UKRAINE AND THE VISEGRAD FOUR:
CURRENT STATUS AND PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION

The modern historic period is characterized by a number of new attributes and dimensions, in particular on the European continent: the emergence of new democracies on the international arena, advancement of integration processes and the considerable enlargement of the European Union that has turned from the Western European organization into a continental formation. The intensification of integration and globalization processes has contributed to the development of regional alliances, and strengthening of transnational corporations. Now the EU is becoming a more and more attractive union of states and nations of the continent. An intention to join it was also declared by Ukraine that has recently explicitly declared this desire and pursues the corresponding policy.

On the other hand, in 1993 our state on the legislative level set a priority for intensifying cooperation not only with the Unified Europe, but also with neighboring states of the so-called Visegrad Group. It is highly important, both from the practical-perspective and in the context of achieving Ukraine’s main foreign policy goal, i.e. realization of the European choice, to study the experience of cooperation and international regional integration within the Visegrad Group, as well as reinforce cooperation with these countries. Implementation by the official Kyiv of the cooperation practice of our closest neighbors and partners, that is mechanisms, forms and types of cooperation approved in the framework of Visegrad, may contribute to strengthening efforts in realization of the European integration strategy of the Ukrainian state; search for additional instruments that could impact the deepening of Ukraine’s relations with the EU and our closest neighbors.

It should be taken into account that the main factors that preconditioned the development of the Visegrad Group were the following ones: historical, that is common legacy of the past and need for consolidation for the sake of the revival of the Central European identity; political – return to the unified Europe, securing irrevocability of democratic changes, strengthening security; economic – building competitiveness of the region in conditions for European integration and unfolding globalization; social-cultural – revival of the European identity as the precondition for the Central European region to join unified Europe. Systematic interaction of the mentioned objective factors, as well as subjective understanding by the Central European ruling elites of the actual historic agenda predefined establishment of the Visegrad Group and determined its main tasks.
The Visegrad Group was founded in 1991 for the coordination of efforts of its member states on their way to joining NATO and the EU. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993 the Group consists of four members (V4: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia). The activities of the V4 covered all spheres of cooperation: security, political, economic, social and cultural, etc. It should be particularly emphasized that the common activities of the Visegrad Group were characterized by joining efforts only in favorable directions of cooperation and avoiding discussions and decisions on problematic issues. The latter were on agenda only in bilateral relations (issues of national minorities, language issues). In the quadrilateral format only those questions remain that do not cause discord, but on the contrary provide additional possibilities for consolidation of the V4 positions.

The analysis proves that three different stages of cooperation are to be singled out in the activity of the Visegrad Group. From the time of the V4 foundation to 1997, i.e. during the first stage, the main systems of cooperation between member states were established. The basis of the activity was the declaration signed by the presidents of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in the Hungarian town of Visegrad (this is where the name of this regional group originates from).

The second stage of the development of the Visegrad cooperation evolved from 1998 to 2004. The essence of the V4 cooperation during these years was the realization of the main common national and state interest of the member states of this regional organization – NATO and EU accession. It was a qualitatively higher level of the regional integrative cooperation based on interaction of a large number of state institutions and civil sector representatives of the V4. In the system of the multilateral cooperation of this period the role of central authorities of the V4 member states increased. At the same time consistent forms, mechanisms and structures of the Visegrad cooperation were established. They contributed to further consolidation of the countries of this regional international organization. All this, as the analysis proves, created more favorable preconditions for coordinated progress of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic on their way to a faster accession to the EU and NATO.

The modern stage in development of the V4 cooperation started in 2004 when these partner states joined the Euro-Atlantic structures. Among the distinctive features of this stage were joint efforts of the states of the sub-region aimed at development of a common position and, if possible, resolution of acute problems in the given European and Atlantic structures, development of common approaches to relations with other neighboring states, etc. In compliance with the declaration passed on May 12, 2004, cooperation within the V4 was to be developed in 41 directions. The Visegrad Group is functioning in the format of regular meetings at all levels, starting from the presidential one. Consultations are held as well as interaction of permanent representatives of the V4 at the EU, NATO, OSCE, UN, Council of Europe, OECD, WNO, and other regional organizations takes place.

