

# The Visegrad Group as an Ambitious Actor of (Central-)European Foreign and Security Policy

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**Abstract:** *Even after achieving its goals, i.e. the entrance of member states into NATO and the EU, the Visegrad Group has managed to profile itself as a significant collective actor. Analyses to date clearly show that the group is able to function as a distinct and even key actor in various policies, including those within the EU; this statement is without doubt valid primarily for the region of the European neighborhood policy and the Eastern partnership, but also for enlargement policy and its clear targeting of the Western Balkans. We can also observe a highly proactive approach in issues linked to security, primarily in the energy sector and recently also cyber security. Nonetheless, all of these and many other significant V4 activities have been overshadowed of late by dispute between the group and a significant portion of members states on perspectives regarding the migration crisis including the tools to deal with it or preventive measures to prevent it from continuing or repeating. This stance on the issue, however, can be seen as proof of the relative power and success of the V4.*

**Keywords:** *Visegrad Group; European Union; security policy*

Mainly from the perspective of Central European political science, the Visegrad Group is one of the most significant regional groupings functioning in contemporary Europe or the European Union. In addition to groups (past and present) such as the CEFTA initiative, the Three Seas Initiative, and to a certain degree European macro-regional strategy, which is strongly reflected in Central and Central-Eastern Europe (cf. Walsch 2015; Cabada – Walsch 2017), the V4 is the bearer of active policies and engages in a number of issues independently both within the EU and outside the Union's area and agenda. This impression is

made stronger by the emphasized presentation of accomplished goals that were defined during the group's foundation in 1991, i.e. membership in the North Atlantic Alliance and full-fledged membership in the EU. This impression was also strengthened by a perception of the group as the leader of the countries of Central-Eastern Europe, whether these countries were EU members or still attempting to gain membership. Self-presentation of the V4 as a successful model that should be followed by other countries of Central-Eastern and Southeast Europe is one of the basic starting points of the V4 member states' foreign and development policy toward the region of the Western Balkans or the group of countries engaged in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program.

In addition to building its position as a model and mediator of "Europeanization" and European policies toward the group of candidate countries of the Western Balkans, the Visegrad Group has attempted in the last decade to promote itself as an alternative or – neutrally speaking – an additional group of countries that introduces agenda within the EU and profiles itself as a significant collective actor. For instance, according to Czech political scientist Michal Kořan (2012: 208–209), after 2009 the V4 changed its rather defensive style and began to offer significantly more proactive stances "when it emphasized its ambition to become one of the needed and energizing factors in the project of European integration as its goal." In this context, Kořan points out that the V4 is characterized by three clearly declared goals that are incorporated into V4 policy: 1) the support of the Eastern and Southeastern direction of EU enlargement; 2) the support of the Eastern dimension of European neighborhood policy; and 3) a shared vision of regional energy policy. All three topics are reflected in the individual contributions brought together in this collective monograph, which deals with the security, foreign and European policy of the Visegrad Group and of its member states.

Nonetheless, at present we see and feel that these topics mentioned above have been clearly overshadowed after 2015 by a group-led resistance to mainstream EU policy in the issues of the so-called migration crisis (cf. Bauerová 2018a, Bauerová 2018b). The ambition to become an alternative "core" or motor for the EU was thus overshadowed by the image of a problematic group that is capable of powerfully and also relatively effectively destroying (in a temporary sense) the efforts for an EU-wide solution (i.e. a one-sided solution that was mostly forced by member states) to the wave of migration. From a medium-range perspective, however, such behavior has blocked the path to introducing agenda and dealing with other policies. The ambition to modify various European policies or promote its own priorities – of which energy policy has seemed in the past and present to be crucial, as well as policies concerning further EU enlargement and the EU's relationship toward Eastern neighbors located between the present EU and Russia – has thus been degraded. This includes the risk that rational V4 propositions will be refused due to the fact that they

are being promoted by countries that are seen as problematic by the European mainstream. As Hungarian political scientist Boglárka Koller pointed out at a debate on Central European cooperation at the 23<sup>rd</sup> annual conference of the Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA) in Wrocław (September 14–15, 2017), Western Europe sees the V4 as “laggards” while the countries of Central Europe see themselves as “pioneers”.

As Olaf Wientzek claims (2017: 47), the V4’s actions since 2015 show that regional cooperation can act as a motor but also a brake on European integration. It becomes a brake “when it becomes a cartel that acts against the interests of the EU and thus causes serious damage to the European integration process as such; the French-German disregard for the Stability and Growth Pact is one such example.” Wientzek (2017: 48) goes on to claim that at present the V4 is viewed through the prism of its own stance on issues of the migration crisis primarily as a “negative coalition”. This is a generalizing and distorted view, but nonetheless one that follows the significant fact that the V4 is perceived on a European level as a “purely defensive project”. Thus, the ambition declared at the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is overshadowed. In this sense, Wientzek calls for a certain type of “restart” by appealing to the V4 to introduce and promote a “positive agenda” on a European level.

Radko Hokovský (2017: 53) is of a similar opinion in his argument that, due to strongly different approaches and economic rivalry, “the Visegrad Group has not yet played a highly significant or visible role throughout the course of most of its existence. This has changed with the migration crisis in 2015.” At the same time, the author correctly points to the fact that the request on the part of V4 leaders to stop illegal migration formulated in 2015 in opposition to the mainstream later became the general message of the majority of politicians in EU countries in 2017. He is referring to the fact that the leaders of the majority of EU countries eventually took the position held by V4 politicians but have not yet erased the “negative, almost toxic image (...) that was at least partially caused by poor political communication and unsuitable rhetoric on the part of V4 leaders. Strong critical statements and refusals, which were unaccompanied by constructive suggestions, did not help Western politicians in understanding or appreciating the stances of the Visegrad. Aside from the restrictive approach to migration, the V4 became infamous for its controversial constitutional steps taken by governments in Budapest and Warsaw. These non-liberal tendencies have only strengthened the image of the Visegrad as a backwards group of post-communist countries that are unable to integrate into a modern and multiculturally conceived Europe” (Hokovský 2017: 54). In Hokovský’s words, the V4 is in a situation that is clearly dominated by the Germany-France duo and generally by the “Western” portion of the EU and is condemned to the role of the brake. This, however, can be a brake that can be destructive and subversive on one hand and a “healthy and constructive regulation” on the other.

To summarize, both skeptics and optimists (the latter perhaps more so) see the V4 as a stabilized regional cooperative structure that will at least formally function into the future and that at present can relatively assertively function as an integrator of broader Central and Eastern European – or even “Union-wide” – alternatives to the motor of the EU, which is represented by the Germany-France duo and their primary partners (Benelux or other countries or groups of countries including some of Central-Eastern Europe, namely Slovenia and Estonia). In our minds, it would be worthy to ask what alternatives the V4 offers in individual policies or to what degree the group itself is capable of defining its shared interests, priorities, and goals and promoting them not only in the framework of Central Europe, but also on an EU or Europe-wide level.

The collection of papers that we have put together in this special issue focuses primarily on wholly current issues while suppressing the historical dimension. We are fully aware of the fact that, aside from the evident advantages, such an approach also carries numerous risks in terms of limitations on contextualization. Nonetheless, we claim on a general level that the nostalgically formulated ideas of Central Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain have clashed with reality in the form of preferences of national interests before a shared Central European identity. Not only V4 countries, but fundamentally all post-communist countries of Central-Eastern Europe in the period of transition and “catching-up” to the West have accepted a dominant and basically single narrative, that is joining (Western-)European integration structures, i.e. NATO and the European Communities (EC) or the EU. Individual countries naturally swayed between various strategies of “catching up” – rivalry vs. cooperation (or independent vs. coordinated activity); looking for a new relationship toward countries of Central-Western Europe (Germany, Austria, or Italy) and other EU members; searching for new positions toward Russia or Eastern/Southeast Europe; balancing between an exclusively pro-Western position (including the risk of Central Europe “disappearing” after its entrance into NATO and the EU) and the multi-vector foreign policy with a specific emphasis on Russia, and so on. Entrance into NATO in 1999 (with the exception of Slovakia, which joined the Alliance in 2004) and the EU in 2004 ended this phase (Cabada – Walsch 2017: 15–17). In the Kroměříž Declaration of May 2004, the Visegrad Group declared it would further exist despite achieving its primary goals, introducing newly declared ones – enlargement to the Western Balkans, the eastern vector of EU policy, and the issue of energy security. The first five years after the entrance of its member states into the EU, the V4 gave the impression of an exhausted community that would fulfill optimistic forecasts (pro-Westernization) or skeptical predictions (becoming geopolitically absorbed) on the dissolution or disappearance of the Central European region.

However, since the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can observe a fundamental turnaround in this development, which was linked (among other

factors) to Central Europe's new profiling headed by the Visegrad Group. So-called Central-Eastern Europe, i.e. the group of post-communist EU-countries, began to be perceived as a structure challenging various fundamental norms or customs of the historical EU-15. At the same time, the Visegrad Group was and is (wholly justifiably in regard to its own self-projection in Central-Eastern Europe) perceived as a leader of this "second" or "other" Europe. Gradually, however, the group found itself in isolation, as other countries of the region observed this linear trajectory; this separation is most significant in the case of Slovenia, which is (justifiably) considered to be the most Euro-optimistic country within the historical EU-15 (cf. Cabada – Hlaváčková 2016 or Cabada – Waisová 2010), but also that of the Baltic states, which in 2011 (Estonia), 2014 (Latvia), and 2015 (Lithuania) entered the Eurozone. As we have noted above, this isolation or at least peripherization was intensified by the so-called refugee crisis or the debate linked to the idea of the redistribution of migrants within the EU after 2015. In this situation, the Visegrad Group closed its doors and to external observers became an "unholy alliance" or "the big, bad Visegrad", which had gone off on an "unsettling new direction" (*Economist*, 28. January 2016).

This closing-up on the part of the Visegrad Four and its leaders on the issue of the migration crisis cannot however cover up the fact that there are many dissonances among member states linked both to history (e.g. Slovak-Hungarian relations or the issue of the Hungarian minority's position in Slovakia) and the present (the relationship with Russia is only one of the examples of the fundamental divisions between V4 countries). The V4 continues to maintain an informal character of cooperation that is founded on the principle that such cooperation is developed only in issues in which relatively simple agreement can be assumed. Several contributions in this book also point to the same fact – for instance, in terms of security we see agreement primarily in areas of so-called "soft security" (Waisová 2018), while in terms of "hard security" a gap between Poland and other member states is widening (Ušiak 2018a; Ušiak 2018b; cf. Cabada – Walsch 2017: 135). Many authors in this context point to the fact that Poland is otherwise determined through the prism of hard power and/or hard security both in regard to foreign policy ambitions and regional perspectives. For example, Drulák and Šabič's (2012, 312) analysis of international policy issues linked to Central Europe, in which they include other countries (Slovenia, Austria, Romania, Germany) along with the V4, claims that: "Four small (Central European – author's note) countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia – author's note) are linked to the Danube Region, while Poland is linked to the Baltic Region. These differences lead to dissimilarity in the perception of regional foreign policy interests. Poland is active in Belarus and Ukraine, countries which are remote to Slovenia. On the contrary, Poland and other V4 countries and Austria are much less engaged in Balkan affairs". Stances on Russia among V4 states also differ, as the situation has become more intense after

the Russian occupation of Crimea and in general after Russia's involvement in the internal development of Ukrainian policy. "Contrary to Poland, the other three V4 countries have not been strongly active in formulating an EU position toward Russia. Furthermore, the top representatives of these countries have occasionally made statements that have cast doubt on their unified European position" (Kucharczyk – Mesežnikov 2015: 11).

