 it was 4 years lower, in 2013 – 2.4 years lower. Average infant morality in V4 countries amounted to 7.25 in 2004 (while the average for the EU was 5.30) and was reduced to 4.82 in 2013 (in 2013 the average for the EU equalled 4.33). The distance has shrunk considerably, which is quite optimistic.

Table 10. Exports (billion US$)

Country	2004	2013	2013 2004=100
Czech Republic	46.77	161.40	345.1
Hungary	42.03	92.98	221.2
Poland	57.60	202.30	351.2
Slovakia	21.25	82.70	389.2

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V4	167.11	539.38	334.8

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015) and own calculations.

Table 11. Life expectancy at birth (years)

Country	2004	2014
Czech Republic	75.8	78.3
Hungary	72.2	75.5
Poland	74.2	76.7
Slovakia	74.2	76.7
V4	74.1	76.8
EU	78.1	80.2

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015) and own calculations.

Table 12. Infant mortality rate (deaths per 1000 life births)

Country	2004	2013
Czech Republic	3.97	2.63
Hungary	8.68	5.09
Poland	8.73	6.19
Slovakia	7.62	5.35
V4	7.25	4.82
EU	5.30	4.33

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015) and own calculations.

Table 13. Net migration (per 1000 population)

Country	2004	2014
Czech Republic	0.97	2.15
Hungary	0.86	1.34
Poland	-0.49	-0.47
Slovakia	0.30	0.01
EU	1.50	2.22

Source: CIA (2011, 2015), IndexMundi (2015) and own calculations.

Net migration (per 1000 population) was the last element taken into consideration during the comparative analysis of situation in V4 countries in 2004 and 2013. Poland was the only country with negative net migration between 2004 and 2013; net migration amounted to around minus 0.5 per 1000 population. In the case of Slovakia net migration was close to zero (0.3 per 1000 population in 20004 and 0.01 per 1000 population in 2013). Net migration for the Czech Republic ranged from 0.97 per 1000 population in 2004 to 2.15 per 1000 population in 2013. Net migration for Hungary amounted to 0.86 per 1000 population in 2004 and 1.34 per 1000 population in 2013 (see table 13).

Conclusion

Accession to the European Union must be seen as a really important stage of V4 states opening. Membership in the European Union has brought economic, social and political effects for both new member states and the European Union itself.

The V4 states citizens are aware of advantages stemming from EU membership. They usually point out to four freedoms (in that to open borders, the possibility to work, study and live in other EU countries), advantages for farmers, as well as positive effects of the inflow of structural funds and Cohesion Fund (transport infrastructure projects, environmental protection ones, promotion of SMEs by European Regional Development Fund and promoting human capital development by European Social Fund). Increased inflow of capital in the form of foreign direct investment as well as stronger foreign trade relations are also mentioned by many V4 citizens. Being a part of the wide family of European societies constitutes another important aspect of membership for V4 citizens. Especially now at the time of growing political instability in the global economy and in Eastern Europe the political effects of membership become more and more important. In Poland the positive attitude towards the EU is the highest of all V4 countries (and of all EU28 countries). In 2014 89% of the Polish citizens were happy about Poland’s membership in the EU (CBOS 2014).

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