

Uncertain Times: The Future of Transatlantic Relations from the Perspective of NGOs and Think-tank's in Central Europe and Hungary

Debate: Energy and climate policy: A green future amidst competing interests

Author: Lilla Judit Bartuszek, Secretary-General, V4SDG-Visegrad for Sustainability

In my paper, my aim is to place the emphasis on the V4 as a geopolitical cooperation that has immense potential in leading the CEE region's sustainability transition. With V4SDG, we envision a sustainable, competitive and resilient V4, built through collaboration across sectors for the Sustainable Development Goals. As committed young professionals, we are taking charge to prepare our region to tackle the greatest challenges of the 21st century. We believe it's time to rethink the V4, going beyond the idea of cooperation limited to governments. This is also an opportunity to empower the V4 as a constructive agent of sustainability action within the EU, ensuring that our region plays an active role in taking leadership on major global issues as part of the Union.

V4 as an actor for Sustainability

On 15 February 1991, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia signed the Visegrad Declaration. For three decades, we nurtured our cooperation by helping each other to great successes, such as joining the European Union and NATO together. This anniversary, the time is ripe to pick a new mission. One that allows us to grow our partnership beyond ad-hoc political cooperation. One that encompasses more than our governments, uniting the shapers of our region in their efforts. One that spans from local to global, offering opportunities for joint achievement. We need a purpose that lasts. In seeking it, let the context guide us. The 21st century threatens with a climate disaster, the destruction of biodiversity, growing inequalities, social fragmentation and unsustainable economies. Those holding the answers to these challenges are the ones writing the future. We cannot afford to lag behind on this if we want to stay relevant and alive. We cannot turn back time, but we can give ourselves a new purpose. One that inspires our citizens to act, one that offers opportunities for development, one that unites rather than divides. The 21st century put it right on our doorstep: it's sustainability. Delivering a green, fair and ambitious V4 that works by and for its people.

Acting globally on sustainability is both a responsibility and an opportunity for the V4, which can be achieved in the region by keeping in mind the multi-layered structure of the international community. As a successful model of collaboration, and as a group of countries with unique courses of development, the V4 must not settle for regional cooperation only. It should reinvent itself as the architect of a sustainable world, spearheading this cause as a strong EU bloc. By strengthening its engagement in solving environmental and socioeconomic challenges and by taking an active stand on sustainability issues internationally, the V4 could significantly improve relations with its global and European partners while grasping the best opportunities to grow, improve, and innovate. The V4 should adopt greater coordination on sustainability issues and the achievement of the UN's 2030 Agenda on both UN and the EU levels while also ensuring no one is left behind by coordinating its support towards developing countries.¹

The EU- V4- sustainability triangle

The European Union (EU) is committed to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in both its internal and external policies. SDGs play an important role in all 6 priorities of the European Commission. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, the EU has made significant progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and will continue to step up its efforts in this direction. The EU has embarked on the transition to a low-carbon, climate-neutral, resource-efficient and circular economy, with increased security, prosperity, equity and inclusion. Through the European Consensus on Development, the EU has also aligned its approach to international cooperation and development policy with the 2030 agenda, focusing on sustainable development goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda is effectively supported by the development of sound policies that take into account the potential impact on developing countries from the outset. It is therefore crucial to promote policy synergies to minimize incoherencies.

¹ V4 Vision for Sustainability: For a Stronger Region Built On Sustainability Cooperation, Visegrad for Sustainability, 2021

The V4 countries are in a particular situation, as they share specific challenges. These do not only allow them to contribute to the EU decision-making mechanisms by starting discussions and highlighting region-specific realities, but they also enhance the diversity of the union, leading to a higher level of inclusion. Combined with a cohesive strategy and constituting approximately one-seventh of the whole EU's population, the Visegrad Group could enhance multilateralism while safeguarding the institutional balance of the EU. To significantly impact regional development, the V4 countries should utilize their unity and interest maximizing potential to allow the voices of smaller states to be heard as well to drive multilateral action. Collaborating and identifying shared aims on a regional level creates a better channel for the V4 to be a leading force in the region in the sector of sustainability. Furthermore, setting viable goals, with their success creating a sense of fulfilment from joint achievements, would facilitate incentives striving for further cooperation.²

The role of civil society in the implementation of the SDGs on the EU and UN level

The involvement of civil society in EU decision-making is not a new phenomenon. In the relation of SDGs, many advances have been made in this field, one of the most prominent is the so-called Multi-Stakeholder Platform, in short MSP, that was established in 2018. The platform was set up to assist the Commission in implementing the sustainable development goals. The platform was represented by a number of NGOs, and was led by Frans Timmermans, the first Vice-President of the European Commission, who has been a key player in European decision-making ever since. The aim of the platform was primarily to publish recommendations on the practical implementation of SDGs, and although it was very important for involving the civil sector, it did not create a real opportunity to examine the practical implementation of SDGs through real indicators. However, indicators play a very important role in monitoring whether real progress can be made in the practical implementation of sustainability goals, as well as in understanding how we measure this progress. In addition, the activities of the platform have not been included in the work of the UN High Level Political Forum, which, approaching the issue from the

² V4 Vision for Sustainability: For a Stronger Region Built On Sustainability Cooperation, Visegrad for Sustainability, 2021

UN, is a very important player in the implementation of SDGs, as this is the forum where Member States shall report on their progress in this area.

Simultaneously with the establishment of the MSP in 2018, the EU also presented its steps towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals at the UN High Level Political Forum. Unfortunately, MSP was discontinued by the end of 2019. Interestingly, the official reason for this was the reference to the fact that the platform had achieved its purpose. This is very strange when you think about it, as it is still 10 years back to the 2030 target date for SDGs, especially given that in 2020, the Decade of Action was announced. Since then, we have no knowledge of the creation of a new, alternative platform, despite pressure from civil society. Nevertheless, it is very important for the citizens of the European Union to have the opportunity to express their views, thus launching a democratic and multilateral channelling process in all areas of sustainable development is crucial.

Outlook: V4 as a global actor

By uniting historical experience with best practices, the region should search for like-minded allies and thus should appear collectively in global discussions on sustainability while offering perspectives and assistance in the processes leading to the achievement of the SDGs. The V4 format should also evaluate the potential in collaborating with third countries to achieve better interest maximisation and the creation of much-needed alliances in the era of collective problems. Therefore, we propose the inclusion of sustainable development into the agenda of the expert and ministerial levels of the meetings in the V4+ formula, as well as the invitation of third country observers to meetings that are of shared importance for all participants to boost the exchange of information. As the region is deeply intertwined regarding waterways and natural resources, as well as areas of collective interests, the V4 may present an example of a successful model of cooperation in the sustainability transition of similar regional collaborations, such as the Western Balkans.³

³ V4 Vision for Sustainability: For a Stronger Region Built On Sustainability Cooperation, Visegrad for Sustainability, 2021