Poland's specific position not only within the V4 but also in regard to the broader Central-Eastern European region and the Europe-wide dimension of politics is reflected upon in a significant portion of the contributions in this book. Thus we see Poland's differing positions and ambitions in the area of security and energy (which is clearly linked to security), and also in efforts to introduce its own agenda on a European level and to form regional alliances or alternative formats of Central European cooperation according to the country's own notions. In this regard, the other three member states are wholly different, as they have no material or ideological grounds on which to build the theoretical ambition of becoming a regional power. Nonetheless, this fact has not kept these countries from making their own efforts to take position as leader of the group – Czech Republic, Hungary – or on the contrary to take the position of dissident, primarily in regard to the pragmatic search for a position on a European level. In this regard, we should mention the unanimous declaration of Slovakia's leading representatives from the period approximately covering the course of the past year. Before elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament in October 2017, i.e. before knowing what political parties Czech voters preferred, Slovak Prime Minister Fico made it clear that his country did not intend to risk shifting outside of the now forming or potential core of the European union because of Visegrad or broader Central European cooperation. At the same time, he clearly pointed out that a sacrifice for the future position of Slovakia at the core of the EU may even be giving up Visegrad cooperation itself: "For Slovakia, the Visegrad Four does not represent an alternative to the EU. The V4 is not the living space that we imagine for our future. Our living space is in the EU" (Fico pospíchá do jádra EU 2017). Fico showed an even more decided and highly pragmatic stance after the parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic in October 2017, which ended in success for protest parties with a reserved or directly negative stance on European integration and showed that the hopes for a re-liberalization and re-Europeanization of the V4 with the use of the Slavkov Declaration would not materialize. Fico met with Slovak President Andrej Kiska and Chairman of the National Council Andrej Danko two days after Czech parliamentary elections and, in a mutual communiqué, declared the pro-European and pro-Western direction of Slovakia in relation to the EU and NATO. Fico subsequently presented this communiqué to the press with the metaphor of an "island", i.e. "a pro-European island in Central Europe" (Slovensko je proeurópsky ostrov 2017). This blow to all three V4

partner countries resonated in an especially critical manner in connection to previous uses of the island metaphor in Central Europe, for instance E. Beneš and Czechoslovak politicians' declaration of interwar Czechoslovakia as an island of democracy. A similar sign of distance is without a doubt the regional Slavkov Triangle activity launched in 2015 by Austrian, Czech, and Slovak diplomacy at the beginning of 2015. This declaration was evidently meant to function as an option for leaving the V4 in the event that, due to the procedures of the Hungarian and Polish governments and namely due to the anti-liberal steps of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the informal leader of Polish politics Jarosław Kaczyński, the group as a whole becomes unpalatable to the other countries of the EU. This unpalatable nature was largely strengthened by the steps taken by both aforementioned governments in diverting their political systems from the principles of a liberal rule of law and the reaction of the European Union against Poland by launching proceedings against it under Article 7 of the Treaty of the European Union. Disruption of the principle of the rule of law could in this case lead to the suspension of the country's voting rights at the Council of the EU's negotiations (cf. e.g. Ehl 2017). Nonetheless, the results of elections in the Czech Republic and Austria in 2017 and mainly the subsequent steps of the key actors of both countries show that the group meant to function as a "lifeline" for Hungary in the case that it decided to pragmatically take the Polish route of "confrontation" (cf. Palata 2015) is presently in a state of "clinical death". At the same time, however, this situation caused a reversal in Polish foreign-policy and regional activity in the Three Seas Initiative, efforts to revitalize the Weimar Triangle, or independent activities from the position of regional power in Central-Eastern Europe (Cabada 2018).

Within the V4 and its foreign policies, just as in the area of directly constructing a relationship with the EU, its institutions, and other member countries, we can observe a whole score of discrepancies that cast doubt on the oft-used label of a unified group that is often (negatively) attributed to the Visegrad by the "rest" of the EU or Western Europe and a label that politicians of V4 countries at times even boast of, primarily in efforts to demonstrate to their domestic audience their alleged determination to defend national interests against "Brussels". Analyses focusing on energy policy and primarily energy security point to similar differences. Here "cooperation within the Visegrad Group has gained a stronger charge through repeated energy crises that Europe, primarily Central-Eastern Europe, has felt in connection to relations between Ukraine and Russia and similarly in connection to climate plans adopted within NATO" (Walsch 2015: 137); nonetheless, steps taken by Hungary and the behavior of other V4 countries points to the strongly national undertones of negotiation. On one hand we see the wager of Polish diplomacy on imported liquefied natural gas to flow through Central-Eastern Europe in a north-south direction from the terminal in Świnoujście to the Croatian terminal on the island of Krk, a matter

that the construction of the Three Seas Initiative is closely linked to (Cabada 2018). On the other hand, we see efforts of other V4 countries to preserve and strengthen the share of nuclear energy in the overall mix. It was the decision to build two new blocks of the nuclear power plant in Paks, Hungary in 2014 – meant to be completed by Russian company Rosatom and financed by a Russian loan – that disrupted the plans for a unified approach on the part of Central Europe in the field of energy security and resource diversification. Thus the V4 cannot be labeled a coherent group in the field of energy security either. Thus, in addition to topics of migration or the protection of the EU's external borders, the analyses presented in this special issue point to the further enlargement of the EU, primarily the countries of the Western Balkans, as the most distinct shared agenda on which V4 states agree. Here, in the cases of Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, we see clear and long-term agreement. Even Poland in this respect is not in principle disagreement, although its agenda is dominantly focused on the issue of Ukraine. Poland in is no way challenging the need for the EU to enlarge into the countries of the Western Balkans, and is merely devoting its energy to another vector, i.e. the region that neighbors the EU in its present form.

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This special issue has been divided into two sections, the first of which primarily deals with the issue of security and cooperation. The second deals with the foreign or European policy of the V4. These dimensions cannot naturally be fully divided, and therefore this division is in fact more of a technical nature and both sections create a relatively homogeneous whole.

In the first section, which focuses on the security aspects of cooperation, we drew from the fact that the current role of the state in the field of security does not only include preserving state sovereignty, territorial integrity, or the security of the population, but also a wide spectrum of non-military aspects that are impacting states more and more significantly. In the past, security and national defense depended on its army and power, while today we can observe and study a state's security from a score of different perspectives. This section of the book is focused on security and defense cooperation of V4 countries, which is not generally a priority for politicians and journalists in a time of peace but becomes an issue of a state's survival in cases of acute security threats. The changes that have taken place in the last roughly three decades in the field of security reveal the basic developmental trends in security policy such as the shift from hard security to soft security, the strengthening of non-military aspects of security, the growth in the number of actors in the global political system, strengthening of states' integration tendencies in the sense of collective and cooperative security, various state approaches (interests) proclaimed in their foreign-security doctrines,

or various implementations of strategies and security policies over the course of this period. In this section, through analytical means, we attempt to define and compare the primary starting points and possibilities for cooperation in the field of security between states of the Visegrad Group – the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. For all four countries, we define the security environment with a special emphasis on forms of V4 cooperation in this area. Finally, we focus on key non-military threats or dimensions of security policy – environmental problems and cyber security, which impact all V4 member states.

In addition to the four mentioned analyses, we have decided to add one more, which is focused on the issue of the migration policy of V4 countries and the group as a whole in connection to the migration crisis of the summer of 2015 and the following period. At the same time, this text forms a sort of natural bridge to the second section of this special issue, which focuses on European or V4 foreign policy and the foreign policy of its member states. In terms of the development of the V4 and its relations with the EU as a political institution represented by central institutions – primarily the European Commission, European Parliament, and the Council of EU – the migration crisis represents a certain dividing line stemming from the construction of the image of the V4 as a disruptor of “harmony” and long-existing mechanisms of consensus within the European integration process. V4 countries have evidently handled the crisis as a security issue; they have strongly securitized the topic of migration and many political actors within the V4 have built their political strategy primarily on a policy of fear linked to the demonization of migration and primarily Islam as an aggressive, non-liberal, and non-European religious-political system with which they link all arriving refugees of war and other types of migrants from northern Africa or the Middle East.

The second section of this special issue carries on from the first in an article reflecting the position of the V4 within the EU. This position is naturally determined by other topics than migration alone. The enlargement policy is a distinct European policy for V4 countries and is dealt with in the following text with regard to the region of the Western Balkans. This analysis is accompanied by an article devoted to reflection on the position of Visegrad cooperation in terms of new institutional and content offers of cooperation in Central and Central-Eastern Europe. Last but not least we present the article focusing on the issue of the possible replication of the division of Europe, i.e. the construction of a certain mental or construed barrier between old (Western) and new (Eastern) Europe. Though such a division may seem banal from a scientific standpoint, it can function all the better in the area of practical and populist-motivated policy in both of these hypothetical parts of the Union.

The effort of this special issue is, among other factors, to provide a sufficient number of arguments against the trivialization of politics and labeling based on a score of prejudices, use of double standards, and disregard for the multi-

-paradigmatic and multi-dimensional nature of these issues and problems. We find it absurd in terms of a construed division of Europe/the EU into Western and Eastern sections (Walsch 2018) for a strongly pro-European Slovenia or Estonia to be “lumped” into the category of “problematic Eastern Europeans” while, for instance, Italy and its exceptionally problematic economy and now also political situation is wholly ignored in the interest of preserving the appearance of a “properly functioning Western Europe”. Therefore we have attempted to create a comprehensive portrayal of selected policies of the V4 (and aspects of them) as a whole and of their member states. We have also analytically pointed to how synergetic the V4 states’ foreign, security, and European policy is or how convergent it is within the group on an EU level and where we observe deviations and more systematic divergences that may point to a fundamental rift within the EU or the V4 itself.

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# The Security Environment of the V4 Countries

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**Abstract:** *State security policy is not created in a vacuum. In general, policy-making is affected by external and internal variables and influences on the security environment as well as by responses to all these factors. Political decision-making is another significant intervening variable. The aim of this study is to define the security environment of the Visegrad countries in both its narrow and broader senses. To this end, I consider common factors that have affected – and continue to influence – all four countries in order to reveal and evaluate the policy development processes in these states up to the present day. My methodology relies on case studies that trace the security policies of each of the Visegrad countries since the end of the bipolar standoff. The comparison in my conclusion highlights significant challenges now affecting the security policies of all these countries including defence budgets, the crisis in Ukraine, the position of EU member states and growing nationalism and extremism.*

**Keywords:** *Central Europe, security environment evolution, security threats, security challenges, the V4*

Security – as defined in a state’s security policy – is one of the most important elements of its foreign and defence policies. These elements determine the direction of foreign policy and, thus, they are often introduced together in state (and organisational) documents. For this reason, it is important to tie any security policy to a concrete foreign policy doctrine when assessing domestic developments. The aim of this study is to define the security environment of the V4 countries from both narrow and broader perspectives. In the process, I identify the main factors that have affected individual V4 countries and their current influences in order to outline and critically assess developments in these states. My methodology relies on case studies that track the security policies of

the V4 countries since the collapse of the bipolar world division. I draw here on the work of other authors who have been undertaking long-term work on the security policies of particular V4 countries. The central pillar of this research is an analysis of state documents, and this is supplemented by studies and other accessible publications by authors from the states in question (see, for instance, Nowakowski – Protasowicki (2008); Czulda – Madej (2015); Karaffa – Balabán – Rašek (2008); Kořan et al. (2014); Kmec – Korba – Ondrejcsák (2005); Goda et al. (2017); Almási – Kádár (2005); Balogh (2013). These authors highlight and evaluate the development processes in their own countries.

The main geopolitical changes that have influenced current relations among these states took place mostly in the last decade of the 20th century. Before this, the V4 countries were an integral part of the Soviet bloc, which determined their regimes, their political orientation and their economic dependence. After the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, these Central European countries sought out a new direction. While all of them had become independent, their natural and human resources were limited and they remained dependent on other states when it came to economic and, in particular, energy matters. The main factor affecting Central Europe's development was its turn to the European Union, a move made with the expectation of achieving economic stability and prosperity. On the other hand, these states continued to rely on the Russian Federation for mineral resources. As far as security was concerned, after the regime change, the Central European states focused on their integration into international security structures. They became members of the United Nations in 1993 and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, previously known as CSCE) in 1995. Their development was shaped by the Partnership for Peace programme and later by their integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In terms of economic integration, European Union membership remained the main objective. Today the V4 countries are all fully-fledged members of both NATO and the EU. These two organisations have a significant effect on their stances on security and other issues.