After the successful European and Atlantic integration the Visegrad Group significantly narrowed the spectrum of cooperation within the group and turned on the one hand, into a group of states that jointly lobby their interests within the EU, and on the oth-
er hand, an institutional club-forum for ideas and experience exchanged with partner countries of the V4. Ukraine takes on of the most important places in the cooperation of the Visegrad Group with Eastern European partners. Official relations between the V4 and Ukraine were initiated on December 3, 1999, when during another meeting that took place in Gerlachov in High Tatras the presidents of the four member states on behalf of their nations confirmed their readiness to promote peace in the Balkans and expressed their willingness to support pro-European forces in Ukraine.

Belonging to the so-called “group of friends” of Ukraine in the EU, the Visegrad states provide sufficient political support to the European integration policy of our state, while presiding in the EU and officially supporting the EU-Ukraine Action Plan. At the same time interaction is developed in different forms: strengthening of governmental contacts, organization of various events in the format of “V4 + Ukraine” in security, military, energy, social and cultural spheres, as well as on the regional level. Analyzing relations in all of these spheres we can define the current status and ways for improving the efficiency of this cooperation.

The modern Ukraine proceeds from the fact that development of a secure international environment around the state is one of the preconditions for its successful development. At the political level, especially on the part of Ukraine, there were many declarations, various intergovernmental meetings at different levels that have not brought noticeable and concrete results. However, it is worth mentioning that the official Kyiv has already got an opportunity to consider and analyze the experience of the V4 states on their way to the EU and NATO membership, as well as to feel support of the V4 states in the question of Ukraine’s European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Cooperation in the political and security sphere between Ukraine and V4 has been developing actively. At the same time it should be noted that a number of declarations on support of European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Kyiv were rather pretentious and have not brought any results in a practical dimension. As the NATO Summit in Bucharest on April 2-4, 2008 showed, not all V4 states in practice supported Ukraine’s joining the MAP. In this case we mean Hungary that together with some other European states opposed it. In other words, that was an indicator of a lack of unanimous support of the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine on the part of all V4 states. And this situation is quite common as the Visegrad Group not always takes a unanimous position in similar questions.

It is to be noted that Slovakia also treated Ukraine’s intention to realize its Euro-Atlantic intentions favorably. Its support was noticeable both during its presidency in the V4 from July 2006 to June 2007, and at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008. Furthermore, on the initiative of the Slovak party the Embassy of the Slovak Republic starting from January 2007 has been performing functions of the contact embassy of NATO. And this role of the Slovak Embassy was prolonged in 2009 for the next two years’ period.

Cooperation in a military sphere takes an important place in Ukraine’s cooperation with the Visegrad Group. This direction of cooperation has been developing most dynam-
ically in the format "V4+Ukraine". Starting from 2002 defense ministers of the Visegrad states have met annually for discussion of the most important problems related to the defense policy. Ukraine joined this military cooperation in 2005. Military-political contacts with heads of military authorities were set, and consultations and meetings on NATO issues at the level of directors of departments for security policy and cooperation with NATO, were initiated. Meeting of heads of joint staff have also taken place (since 2007 Ukraine has been participating in them). During these meetings the participants exchange their experience and discuss problems of military cooperation between Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. These meetings have contributed to efficient interaction of our country with the V4 countries in the context of its preparation to join the North-Atlantic Alliance.

In order to further develop this cooperation, Ukrainian soldiers have participated in joint military exercises together with soldiers of the V4 countries. The most important military exercises since 2006 have been the following: joint command-staff exercises "Rapid Trident" (Poland, Hungary), exercises of airmobile units "Cossack Steppe" (Poland), "Light Avalon" (Slovakia, Hungary).

One of the main results of military cooperation is assistance of the V4 countries in the reform of the armed forces of Ukraine and their transition to NATO standards. At the same time, this assistance in corresponding directions comes not from the V4 as an international formation, but from each state of this organization separately. Though, the consolidated position of all members of this Group as to the necessity of providing this assistance to Ukraine should not be underestimated.

In order to improve cooperation at the regional and local levels it is necessary to pay greater attention to trans-border cooperation, decentralization of decision making and better financing of projects on regional cooperation. At the same time some segmentation or even subdivision of Euro-regions into smaller parts should take place. For local governing bodies of Ukraine it is necessary to train experts in trans-border cooperation with knowledge of foreign languages (one working language of the EU and one language of the V4). The procedure for receiving international technical assistance should be simplified, as well as an effective system for informing grant applicants should be created.

These and other efforts are sure to significantly improve the level and results of the cooperation of Ukraine with the Visegrad Group, as well as with each of its members individually.