## **The Central European Security Environment at a Crossroads**

The rapid transformation of the V4 countries into members of CSCE/OSCE, the EU and NATO meant they never reflected adequately on the Cold War period and its impact on their security policies. In the years after the Second World War, all these states were exposed to the Warsaw Pact and fell under the influence of the Soviet Union, which also held considerable sway over their security policies. Moreover, the years 1956, 1968 and 1981 were important milestones for Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland respectively, marking the arrival of Warsaw Pact troops or the start of a political intervention designed to enhance stability and protect socialism (Pástor 2004: 23). The bipolar system ultimately

came undone under the weight of ideological and security conflicts. The fundamental changes that brought about this collapse occurred first within internal political systems and only later transformed international politics. Though the confrontation between the two blocs was over, a new polarisation with its own security threats had begun.

Mikhail Gorbachev's speech on the floor of the Council of Europe in July 1989 may be considered a breakthrough event. This address prefigured major developments including the USSR's deviation from Brezhnev's doctrine, its decision not to maintain Soviet satellites in its sphere of influence, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (which eventually occurred in 1991) and ultimately the collapse of the USSR and reactions to the end of the bipolar system. The East European states were faced with new challenges that demanded an appropriate response. As such, these states and their representatives had to decide on the most suitable of seven alternative approaches: a) neutrality (with or without institutional security); b) establishment of their own independent regional security organisation; c) engagement in an existing regional security organisation and its subsequent transformation; d) revival of an Eastern (European) security organisation; e) integration into Western security structures; f) creation of some kind of pan-European security architecture or g) reliance on national defence exclusively (Nagy – Kovács 2006; Cottey 1995).

As they attempted to decide on a position, these states were concerned about the USSR's potential recovery of its strength and power and they struggled to overcome a dependency established over decades. Analysing each of these alternatives should reveal the one most conducive to these states' interests, and I review the options in greater detail in the sections on individual countries. At this point, however, it is worth summarising some key concerns around the seven approaches. On the option of neutrality, it was clear that this "soft" approach (i.e. neutrality without institutional support) offered no security guarantees but these states lacked the backing for the "hard" version that might have come from the UN Security Council, for example. At the same time, they opposed forming their own regional security organisation since they had different (and at times even opposed) interests. Turning to the option of integration into an existing regional security organisation that would then be transformed, they considered CSCE/OSCE but noted that it had never exercised military force and could not guarantee their defence. Similarly, the revival of an Eastern security organisation was highly unappealing given their historical experience. Integration into Western structures was more attractive though it too seemed unrealistic since NATO had not adopted an enlargement policy. Still, this option promised to connect them directly with a guarantor of regional defence and security. The creation of some kind of pan-European security architecture also appealed to European states (and especially those of Central and Eastern Europe), but in practical terms looked onerous if not

impossible. The last alternative – development of national defence – was considered prohibitively expensive given the states' obsolete defence technology and the need for large investments in transformation.

Ultimately, the Central European states decided on options b), e) and to some extent g). The plan sketched out in option b) was implemented through the creation of the V3 (and subsequently V4) alliance, which gave these states the chance to cooperate in preparation for their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Option e) was seen as optimal given the benefits of NATO membership and the potential for a new security and defence structure in the context of European Union membership.

Today the V4's security policy is influenced significantly by these states' NATO and EU memberships, which provide a framework for their decisions, involvement and positions. While the EU has focused primarily on economic integration over the last few years, it has also established some instruments that may affect security and defence policy. I refer particularly here to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy/Common Security and Defence Policy (ESDP/CSDP). At the same time, current circumstances suggest the need for NATO's continued engagement on the European continent since its position considerably affects the security policies of its member states.

The following sections provide an analysis of the security policies of the individual V4 countries. For this purpose, I have defined specific historical periods according to the milestones in a particular country or the strategic decisions that it had to make. I do not enumerate all events occurring in this context but focus instead on the ones which were most important, substantive and decisive and, thus, helped to shape and develop the state and its security policy.

## **Basic development of foreign and security policies of the V4 countries**

Understanding the development of the V4 states' security policies is essential in the context of their cooperation. Clearly, however, these security policies are not created in a vacuum; they are influenced by not only the evolution of the security environment but also internal political conditions in individual states. In this section, I outline the main phases of development in all four states that set the course for their future orientation.

### *The Czech Republic*

The Czech Republic's security context may be seen as historically unchanging in terms of external borders. As far as the domestic security environment is

concerned, however, there have been frequent changes in the image of the external enemy and the nature of both regional and global threats and risks.

For our purposes, the first critical period ran from 1989 to 1993 and also involved the Slovak Republic. These years were marked by the collapse of the bipolar system, which brought new dimensions to international relations and launched new processes that continue to this day. The Czech Republic became part of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (CSFR), a shift that profoundly changed not only the country's political configuration but also the nature of its security and its outlook. Shortly after its creation, the CSFR had to deal with multiple problems including the withdrawal of Warsaw Pact troops from its territory, which was finally achieved in 1991 (Khol 2004). The CSFR remained a member of the Warsaw Pact until mid-1991. That year also saw the dissolution of the USSR, resulting in new security arrangements across Europe that each state had to contend with. The CSFR immediately sought to enter the European Communities (EC). At the same time, it applied for NATO membership, having identified NATO as a critical security guarantor (Khol 2004). More changes ensued in 1992 with signs emerging of separatist programmes in the Czech and Slovak state. This situation led to the establishment of two separate republics in 1993 – the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Among the difficult tasks confronting both these states were their transformation into market economies, the establishment of the rule of law and the shaping of their national security environment and security policies.

The second key period (1993–1999) was dominated by the Czech Republic's efforts to establish a national defence and security identity even though its security policy had not yet taken shape. The dissolution of the CSFR brought an end to the State Defence Council, the central state administrative authority that had been responsible for implementing security policy. The emphasis began to shift to the defence side of security policy to be implemented by the Ministry of Defence. As in the other V4 states, however, politicians did not see security and defence policies as pressing concerns – their primary objectives remained creating democratic institutions and rules and overseeing the transition to a market economy and the relaxation of the planned economy. It was only in 1996 that security emerged as a separate item on the Czech government's agenda, a shift linked to the decision to join NATO (Mazalová 2006). At the Madrid NATO summit in 1997, the Czech Republic was invited to start accession negotiations. These negotiations ended while Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus was still in power,<sup>1</sup> that is, shortly before the appointment of the caretaker Tošovský government (which pursued accession without any significant

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1 Despite the Czech Republic's efforts at the start of the negotiations, it had not met the accession criteria in all six areas identified by Borkovec (2008:24): "political, legislative, defence criteria (defence planning, interoperability, infrastructure, and defence industry), resources (economic and human), information security and public support."

changes) and the early elections that put Milos Zeman into office (Karaffa et al. 2008: 7). Zeman's government also stayed the established course on integration despite early indications from some members of the ruling party that the Czech Republic might choose a different course based on the Danish and Norwegian examples. In fact, Zeman's government finalised the necessary steps and the Czech Republic joined NATO in March 1999.

The third critical period (1999–2007) was marked by problems around the transformation and interoperability of the Czech army and its transition to a fully professional force in 2005. Other issues in this period concerned the meaning of NATO membership itself; like the citizens of other V4 countries, Czechs had distorted ideas about NATO's operations and the obligations of its member states. This problem had already been apparent in the spring of 1999 when the Kosovo crisis led to the establishment of new NATO operations and the Czech Republic faced a decision about whether to support air strikes. Czech politicians divided into two clear camps, with supporters of the action (a group including President Vaclav Havel and politicians from various parties (KDU-ČSL, ODA) on one side and its opponents (then prime minister Zeman and then assembly chairman Klaus) on the other. The Czech public remained ambivalent about the proposed proactive steps and it refused to support the operation. Politicians favouring the intervention faced a formidable task: wanting to maintain the country's image as a responsible and credible partner, they had to justify unpopular steps to the people. This period was also complicated by changes in EU and NATO operations as both organisations significantly altered the scope and substance of their activities after Czech accession (Khol 2004: 35). Other milestones included the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the 2002 NATO summit in Prague (an important opportunity for the Czechs to prove their reliability and readiness for future action) and the 2003 Iraqi crisis in which the country supported US policy. By the latter action, the Czech Republic took a stand against the European coalition that opposed the invasion and recognised the United States as a strategic partner.

The era that followed (2007–2013) was one of maintaining of the established course with the aim of achieving deeper integration and cooperation on security issues. The Euro-Atlantic integration process concluded with the accession of all of the V4 countries to NATO and the EU. The Czech Republic, thus, became part of a neighbourhood of states with shared values and institutional anchoring; this was a significant expansion of security whose implications went beyond the country's external borders. The need to support NATO and the EU through contributions of the Czech Republic's own capacities was – and remains – a major issue for national security policymakers. These years also saw the convergence of the two main streams of Czech security policy: its Atlantic and European components. The Czechs supported and participated in EU military operations (e.g. EU ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and civilian missions (e.g. EUFOR

in Chad). They also contributed to the EU defence architecture by establishing the EU Battlegroup together with the other V4 countries (described in this article as the V4 EU Battlegroup or V4 EU BG) (Kořan et al. 2014). These steps were backed up by various national strategic documents,<sup>2</sup> which shed further light on the Czech position on the CFSP-related obligations arising from EU membership and, in particular, the defence dimension of ESDP/CSDP.

The last key period begins in 2013 and is ongoing. Czech security policy in this era has been characterised by a persistent ambivalence about NATO and the EU in the area of ESDP/CSDP. This dual-track approach has, however, been typical for most Central European states. A second problem concerns the allocation of funds for the purpose of upgrading the Czech army in order to fulfil the country's obligations under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and its defence commitments vis-à-vis the EU. A third issue is the need for clarification of the Czech position on the conflict in Ukraine and, thus, also indirectly on Russia and East-West relations. This situation has been affected by the crisis in Ukraine that emerged in November 2013 and the related migration crisis. Divisions in the Czech Republic over the nature and impact of the conflict (Buchtík – Leontiyeva 2014: 4–5) reflect the different positions put forward by President Zeman and the previous Sobotka government (it is also worth mentioning the stance of Foreign Affairs Ministry political secretary Petr Drulák, who has called for Czech neutrality). For security purposes, this clarification of the Czech position is important. In this context, domestic political issues will likely determine the direction taken on security and foreign policy.

According to Kořan (2012b), when it comes to the development of the country's foreign and security policies, Czech politicians have fallen into two camps: a dissident school (cf. Waisová 2010; Waisová – Piknerová 2012) and a school grounded in liberal economics. While the former has favoured a pro-Atlantic position because of the emphasis on supporting human rights and combating abuse, the latter has stressed the economic benefits of this position. In other words, although the ideological motives of these camps have differed, their outcome has been the same (Kořan 2012b). The evolution of Czech security policy can also be understood in terms of two main plots. The first of these began with a clear focus on NATO membership immediately after the establishment of the independent state; it has since run into difficulties as the Czech Republic struggles to find its own place in the organisation. The second plot traces the complications around the country's efforts to find a consensus on the most appropriate European security architecture and, thus, a position on the ESDP/CSDP and CFSP frameworks.

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2 These documents included the 2008 Czech Military Strategy, the May 2011 Czech Defence White Paper, the September 2011 Czech Security Strategy and the 2012 Czech Defence Strategy.

## *The Slovak Republic*

The account below highlights the four key eras of Slovak security policy development. The first of these (1989–1993) was one of shared experience with the Czech Republic, and thus, is covered in the section above.

The second period (1993–1998) began with the division of Czechoslovakia and was characterised by indecisiveness and unfavourable domestic developments. These first years of independence were a time of shaping Slovak statehood. Given the geopolitical circumstances, the country's representatives sought to integrate into existing international organisations, an approach that promised to deliver a reasonable profit when set against the required costs. Vladimir Mečiar's government announced Slovakia's wish to join NATO and the EU. In this context, the year 1997 marked a turning point: just as the national debate about NATO culminated, Slovakia took steps to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a move that some politicians saw as incompatible with EU and NATO integration (Exchange of experience in Partnership for Peace Program Implementation 1998). Slovakia would eventually become a sort of a bridge between the West and the East, and even at this point, some voices called for neutrality. At the same time, foreign partners took a negative view of the failed February 1997 referendum on Slovakia's potential NATO membership. Slovak politicians' comments also exposed internal tensions in the country around security (Ušiak 2012). While at the international level, some of these individuals promoted Slovak accession to NATO and the EU, on the domestic scene, others revealed a schism about the country's future security policy. Moreover, the development of the Slovak army lagged behind the armies of other states, and this ultimately also contributed to the rejection of Slovakia's integration by external parties.

The third era (1998–2006) saw the suspension of plans for NATO integration as Slovakia faced the need to restart this process. The domestic situation changed after the 1998 elections when Mikuláš Dzurinda's government took office. The effects of this shift went beyond internal political developments, with clear trans-Atlantic goals being set in the area of security. This helped revive the negotiations on Slovakia's accession to both the EU and NATO. The new prime minister faced major challenges including changing the attitudes of partners with a significant influence over Slovakia's integration into Western structures and presenting a new position in the country's strategic security documents. Other key tasks included overseeing the required transformation of the Slovak army and creating space for public debate about Slovakia's approach to trans-Atlantic structures. These issues were addressed in much of the security policy during Dzurinda's first term in office. In 1999, Slovakia participated for the first time in an operation launched under the auspices of NATO. This was the SFOR mission. All these steps were appreciated by foreign partners, including the

most important player – the United States. The years 2000 and 2001 brought more reforms and more positive statements from foreign partners (Kmec et al. 2005). As a result, at the NATO summit in Prague in 2002, Slovakia was one of the seven countries invited to join NATO in a second round of enlargement. (The other invited states were Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovenia.) With the outbreak of the Iraqi crisis in early 2003, Slovakia had to defer to the UN Security Council’s decision and it eventually deployed 75 Slovak soldiers. Although this mission’s official mandate was only for the Kuwait area, it had the option to enter Iraq in the event of the latter’s use (or reasonably suspected use) of weapons of mass destruction.

The final major period begins in 2006 and has been focused on Slovakia’s membership of NATO and the EU. In early 2006, the Slovak army was professionalised under Act No. 346/2005 on the State Service of Professional Soldiers in the Slovak Army. The main goals of the statute were the gradual elimination of compulsory military service and the full professionalisation of the army by the beginning of 2006. A more significant change came after the 2006 elections when Robert Fico took charge of the government. Fico held power for more than a decade, with only a brief interruption when Iveta Radičová became prime minister. Radičová made changes to the country’s security and defence policy in response to the emerging financial crisis and concerns about the level of national defence funding. Under her watch, a process of strategic defence evaluation was also begun. Its findings included the need to bring the state’s financial framework into line with Slovakia’s political ambitions and essential military reforms. During his next two terms in office, Fico developed a security policy based around the crisis in Ukraine, the migration crisis and Slovakia’s position on the EU “core.” It remains an open question how all this will affect the country’s future security policy. Political protests in the spring of 2018 brought an end to Fico’s reign, with Peter Pellegrini replacing him as prime minister. To date, however, this change has not significantly influenced Slovak foreign and security policies. Instead, the country has maintained its ambivalence about many important security questions.

### *The Republic of Poland*

Historically Poland’s security policy was shaped by a distrust of European allies after the country’s invasion in 1939 and betrayal in Yalta in 1945. These events caused Polish leaders to focus on finding trustworthy partners and ensuring the country’s own reliability. The more recent development of Polish security policy can be divided into four main eras.

The first of these periods (1990–1999) corresponded with with the years of integration into the North Atlantic Alliance. During this time, domestic political developments were largely influenced by Lech Wałęsa, the president elected in

1990. Wałęsa managed to restore stability after the first free elections in 1991 when a struggle erupted among various parties and politicians in the *Sejm*, the lower house of Polish parliament. After the 1993 elections, the political leaders' attention turned to Western organisations, particularly the European Communities and NATO, along with the development of relations with Germany (Nowakowski - Protasowicki 2008). At the same time, Poland continued to intensify its relations and ties with the United States.

The second period (1999–2004) began with Poland's integration into NATO and was dominated by preparations for accession to the European Union. These years confirmed the country's pro-Western orientation. The integration process and negotiations were completed in 2004 when Poland joined the EU. In addition, Poland made efforts to prove its strategic significance as a Central European state to NATO. Polish leaders expressed strong support for the United States especially after the 9/11 terrorist attack, endorsing both operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2002 and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. In this way, Poland became one of the main proponents of US policy in Europe (Longhurst – Zaborowski 2007). Many authors have identified this alliance with the US as the third pillar of Polish national security alongside the country's partnerships with NATO and the EU. On this view, none of these pillars is most important, and they all have equal significance. On the other hand, it is true that support for the development of a European defence structure lagged significantly behind during these years.

The third key period (2004–2013) was organised around Poland's responses to major events, including its EU accession, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and other international crises. At the same time, Poland was required to respond to activities under the Common Security and Defence Policy. In this regard, Poland supported the development of the EU's own capacities while simultaneously maintaining its alliance with the US, which remained its main partner. Since the establishment of the ESDP in around 2000 (i.e. during the integration period), Poland had consistently refused to develop the policy, which it believed was being advanced at the expense of the European security and defence identity (ESDI) strategy (Pomorska 2011).<sup>3</sup> In 2009, the Polish army completed its transformation as part of the required adaptations for NATO and EU membership. Compulsory military service was eliminated and a professional army introduced. A turning point in the country's stance on ESDP came with the resolution of major differences about the nature of its operations. Also significant was the weakening of the US-Polish partnership after the failure to

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3 The ESDI policy promoted a stronger alignment with NATO than had been foreseen under the original ESDP proposal. The goal was to ensure the European Union's security and defence. This discrepancy was eventually resolved in the Strategic Partnership Agreement on Crisis Management (known as Berlin Plus) concluded between the EU and NATO. That agreement established a mechanism enabling the EU to access NATO logistical and planning resources including intelligence.

establish an anti-missile defence system in Central Europe (a situation that was also due to Russian pressure). Moreover, there were claims that any interest promoted within NATO would always remain subject to the decisions of major actors. As such, Poland began to recognise the EU's defence capabilities as a viable alternative for projecting its own power.

The last important period begins in 2013 and has focused particularly on the risk of the situation in Ukraine escalating into a large-scale armed conflict which could potentially affect Poland. At the same time, Poland has sought out the position of leader of the V4 group. Overall, this period has, thus, been marked by three key themes: Polish fears of a major military conflict in Ukraine; the consolidation of Poland's relations with the US as a potential protector (defender) (Machnikowski 2015) and the country's efforts to establish itself as the leader of Central Europe and ultimately also the EU. This post-2013 era has seen a growing awareness in Poland of the country's strength and dominance at least in the Central European region and its impact on decision-making in the EU. As we have seen, towards the end of the previous period, the role of the US was weakened while the position of the EU was strengthened. Subsequent elections resulted, however, in a new government under the leadership of Beata Szydło and the latter was replaced in December 2017 by Mateusz Morawiecki, a strong nationalist. Combined with the resurgence of fears of Russian expansionism in the context of the Ukrainian crisis, this nationalism has seen a renewed emphasis on the importance of the US (NATO) for Poland's defence.<sup>4</sup>

### *Hungary*<sup>5</sup>

Back in May/June 1989, Hungary signalled a new course for its foreign policy when it opened up its borders with Austria so that thousands of East Germans could access the West. Hungary was also one of the initiators of the plan to dissolve the Warsaw Pact (Asmus 2002: 219). The evolution of its security policy can be divided into three discrete periods.

The first of these eras (1990–1999) was dominated by the NATO integration process and Hungary's own efforts to work out a strategic position. This period saw a number of essential reforms to the organisation of state defence. Hungary was the first of the Central European states to unequivocally confirm its pro-West orientation not only in declarations but also in changes to domes-

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4 There are several practical examples of this shift. These include Poland's support for a deployment of NATO forces (and especially US troops) to protect the Eastern border, the establishment of a NATO Counter Intelligence Center of Excellence (CI COE) in Krakow and the operation of the Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC-NE) in Szczecin and NATO units in Bydgoszcz. (We could point to many more examples of the NATO-US military presence in Poland in 2018). All this points to the greater importance of NATO/the US for Poland than for the other V4 countries.

5 This text refers to "Hungary," which is the official state name under the currently valid Constitution of April 2011. This replaces the former name "Hungarian Republic."

tic policy. The first free elections were held in March/April 1990 and the first post-Communist government, which held office from 1990 to 1994, declared NATO integration to be a priority. After the collapse of the USSR, the three Central European states agreed to take a common stance on security, and in 1992, their leaders Václav Havel, Lech Walesa and József Antall met in Prague. Hungary was assured that the ethnic Hungarian minority issue (see below) and its proposed solution would not obstruct the first phase of NATO integration (Almási – Kádár 2005: 262).

The following period (1999–2010) was one of EU accession negotiations and ultimately EU integration. Hungary sought to achieve a strategic balance between the EU and NATO in its internal and external security; at the same time, it applied strategic thinking to the collective defence. While some Central European states had managed to become NATO members less than eight years after the fall of the USSR and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, there remained the problem of instability in the Balkans. Hungary was one of the main proponents of further NATO enlargement, having found itself in the position of a NATO island in Central and Eastern Europe after 2004 (Nagy – Kovács 2006). As the question of relations among the EU, NATO and the US came to the fore, Hungary tried to find an appropriate position within this triad. In this context, it accepted the strategic benefits of its geopolitical position to both the EU and NATO while noting the advantages that the country gained from its membership and location when it came to external threats that might affect domestic security. Around this time, there were other developments: Hungary became aware of several options for implementing an effective policy on the ethnic Hungarian minority residing within other states. Moreover, the emerging concept of ESDP reinforced the state's interest in an effective EU defence policy that might also draw on NATO's capabilities. Accompanying EU accession, the year 2004 brought several changes to Hungarian security and defence policy including the end of compulsory military service and introduction of a professional army (or troops on contract). These adaptations resulted from Hungary's obligation to ensure the interoperability of its army and its suitability for remote regional operations, special missions and deployment in joint operations and missions within both the EU and NATO. However, like other V4 countries, Hungary also saw a decline in defence spending (Nagy – Kovács 2006).<sup>6</sup> This trend continues within the V4 to the present day, with Poland being the only exception.

The final key period begins in 2010 and has been a time of strategic decision-making for Hungary between the EU (ESDP/CSDP) and NATO. At the same time, Hungary has established a new path with implications that go beyond the reform of foreign and security policy and the army; it is seeking a new position in East–West relations. Recent years have been dominated by the new approach

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6 In 2004/2005, this spending dropped to 1.5/1.4% of GDP. In contrast, it stood at 1.8% of GDP in 2001.

to foreign policy and security of Viktor Orbán. This approach has four main priorities: expanding Hungary's foreign policy to address more of the world; a greater focus on the Eastern Partnership; adoption of new strategic documents (Balogh 2013: 1) and attempts to secure a new position on the East–West axis. These plans have also found expression in the state's security policy. Statements made by Orbán during the 2014 Ukraine crisis suggested a change in foreign policy, especially concerning East–West relations.<sup>7</sup> Hungarian political representatives began to promote a redefined concept of Euro-Asianism that clearly named the Russian Federation as a partner especially in the area of trade and energy security (Naxera 2017). The latest steps by Hungarian representatives have triggered a disagreement between Budapest and Brussels and suggest a new stance to Moscow conflicting with the position of most EU members (Haines 2014; Johnson 2014).<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Hungary has taken a completely different position on the crisis in Ukraine and sanctioning of Russia. Moreover, it has departed significantly from the EU given deepening trade links between Hungary and Russia, the questionable support of factions of the Hungarian government for some Russian actions and Hungary's attacks on foreign NGOs. These actions by Hungary differ from those of its partners in Central Europe (especially Poland) and indicate that Hungary is partly influenced by Russia. The Hungarian public has tended to be ambivalent about the country's position in East–West affairs. In this context, Orbán's pro-Russia policy may be understood as a kind of "pendulum diplomacy" based on cold calculation of the economic and perhaps also social benefits of connections with Russia. As a result, relations with the EU and NATO (USA) have come under strain and trust has declined.

## Common security challenges for the V4 countries

The security policy of the V4 countries developed in a space that had once been a territorial barrier between empires and later served the same purpose between ideological blocs. By the end of the 20th century, this area had changed significantly and new boundaries had arisen as NATO and the EU expanded into the former Eastern bloc states. A pro-West position predominated in these countries for reasons that were first and foremost economic but also ideological, cultural and social. Combined with a programme of gradual development, this pro-West stance stimulated changes in the security environment (Dančák et al. 2011).

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7 This shift had already been signalled by Orbán in the inauguration speech after his re-election in May 2014. That speech had emphasised the need to ensure the recognition of dual citizenship as well as collective rights and autonomy for the Hungarian minority in Trans-Carpathian Ukraine. The area is home to about 150,000 ethnic Hungarians (Orbánov minister zahládza 2014)

8 It should nevertheless be acknowledged that Hungary has so far abided by the sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia.

Arguably, the contemporary security environment in the V4 countries remains very similar. At present, all these states base their foreign and security policy on NATO's strategic plans. They view NATO as the main guarantor of their security and operate in a context of security-related cooperation between NATO and the EU. At the same time, deeper anti-European tendencies have endured especially in Poland and Hungary. And despite their assurances to the contrary, even Slovakia and the Czech Republic do not always contribute to stabilising the V4 region or its pro-European orientation.

Current V4 security policy rests on cooperation with NATO and the EU as well as on the pro-Euro-Atlantic positions that states maintain regardless of the differing postures of politicians from individual countries. A comparison of security threats across the states also reveals significant similarities. Moreover, there are strong correlations with the updated European security strategy and the strategic concept adopted by NATO in 2010. Still, some minor discrepancies may be observed within both the regional and domestic security environments. Based on the above analysis of security policy development, we may also note a number of key security challenges that will determine the course of the security and foreign policy of the V4 countries and influence their cooperation. These challenges include decreasing defence spending, the crisis in Ukraine, attitudes to the EU (in response to the migration crisis, the building of the EU core and other issues) and finally, the growing influence of nationalism and extremism in all the states in question.

Concerns about shrinking defence budgets are not unique to the states of Central and South-East Europe. Nevertheless, given the global financial crisis (which cannot, however, be seen as the sole triggering event) and the current context of relative stability and no direct military conflict, the V4 states besides Poland have come under pressure to reduce their defence spending, and thus, shirk their obligations as NATO members to allocate 2% of GDP to defence. These states have tended to behave like freeloaders, relying excessively on others to foot their "bill" (Ušiak - Ivančík 2014) and, thus, becoming "consumers" of security. The second major challenge relates to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, which has led to a turning point in the cooperation among the Central European states (Hendrych et al. 2017). At present, there continues to be no consensus among these countries about the origins and nature of the conflict, and, thus, the role of the Russian Federation. As such, the attitudes of individual state representatives are often ambiguous. Thirdly, as regards EU policies and instruments, there appear to be several areas of friction including the migration crisis and the role of the EU core. These two problems have been driving the move for greater EU integration in the areas of security and defence. The potential disengagement of one or several V4 countries might endanger cooperation within the V4. The final challenge, and one that goes beyond the V4 countries, concerns the growing popularity of extremism (Bienczyk – Missala et al. 2017) and na-

tionalist programmes and their transition into political life. These tendencies could put pressure on any kind of transnational cooperation, including the V4. On the other hand, they may reinforce the V4 cooperation as an alternative to higher-level integration. In the next section, I consider some of the opportunities for further cooperation that these challenges have produced.

The analysis and comparison in this study have made clear that the security and foreign policies of the V4 countries have been based on – and continue to reflect – their dependency on great empires or powers. These powers clearly have their own strategic interests. Putting aside the shared values and ideas of the V4, much of their current cooperation is the result of their geographical proximity and active participation in two international organisations – NATO and the EU.

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# Security-related Cooperation among the V4 States

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**Abstract:** *The need for security and defence cooperation is a significant driver bringing together many nation-state groupings. Today, the renewal and strengthening of this cooperation is a pressing concern for all such alliances around the world. This cooperation is rooted in the history that initially highlighted its potential, but it also encompasses contemporary relationships formed under the influence of enormous challenges and pressures. Finally it draws on the past successes and failures of the group in question. The aim of this study is to trace the beginnings of the security-related cooperation of the Visegrad countries and locate the point of coordination of their respective security policies. My methodology is based on an analysis and synthesis of key source materials, making use of different types of analytical approaches. In order to identify the factors that connected the V4 states, I have applied a comparative method. My conclusion highlights important areas of security-related cooperation ranging from the coordination of energy policies to military and defence matters and social protection including the fight against extremism, radicalism and hybrid threats.*

**Keywords:** *security cooperation, V4, defence, Central Europe, security challenges, Ukraine*

The V4 states have had to wrestle with a number of ideological, procedural and substantive issues in their security policies. They have also needed to respond to a changing security environment, which has been dominated by indirect rather than direct threats. In this context, the most critical concerns have included migration, potential human rights abuses, economic instability and the rise

of radicalism and extremism. At the same time, this territory – long known as a *cordon sanitaire*<sup>1</sup> – has become a transit zone from the East, requiring the Schengen area to establish new security guarantees. These issues have, however, not been the only focus of security policy documents. There has also been a need for institutional changes concerning state decision-making powers and the options of individual actors as well as the extent of their participation in security and defence.

This study aims to locate the starting point of the security-related cooperation among the Visegrad Group states, or more precisely, the beginnings of their coordinated/common security policy. My methodology involves the analysis and synthesis of key materials. To this end, I apply various kinds of analytical approaches and compare the situation across the states. Comparing the security policies of the four Central European states also reveals the limitations of this method. These limits stem from a predetermined (retrospective) view of the security and defence aspects of this cooperation. As such, this comparison does not cover all issues informing the contemporary sectoral understanding of security. I have drawn especially on primary documents concerning Visegrad Group, and these are supplemented by accessible scholarly publications (Eichler 2011; Dančák et al. 2011; Šuplata et al. 2013; Denková et al. 2017; Biencyk-Missala et al. 2017). These works highlight and critically assess developments in individual V4 countries from various perspectives.

The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary are small or medium-sized post-Communist countries. This fact influences their vital interests as well as their ability to promote and protect those interests. As a non-institutional form of cooperation, the V4 group has offered a unique opportunity for these four Central European countries to coordinate their plans and interests on a wider regional basis. This cooperative strategy has been key to relationships within the group as well as its greater visibility across the wider European region. Acting alone, these states only had limited options to pursue their interests at international level and their ability to ensure their safety was restricted.

## Historical experiences leading to cooperation

In the 1990s, each of the V4 states attempted to forge a new identity in the international environment that emerged after the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. As we have seen, the four countries did not become NATO members at the same time; Slovakia's acceptance was delayed until 2004, while the other three states joined NATO in 1999. The Slovak delay was largely due to the insufficient development of the country especially when it came to com-

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1 This term describes a space that creates a territorial barrier between empires or ideological blocs.

pliance with democratic criteria (Asmus 2002). All of the Visegrad countries, however, acquired EU membership in May 2004.

History shows us that the process of democratisation is not easy and democracies – even when they are liberal – may be threatened by crises in the same way as other systems (Husenecová 2017). With this in mind, it is worth tracing factors that may have fostered the V4's cooperation. Common historical features of these states include the following:

- Respect for authorities that promote humanistic, patriotic and at times even nationalist values as the basis for state power<sup>2</sup> (Baar 2001)
- An ability to choose leaders based not on their political status or populist rhetoric but rather on their sense of responsibility and respect for moral standards in political life. Due to this political pragmatism, all of the V4 states have had leaders who, instead of maximising their own power, strived to uphold the highest moral standards (Waisová-Piknerová 2012). (In contrast, the last decade has seen the political leadership in these countries veer in the opposite direction, confirming the thesis that there are 20-year cycles at work)<sup>3</sup>
- An ability to preserve national cultures, languages and religious preferences and expand national objectives despite centuries of forced assimilation (Gonionskij 1967).
- A perception of their security environment as a space integral to national and civil identity but also one that should not be endangered by subjugating minority groups (domestic ethnic, cultural and religious minorities). At the same time, traces of the old Versailles system remain in some links between the states in the region (for example, in the relations between the Hungarians and the Slovaks, the Czechs and the Slovaks, and the Poles and the Lithuanians).
- Persistent support from the majority of the population for a West European value system. These values have often been challenged by pan-Slavism and conflicts in East–West relations (Rupnik 1992). Central Europe has always been exposed to these tensions with frequent pressure on the region to adapt to the ambitions of stronger actors.
- Doubts about the effectiveness of regional security given past involvement with other Central European states in the Warsaw Pact organisa-

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2 As recent political developments make clear, there has been a renaissance of nationalist thinking in the region. In individual states, political leaders (for example, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, Miloš Zeman and Robert Fico) have rejected European unity on issues such as the migration crisis. In some cases, their actions have led to de-Europeanisation.

3 According to this theory, every 20 years a new generation comes of age in the absence of sufficient altruistic and socially progressive role models. This generation may catalyse opposition movements and conflicts to which established political elites will usually respond with panic and non-transparency. Rather than acting as a stabilising force, these elites display increased intolerance, instability and self-centredness as it becomes clear they will not stay in power for long (Geertz 1973).

tion (Horemuž 2009). This participation had the same effect on all V4 countries, and they each also felt the negative impact of the Communist ideology, as seen in the suppression of civil society.

- Experience of subjugation to a central power that ruled through violence, coercion and fear. As such, tradition is not the basis for the relationships among the V4 states. Rather, their common background has helped them cooperate while respecting the inevitable disparities in their political development. These disparities are seen as integral to liberal democracy, the common ideology of these states.
- A state rhetoric that draws not only on abstractions (identity, patriotism, collective memory and the protection of territory and values) but on norms which have arisen from the adoption, implementation and reform of national security strategies (Lasicová – Ušiak 2012). These norms take different forms depending on whether they have been adopted by the state and its political bodies/institutions or by NGOs and civil movements. Norms of the second kind have particular importance since they show the direct influence of civil initiatives on the quality of the security environment.

In outlining these common experiences of the V4 countries, I have sought to expose a phenomenon that remains insufficiently researched: the role of sectoral cooperation in regional (multi-state) integration. After the collapse of the USSR and the Soviet bloc, institutional systems of cooperation among the Central European states also fell apart. The participation of these states in the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and the Central European Initiative (CEI) enabled them to pursue economic and political integration (CEFTA 2006 – Středoevropská zóna volného 2009). At the same time, their membership of Partnership for Peace gave rise to a project that lacked official status but was nevertheless implemented by the Visegrad countries with their typical enthusiasm for anything new. The project also marked the beginning of research in the area of security. At the outset, this Visegrad initiative relied on an Anglo-centric approach and terminology, which were not always well suited to Central Europe. These countries, thus, began to focus increasingly on their distinct Central European mindset, assessing how best to adapt this to present conditions. At the same time, an analysis of these states' motives and catalysts for cooperation highlights certain differences (for example, in the perception of the presence and origins of threats, depictions of historical events and views on the issue of national minorities). Such divergences were clear despite these states' proximity and a number of shared experiences. Today these tensions tend to surface at the level of culture and national psychology (Eichler 2011: 53) rather than any actual security threats. (Their role as latent threats cannot, however, be ruled out.) Acknowledging and overcoming past mistakes may

help these states reconcile their differences and establish a common idea of cooperation.

Over the last three decades, we have, thus, seen the development of an initiative that aims to share common values while transforming collective and cooperative security. These goals were also reflected in the early security policies of the Visegrad states. The current security policies of all these countries call for the peaceful settlement of disputes by non-military means and the management of all future conflicts and crises in line with the principles of international law. Contemporary strategies are also guided by principles of conflict prevention, crisis management, smart defence and pooling and sharing. They are based on collaboration and international cooperation. In this context, security-related cooperation falls into two main areas: military and non-military.

A second key influence on the V4 states' security policies is clearly the doctrines of transnational organisations, as seen in transnational security policies. The V3's original foreign and security policy goal – joining the UN and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – was pursued on the basis that after the Soviet bloc collapsed, these states would be transformed into democracies and proceed to reinforce their democratic institutions during the transition period. Since the UN and OSCE were inclusive security organisations, membership did not require the fulfilment of any particular criteria. After these states joined the EU and NATO, another set of goals was achieved. In reflecting on this accession, some transnational organisations saw an affirmation of their plan to extend membership through a tactical enlargement that would reinforce collective defence. Several of them even drew on the notion of enhanced cooperative security to introduce tasks enabling cooperation with non-member states with similar interests to those members (Biava et al. 2011). Since this time, other changes on the agenda have included strengthening counter-terrorism strategies especially on cyber-terrorism; establishing tools to address and eliminate social threats such as extremism and nationalism; improving energy security; promoting the idea of enhanced security through crisis management; increasing the focus on deterrence and last but not least, advocating for reform and transformation, and thus, the establishment of effective NATO/EU armed forces. These are currently also the main goals of the security policies of the V4 states.

## **The V4 as a platform for security cooperation**

After the collapse of the USSR, stabilising the Central European area became a crucial goal. This was also a driving force behind the cooperation among Central European states. On 15 February 1991, just ten days before the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the CSFR, Poland and Hungary (the V3) signed a joint declaration on the coordination of their plans to join the European

Communities and NATO. The V3 initiative was intended to establish security guarantors for the new environment, with an emphasis on a system that would be qualitatively different to the one under the Warsaw Pact (Ondrejcsák 2016). As an approach that was the very opposite of its predecessor, this cooperation with the European Communities and the North Atlantic Alliance instilled new hope. While there was still some mistrust of Western powers based on historical experience, the alternatives for the Central European countries were seen as either inefficient or harmful. During their transition, these states were keenly aware of their difficult position as post-Communist nations encountering democratic Europe. In order to defend their essential interests, they, thus, opted for a coordinated approach based on their geographic proximity, shared historical experience, preferred values and cultural affinities (Šoth 2010). This regional coordination would eventually prove these states' ability to cooperate to Western Europe as the unity and strength of the region appealed to both the European Communities and NATO. Additionally, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, these countries needed to create a space where they belonged even if this was only in the informal setting of the V3 (Šoth 2010: 12). The meeting that determined the V3 cooperation took place at a historically significant location; it was the same site where Czech, Polish and Hungarian kings had met in 1335 to discuss their countries' common problems. The first joint V3 declaration included reflections on these origins as well as the states' common history and cultural proximity. It also set out clear strategic objectives for this cooperation, including not just the establishment of parliamentary democracies, liberal market economies and respect for human rights but the restoration of freedom and sovereignty and joint efforts to integrate into Western structures (Visegrad Group 1991). In 1993, following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and its transformation into separate Czech and Slovak states, the group became the V4. Since that time, its cooperation has mainly occurred through consultations of various kinds including annual summits at the highest level, twice yearly meetings of prime ministers and meetings between particular ministers as required (Visegrad Group 1999). These meetings are seen as opportunities to harmonise state actions, exchange experiences and define common protocols. Traditionally prime ministerial meetings have had the greatest impact.

The year 2004 was a milestone for the V4 cooperation since it marked the point when all these states had joined the EU and NATO. As such, the initial aim of their cooperation had been achieved. From a security perspective, 2007 was similarly important as the year when these countries became part of the Schengen zone. This change meant the V4 were able to benefit from the free movement of persons, goods and services, but it also shifted the EU's external boundaries to the borders of these Central European states. As such, the adoption of major border protection measures became essential, thereby fulfilling one of the V4's post-2004 strategic priorities that had been stipulated in a prime

ministerial declaration in Kroměříž (Visegrad Group 2004). Significantly, it was also around this time that these countries began to realise their responsibilities as states that had completed the integration process, becoming mindful of the duty to share their experiences with potential NATO and EU members. Buoyed by this new awareness of their responsibilities, these states identified the Eastern Partnership and European Neighbourhood Policy as tools and goals for the V4's work within the EU as part of a larger project of establishing peace and stability in Europe (Pulišová 2010: 109). Both the Eastern Partnership and subsequent EU enlargement to the South-East and East were initiated by the Czech Republic during its 2009 EU Council presidency in line with the interests of the V4 states.

Generally speaking, most analysts agree that integration into NATO and the EU (Paulech – Urbanovská 2014) has been the Visegrad Group's major achievement. Some also cite the creation of the group's only institutional body, International Visegrad Fund, which provides scholarships, grants and various support options (Rosputinský 2012). After the achievement of the group's fundamental goal in 2004, the cooperation became to stagnate, but this did not mean it ceased to function altogether. In fact, it seemed the group was merely waiting for a new call to action, and this came in the form of the global economic and gas crisis of 2009. Under these conditions, the V4 states began to rediscover their motivation, and since 2010, they have revived their cooperation.

Clearly, NATO and EU membership remain important influences on the V4's cooperation. These states have been particularly aware of their responsibility for enlarging the security environments to which they belong. They have also been conscious of the need to gradually adapt to transnational doctrines such as the European security strategy and its 2008 update and the 2010 NATO strategic plan. At an important meeting of V4 prime ministers in Bratislava in 2011, the group's security and defence cooperation was taken to the next level. The prime ministers agreed to take a proactive approach to the suppression of significant threats including extremism, terrorism, cyberterrorism, the traffic in human beings and drugs, illegal migration, climate change and poverty. This focus reflected not only the agenda of transnational organisations but also a specifically Central European framework and set of state interests. One key driver was the V4 countries' simultaneous membership of NATO and the EU, which has led to the need to ensure complementarity and to eliminate duplications based on security and defence commitments to the two organisations (Visegrad Group 2011). Even before their accession, these states were conscious of their responsibilities for creating international peace and security in South-East and East Europe, as can be seen from their contribution to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission in the 1990s. Later, as NATO and EU member states, they joined various missions including EULEX in Kosovo, EUMM in Georgia and EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

All these states are also fully aware of their responsibility for self-defence, however in practical terms, common goals in this area have been more difficult to achieve. Awareness of NATO defence guarantees and a broader trend of decreased defence spending have turned these states into “freeloaders” (Poland remains the only exception among the V4). In this context, the establishment and deployment of the Visegrad EU Battlegroup in the first half of 2016 may be seen as a significant success. This move has been perceived by foreign partners as an attempt by the V4 to assume responsibility for self-defence. The Visegrad Group’s ability to create its own military structure is seen as a sign of these states’ general interoperability and willingness to participate in common actions (Šuplata et al. 2013). This joint initiative will be relaunched in 2019. In addition, during the 2014–2015 Slovak presidency, the V4 adopted an action plan about defence cooperation. This plan established a framework for defence cooperation with a particular focus on reinforcing common defence planning and protecting air space. It also highlighted the possibility of creating a permanent V4 defence modular force (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic 2015).

Another important V4 initiative has occurred in the area of energy security with plans to establish an effective distribution network among the states through the North–South Corridor. The link between Hungary and Slovakia has already been established while completion of the one between Slovakia and Poland is expected in 2018/2019 (ČTK 2015; EUSTREAM 2016). The V4 countries have been trying to promote this project at a European level.

The overall concept of V4 security cooperation is based on an affiliation to the Central European region.<sup>4</sup> These states have been able to reach a consensus on their vital and strategic interests, but it has been more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve cooperation in other areas. Many initiatives are triggered by a top-down system whereby membership of international organisations pushes the V4 to fulfil obligations, and this requires them to cooperate on security and defence. The states have chosen to apply a “soft power” philosophy and they therefore try to advance their external interests by non-military means. The low level of institutionalisation of their activities allows them to respond flexibly to new prompts and challenges. It also means they can introduce effective new forms of coordination (Gizicki 2012: 9), reignite existing cooperation with new energy and projects (Dančák et al. 2011: 36-37) or even create spaces to launch new regional initiatives in line with their priorities and ongoing activities (Strážay 2015).

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4 Some voices have advocated for V4 enlargement, but so far this idea has not taken hold (Terem-Lenč 2011).

## Successes and failures of V4 security cooperation

So far, I have outlined key aspects of the V4's cooperation around defence and security. It is also important, however, to identify the main successes and failures of this cooperation. The establishment of the CEFTA in 1992 was one of the V4's first successes (Pavlovič 2001: 9), and in more recent years, several other formats of security-related cooperation have emerged as a result of the long-term efforts of the V4 countries. A number of declarations have also been adopted in support of these endeavours. (See, for example, the Budapest Declaration/Framework for Enhanced Defence Planning and the Action Plan for V4 Defence Cooperation, probably the most important document adopted during the 2014 Slovak presidency.)

One critical contributor to these developments has been the limitation or even absence of bilateral tensions within the V4 group. Today these states enjoy good relations and have even managed to overcome certain historical conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Although some minor bilateral disagreements persist, they have almost no impact on the group's operation (Strážay 2011: 26). To the contrary, the V4 group's internal cohesion was well evidenced in 2007 when its members became part of the Schengen zone (Strážay 2011: 28). Since then, these states have established an even stronger collective voice within the EU.

In this regard, regular meetings of working groups on defence cooperation and project preparation have been particularly important. Probably the most successful of these are the regular meetings of military specialists along with chiefs of general staff, state secretaries and defence ministers. While it is true that not all concluded agreements and project proposals have been taken forward politically (Strážay 2011), the V4 have had a significant impact on military cooperation. As we have seen, one key accomplishment was the establishment of the V4 EU Battlegroup and its deployment in the first half of 2016. The Battlegroup has three main components: Force Headquarters (the group's hub) and the operations and strategic resources units. This initiative is based in Krakow, Poland (Šuplata et al. 2013). More than 3,700 soldiers have been involved with the majority coming from Poland (1,800) followed by the Czech Republic (728), Hungary (640) and finally Slovakia (560) (actual numbers have varied slightly based on the capacities and options of individual states) (Český rozhlas 2015). The success of this project is clear not only from the deployment, which extended for an entire half year but from the decision of the V4 countries to repeat these operations in 2019.

Since this initiative took place, there has been joint work on military training and defence planning, two unavoidable parts of any military and security cooperation. Current agreements require regular military training at least

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5 The historical conflict between Slovakia and Hungary is one of the most important examples.

once a year in the form of large-scale manoeuvres together with smaller exercises several times a year where possible. Joint work on defence planning relates especially to the exchange of information among all involved parties. This cooperation is still not fully effective (Nad' et al. 2016). It is particularly important for ensuring the V4 group's coordination and readiness to handle potential military threats.

Cooperation around air space protection is another significant topic as well as one of the long-term priorities of the V4. This discussion dates back to 2000 when the states tried to harmonise and unify the guidelines on supersonic aircrafts, an essential measure for the effective use of these planes (Podaný 2015; Juhászová et al. 2012). That process proved difficult, and in addition to the large national investment costs associated with modernisation (an investment that is still required in the case of Slovakia), certain state interests have interfered with the decision-making process. As such, this area of cooperation has not been very successful to date.

The above initiatives have received considerable support from international organisations, including the EU in the case of the V4 EU Battlegroup. In addition, NATO is behind another successful project, the NATO Counter-Intelligence Centre of Excellence in Krakow. It should be noted that this project has been a major challenge for the V4 countries as well as an opportunity. Since the 2016 Polish parliamentary elections, some tensions have erupted between Poland and other participating countries, especially as regards the nomination of personnel. There has also been a reluctance to reach agreement on the centre's operations (Pravda 2015).

Putting the NATO centre aside, however, the V4 has been an effective means of supporting staff nominations. A long tradition exists of group consultations and support for candidates originating from one of the V4 countries, and this approach is particularly important in the area of security. While this process is not easy and the states sometimes fail to achieve a consensus, these consultations have been very significant for the coordination of the V4's external affairs.

Cooperation around education is another crucial area of work, albeit one with many shortcomings. Despite the education platform established for the Visegrad states under a 2013 agreement (Visegrad Group Military Education Platform – VIGMILEP), this concept has yet to be put into practice. The Baltic Defence Academy may be a positive example of cooperation in this area. In contrast, the VIGMILEP has been frustrated by the preferences of individual countries, which are unwilling to abandon their established approach in favour of a transnational education institution. Financial and personnel issues are additional obstacles (Gawron – Tabor 2015). Furthermore, decision-making in this area is affected by the fact that the soldiers and defence ministry staff of individual countries are trained by NATO and the EU. For the time being, implementing this kind of cooperation at V4 level, thus, remains difficult.

Several initiatives related to common defence spending have been more outright failures. These include joint efforts to upgrade V4 helicopters and acquire mobile 3D radars (Nađ et al. 2016). Despite expectations of financial savings and other economic benefits, these projects have been compromised by various national interests and interest groups linked to individual states that ultimately slowed or completely hindered any progress. Meanwhile, the V4 states have continued their efforts to cooperate concerning arms, technological issues and the exchange of information and experiences as well as the coordination of a common stance on security. Moreover, V4 units have been deployed within several operations and missions. These include Czech and Slovak battalions within the KFOR mission in Kosovo, Slovak and Hungarian contingents within UNFICYP in Cyprus and the joint involvement of Poland and Slovakia in Iraq (Nađ et al. 2010). These initiatives are still in operation as they have proven to be relatively effective both economically and organisationally.

### ***Opportunities for future security cooperation***

The Central European states, and the countries of the Visegrad Group in particular, went through a transition period in the early 1990s. They later became the first of the post-Communist republics to accede to the North Atlantic Alliance, a collective security organisation and the European Union, an economic group of Western countries with some elements of a security and defence policy. As members of these two organisations, the V4 countries are usually not called on to protect their territory alone but can take advantage of NATO collective defence programmes and EU policies on defence, foreign security, energy and many other matters (Strážay 2015). This does not mean, however, that the V4 countries should abandon cooperation in a narrower regional format. Several examples exist of relatively successful security and defence cooperation based on a regional approach, including the Baltic, Nordic and Benelux groups.

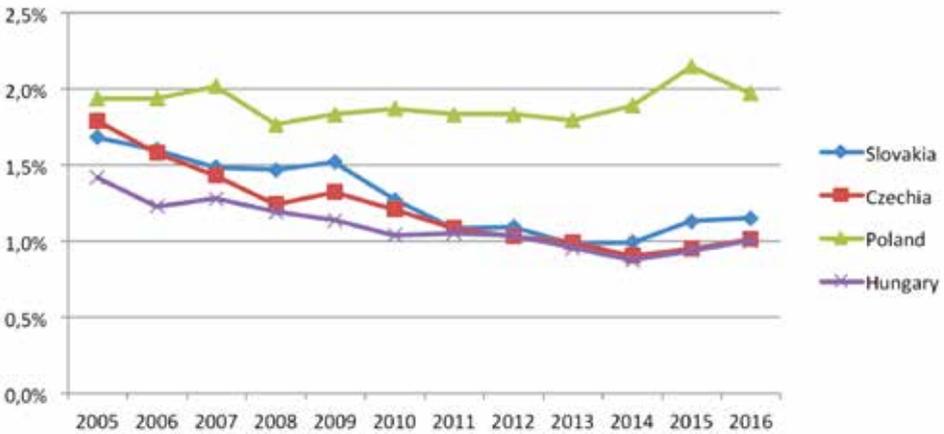
Given the common challenges that the V4 countries are facing, it is worth considering the main opportunities that have emerged for them in response. A security challenge describes a potential disruption of security. States may choose to respond in a range of ways, and it will depend on the individual country and the measures it adopts whether the challenge affects it positively or negatively. These challenges, thus, provide the V4 countries with various openings for cooperation.

The V4 countries have all recorded a decline in defence spending, with the exception of Poland and in recent years also Slovakia. (In the Slovak case, however, the increase in the defence budget has been only minimal.) This trend is evident from a comparison of defence spending in these states as a proportion of their GDP (see Table 1). Moreover, aside from Poland, each of the V4 countries

has maintained a defence budget significantly below 2% of GDP, the limit they agreed on when entering NATO.

This situation puts pressure on the V4 to be more pragmatic about defence spending. In fact, the states may save money by pursuing joint purchases and common procurement. The first step here could be to collaborate on defence planning and coordination given the potential for research and development in these two areas. The defence industry in all of these countries has considerable potential, and effective allocation of resources to a joint programme could bring the desired savings (Majer et al. 2015). This should not mean, however, that the money saved is distributed to other sectors; rather, any savings should help make up needed funds in the area of defence and security. Joint deployments offer another possibility for savings. The creation of the V4 EU Battlegroup realised this idea in practice. It has far greater potential, however, and could be applied, for example, to EU operations in international crisis management situations or in protecting NATO's eastern borders (Nad' et al. 2016).

**Table 1 Defence spending as a proportion of GDP before, during and after the financial crisis (year/percentage of GDP spent on defence in individual states)**



Source: SIPRI 2018

The crisis in Ukraine has led countries to rethink their approach to situations that do not create a military conflict in their immediate proximity, as described in their strategic documents. They have been pressed to reflect on an adequate response. A similar impulse can be seen when it comes to defining the source of the conflict. On the one hand, the V4 countries have issued a joint declaration on their non-recognition of Crimea and condemnation of the illegal annexation (Visegrad Group 2014a). On the other, the foreign security policies and practices of individual states reveal significant discrepancies in their attitudes as well as

internal tensions (Slovakia and the Czech Republic are the most striking examples). The Russian Federation's increasing assertiveness and its use of hybrid threats have exposed such states to the effects of information warfare. In this context, the first efforts at a coordinated V4 response can be seen in the NATO Counter-Intelligence Centre of Excellence, which was established in Krakow. This centre was set up to respond to precisely these kinds of threats, but as we have observed, major staff changes have compromised its efficiency (Pravda 2015). While there is still great potential for a V4 response to this challenge, for now the states have agreed only on its presence and not on its source. This significantly undermines their ability to proceed.

In this regard, one key driver of the V4's cooperation has been the joint visit by the foreign ministers of these states to Kiev in 2014 when they decided to help Ukraine make necessary reforms (CEID 2017). Even so, it remains to be seen if Ukraine will become a stable partner for the V4. The crisis in the country has also created opportunities to protect the eastern border of the EU and NATO in the Baltic countries. In this context, the V4 group is currently actively promoting the strengthening of the Baltic region, and its gradual dispatch of military units to protect this border signals the acceleration of this project. This has also added to the pressure to reinforce defence-related cooperation between the V4 and the Baltic states.

In recent times, attitudes to the EU have been a divisive rather than a unifying force within the V4 group. So far these states have agreed not to accept a multi-speed Europe,<sup>6</sup> and Poland has even declared that such a scenario would lead to the disintegration of the EU (Hendrych et al. 2017). The predominant opinion among the V4 has been that the role of individual EU member states should be reinforced within the union. They have also agreed on the need to protect state freedoms and values and the Schengen zone (Denková et al. 2017). Nevertheless, while there remain opportunities for V4 cooperation, tensions have emerged within the group, especially when it comes to voting on the migration crisis and the implementation of economic sanctions against Russia. In both these cases, the V4 states have failed to arrange any actions or meetings to coordinate their steps (Rácz 2014: 3; Bolečeková – Olejarová 2016). Clearly the EU continues to exert an enormous influence on the V4's security including their defence, domestic security, responses to terrorism and energy security. The motives for V4 cooperation are, thus, significant,<sup>7</sup> but whether this translates into action will depend on the importance of the interests at stake. At the moment it seems that the V4's vital interests could restart their cooperation.

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6 In fact there is some disagreement within the V4 on this issue: Slovakia and perhaps also the Czech Republic have had a more positive response to the creation of an EU "core" which they see as a step towards EU integration. In contrast, Hungary and Poland are opposed to these developments.

7 This cooperation might extend to at least to creating new strategic documents or recommendations to the EU or advocating state interests at EU level.

The increasing power of nationalism and the rise of extremism are obvious in all of the V4 countries. Extremist groups communicate with one another, offer mutual support and coordinate their activities (Bienczyk – Missala et al. 2017). Their programmes focus on undermining of democracy and state participation in transnational organisations including by contesting membership of Euro-Atlantic institutions and affiliations to the West (Mesežnikov – Kocúr 2015). These pressures have produced splits and conflicts within the V4 group, a situation similar to the one after 2004 when the V4 achieved their first major success. As we have seen, these states have often focused lately on advancing their own interests. Much will turn on whether they favour conflict and a reluctance to collaborate over initiating cooperation.

The analysis and comparison in this study have at least partly confirmed that the main motive for security-related cooperation is identifying the common features of the states concerned. These traits may be uncovered by addressing these countries' security concerns. Currently the V4 share a number of characteristics, however their positions differ on several issues. Such disparities stem primarily from their different perceptions of threats. Political theory tells us that though the presence of a threat is an objective fact, the perception of risks results from a subjective decision-making process. At the national level, this is a process undertaken by politicians. It would seem, then, that the V4 countries have the same awareness of the threats being posed but different positions on the nature and extent of the risks. Furthermore, we need to highlight the roles of the EU and NATO in managing security: while the EU plays an important part in coordinating the elimination of threats in the realm of non-military security, NATO coordinates military responses. It is also true that many of the V4's past successes were attached to more ambitious endeavours. This does not mean, however, that the V4 cannot be an effective security and defence subsystem within NATO and the EU. Indeed, far from opposing this initiative, NATO and the EU have given it their support.

Today the V4 states are involved in many security and defence initiatives and activities, but this question of risk perception remains crucial to their quest for common interests and connections. From a historical perspective, we can see that the V4's cooperation culminated some years ago and since then it has waxed and waned at various times; even so, it has retained the potential to be decisive especially at times of crisis. It is strongly presumed that the V4 cooperation will survive despite the current problems. While this cooperation may attenuate slightly or even stagnate, the informal nature of the group enables it to overcome these periods without any serious damage to its operation. Moreover, the V4 states can relaunch their cooperation when vital and strategic interests are at stake, as we have seen several times in the past.

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# The Environmental Situation in the Visegrad Region: Neglect and Insufficient Cooperation in the Face of Serious Environmental Threats

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**Abstract:** *Only a few studies have covered environmental problems in Central Europe and analysed environmental governance in Central European countries and no study has considered environmental cooperation in this region. The goal of the article is to map and analyse the environmental situation in Central Europe, paying attention to Central Europeans' perceptions about the environment, key environmental problems and the policy tools these countries plan to use to face them. For this purpose, I concentrate mainly on the Visegrad Four (V4) countries, which represent the core of Central Europe. My findings suggest that the most active and successful environmental cooperation is taking place in an area that includes the V4 countries, their neighbours and other European countries. The EU offers the most important framework to support and develop this environmental cooperation. My assessment of the environmental situation in the V4 region shows that environmental cooperation among the V4 countries cannot be expected and would only have limited value. Because of their geopolitical situation and physical geography, Poland and Hungary in particular are linked to environmental issues that go beyond Central Europe and call for far wider environmental action. Dealing with environmental threats successfully and protecting the Central European environment efficiently cannot be tasks for the V4 group alone. Clearly we require a cooperative and cross-border Europe-wide approach.*

**Keywords:** *Central Europe, Visegrad Group, environmental cooperation, environmental threats*

“Environmental problems need  
[an] integrated approach...”  
(the European Environmental Agency)

In the summer of 2002, southern Germany and parts of Austria, south-west Bohemia and southern Moravia received hardly any rain. Subsequently, Bavaria and parts of the Czech Republic were affected by one of the largest floods in the region in the last century. The flood destroyed farmland, roads and infrastructure and several human lives were lost. It also damaged several hydropower plants, power networks and chemical factories containing highly hazardous substances. But it was not only Bavaria and central Bohemia that were hit by the flood; other regions down the Danube and Elbe were also seriously affected. Moreover, the large area of Central Europe hit by the 2002 flood went on to suffer repeated droughts between 2002 and 2017 (Intersucho online n.d.). The driest regions were in Hungary, south Slovakia and south Moravia, but much of central Bohemia and central and eastern Poland was also left to cope with a lack of water. Water shortages reduce the capacity of affected land to retain water and in the medium term impede food production and the quality of farmland. Other consequences include erosion, vegetation changes and reduced crop quality as well as wider changes to the ecosystem and cumulative environmental stress. This stress harms not only flora and animal populations, but also the daily life of human communities.

In the case of Central Europe, the drought and rising average temperatures – together with factors including an increase in international trade – opened the door to invasive species from Africa, Asia and the Middle East that lack natural predators in the Central European region (Štátna ochrana přírody n.d.). As such, the region was – and continues to be – faced with environmental risks and threats. While for many years almost no policymakers and only a small number of scholars in Central Europe paid attention to this situation, since the 2002 flood, there has been a growing focus on these issues. There are, however, still very few studies of environmental problems in Central Europe; we lack analyses of environmental governance in Central European countries, and there is no study of environmental cooperation in the region. This article sets out to fill these gaps by charting and analysing the environmental situation in Central Europe. To this end, it addresses key environmental problems and threats in the region along with the policy tools, including regional cooperation, which Central European countries plan to deploy against them.

This study focuses on the Visegrad Four countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia; the V4), which constitute the core of Central Europe, and it only considers neighbouring countries to a limited extent. The structure of my analysis is as follows: I begin by evaluating the environmental

situation and environmental governance in each V4 country and then scrutinise environmental threats, environmental governance and cooperation across the V4 region. Drawing together the evidence, my conclusion shows that despite the experience of the 2002 flood, interest in environmental issues in the V4 countries is quite low and policymakers seldom mention environmental security in their strategic documents. As such, environmental cooperation remains quite poor among the V4 member countries and is generally encouraged and managed by the European Union.

## **Environmental security and environmental cooperation in Central Europe: An academic overview**

The environment emerged as a political concern in the 1960s and interest in these matters developed rapidly during the 1970s (Waisová 2015). In the years since, however, this interest in environmental issues and their political and security consequences has not been evenly distributed: while in regions like Western Europe and North America, scholars and politicians have been concerned about these problems for decades, in other areas – including Central Europe – academic and political interest in the environment is relatively new. In the late 1970s, the political establishment in the Central European Communist countries took note of environmental and ecological issues after a rapid rise in air, land and water pollution in several industrial regions led to dissatisfaction among the local population that threatened the political regime. This also explains why in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, green issues were mainly the concern of anti-regime groups and many green parties in the V4 countries emerged from the dissident movement. Nevertheless it was not until the 1990s that ecological and environmental protection became political issues. For Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, a milestone for environmental awareness came in the negotiations around EU membership. Before the V4 countries could join the EU, they had to adopt the EU's green laws and revise their own environmental norms. These transformations have been described as the “Europeanization of environmental politics” (see, e.g., Braun 2014).

My goal in this section is not, however, to analyse political responses to these environmental problems and threats. I will return to that task in the parts below, but my initial aim is to describe how academic interest in environmental issues developed in Central Europe. In other words, I will investigate when academic forums became open to environmental research and who put issues like environmental security and environmental cooperation on the V4 countries' political agenda.

The first expert analysis of the environmental situation and challenges in Central Europe appeared during the 1970s. While analyses from the West had linked the environmental situation in Central Europe to the political regimes

and politically driven economies of the Communist countries, scholars in those countries took a more cautious view. As such, these Czechoslovak, Hungarian and Polish scholars were silent about the environmental harm caused by Soviet economic decisions as well as environmental challenges such as rising pesticide use and air pollution and the links with regional and human security.

A turning point in the development of (apolitical) academic environmental research was the decline of the Communist regimes. As borders were opened, ideas and scholars began to travel and new thinking about the environmental situation in the V4 countries emerged. Environmental research in the V4 countries soon reached world level as Czech, Polish, Slovak and Hungarian environmental scholars published articles in leading academic journals and took part in international research teams. In the 1990s, this general environmental research continued, but more political issues such as sustainable development, green and circular economies and state responsibility for developing environmentally friendly policies were also stressed. Remarkably, during the 1990s, several environmental scholars entered politics in the V4 countries and some even occupied high-level political positions (in Czechoslovakia, we may point, for example, to Professor Bedřich Moldan and Jaroslav Vavroušek, while in Hungary, György Enyedi was active). These individuals were able to put environmental issues on the political agenda. New issues such as environmental security and threats, environmental governance and green tourism emerged in environmental research and politics (TRD n.d.). These developments were linked not only to open borders and the movement of scholars and ideas, but to the substantial support of international institutions like the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for research and development around environmental policies. Today environmental research in the V4 region is highly developed and scholars from these countries address matters ranging from local environmental problems and environmental education to global concerns such as climate change. There has also been an observable rise in the interest of public authorities in environmental research.

## **Environmental risks and threats in the V4 countries**

The Visegrad Group countries share a number of environmental problems that threaten not only their national security but also the safety of citizens and the quality of life in these states. Some of the problems facing the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are the legacy of decades of Communist rule and exploitative Soviet policies (for example, mining and the use of low-quality coal and uranium mining for export to the Soviet Union; Turnock 2001a). Many other environmental problems emerged in the era of rapid economic development and weak environment policies after 1990.

The V4 countries have all taken quite a similar approach to the environment: after the fall of Communism, they restricted heavy industry and took initial steps to promote environmental education and environmentally friendly and sustainable planning. They also adopted their first national and international environmental protection documents. Nevertheless, the sharp economic growth of the post-Communist period and the efforts of these countries to enter Western markets produced new ecological stress. Today both the environment policies and responses of citizens in these Central European countries remain very weak. This is particularly clear when we consider the fate of green parties in these states. After the first post-Communist elections, these parties not only entered parliament but also joined coalition governments in several countries. However, in contrast to the situation in Western Europe, their electoral support rapidly declined and they lost relevance in the national political system (Frankland 2016).

As things stand, most politicians in the V4 states do not pay attention to environmental issues. These states are similar both in their tendency to ignore environmental matters and in the kinds of environmental problems they face. In the next section, I consider each of these countries in turn, focusing on its environmental situation and the threats it faces as well the tools being harnessed in response. I then turn to the V4 region and explore environmental threats and the roles of interdependence and regional environmental cooperation.

### *The Czech Republic*

The Czech Republic has long been considered the biggest exporter of pollution in the V4 region. This is a result of the country's industrial history, political decisions made under Communism and last but not least, local physical and geographical conditions. At present, the country's main environmental challenges include air, water and land pollution (mostly affecting northern Moravia, Prague and northern Bohemia) and problematic land design including defective river regulation and large areas of land dedicated to monocultures. As we have seen, many of these problems are directly connected to the political decisions of the Communist political establishment. Under the Soviet Union's leadership, the Central European countries transformed their economic and agricultural systems based on new specialisations; Czechoslovakia was selected to mine uranium, limestone and coal and develop heavy industry and large-scale agriculture and forestry. The era was significant for its high rate of pesticide consumption. Despite some isolated improvements, the environmental situation is not much better today in many localities and regions; the countryside, in particular, has been damaged or changed irrevocably and the benefits of new environmental friendly projects are offset by rising traffic, rapid and poorly managed urbanisation and illegal landfills. The country is also being challenged by new environmental problems connected with climate change. These include torrential

rain and landslides, long-term droughts, the loss of arable land and the loss of biodiversity, particularly bird species (Kratina et al n.d.).

As regards changing Czech attitudes to environmental issues, the most decisive moment was the 2002 flood. The flood hit the most populated parts of the country and required the overhaul of environmental protection systems along with strategic threat management and urban planning. New mid-term and long-term strategic documents were adopted while older ones were updated (this included basic concepts of foreign and security policy). As a result, environmental issues entered the political debate and politicians began to talk about environmental threats and the need for a political response. Czech integrated rescue and water management systems were transformed and systematic research commenced on environmental threats and issues like climate change and environmental education. Other measures included an increase in the number of national parks and the introduction of small environmental incentives for individual citizens and local communities. All these transformative and environmentally friendly developments had the backing of the EU. After the Czech Republic became an EU member, it began developing environmental legislation based on the EU framework and received generous support for the restoration of damaged regions and development of new environmental projects (most notably sewage disposal plants). All these developments went hand in hand with changes in the values of Czech society. Opinion polls show that younger generations especially believe the environment is very important and address environmental issues in their everyday lives (CVVM 2017).

In sum, Czech environmental policy has seen a number of positive transformations in the last decade despite the presence of influential voices who deny or trivialise environmental changes and the role of conservation (former Czech president Václav Klaus is a good example). As a result, the environment now has a key place in public and political debates and environmental issues feature on local as well as nation-wide agenda.

## *Hungary*

Like the other V4 countries, Hungary has had to cope with the negative environmental impact of the Communist era, however its situation is slightly different owing mainly to its physical geography. There are no hills and mountains in Hungary that might block wind and rain. At the same time, the country's average annual temperature is higher based on its low elevation, and its two biggest rivers (the Danube and the Tisza) have their sources outside Hungary and extend beyond it (94 percent of Hungary's water comes from neighbouring countries; EEA 2016). Over the last few decades, Hungary has faced repeated challenges caused by air and water pollution, the degradation of farmland and the loss of biodiversity. The state is also dealing with water shortages and declining water

quality. All this is to some degree connected with poor water management: Hungary has weak anti-flood measures and a deficient sewage system, and too few people (less than 74 percent of the population) have access to sewage disposal plants. In regions outside Budapest, damage to local water resources is common and some villages with no public water pipes have depended on water tanks for weeks or months on end over the last decade.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, many scholars (e.g. Varga – Fleischer 1993) have noted that a key issue for Hungary's environmental sustainability is the state of the Danube and surrounding areas. Agricultural activities, industrialisation and urbanisation are all concentrated around the Danube. As a result, the river area has sustained long-term environmental depletion and stress as well as major damage (erosion, chemical pollution and harm from increased traffic and noise). Over the last decade, it has become increasingly clear that one of the most important steps for protecting the Danube and the Tisza is linking water management with early warning systems and river design. Hungary continues to be tested by adverse weather events affecting its upper waterways. Moreover, although there have been significant improvements in the anti-flood system, wide areas around the Danube and the Tisza continue to be hit by annual floods. More than 50 percent of Hungarian territory remains flood-prone (OECD 2008: 72).

The challenge for Budapest, thus, lies not only in environmental and conservation issues but in a lack of environmental management. In 2010, the Ministry for the Environment and Water Resources was dissolved and its agenda was divided between the Ministry for Rural Development (a new department incorporating the Ministry for Agriculture and Ministry for the Environment) and the Ministry for the Interior. Water management and other water issues were assigned to the Ministry for the Interior based on the argument that water is a security issue (see OVF 2014). This institutional reorganisation was criticised by some who argued it would lead to environmental policies being driven by the economic interests of the agriculture and industrial lobby (The Green Minister 2014). The other hot topic in current Hungarian environmental policy is the lack of "environmental democracy". Though Budapest signed the Aarhus Convention and the Aarhus system is part of EU law, Hungarian national and local authorities have failed to release environmental information (Antal 2015; OECD 2008).

All in all, water resource problems are the most pressing environmental issue facing Hungary, with particular concerns about quality, quantity and management. A second issue for Budapest is the need to resolve the management of environmental policy and set priorities for the environmental agenda. In recent years, Hungarian governments seem to have used water issues for the purpose of national branding rather than to launch a real debate.<sup>1</sup>

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1 In 2016, Hungary organised the World Water Summit (<https://www.budapestwatersummit.hu/budapest-water-summit/news/>) and in 2017, it coordinated the sixth Danube Forum (<http://www.danube-forum->

## Poland

Like the other post-Communist countries, Poland inherited the burden of centralised policies that were environmentally unfriendly. Due to its physical geography, the country has been severely affected by environmental pollution coming from neighbouring countries, particularly the so-called Black Triangle (the trans-border region between Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Poland) and the Baltic Sea. Warsaw has also been challenged by more recent environmental problems caused by the sharp economic growth of the 1990s along with the rise of sea and road traffic and the steel industry. The most serious environmental problems now facing the country include air pollution, the coal dependence of domestic industries, water scarcity and waste industry mismanagement (OECD 2015). Like other Central European countries, Poland has had to contend with the loss of land for agriculture. This is largely due to growing urbanisation and the building of new industrial parks and transport infrastructure. Across the EU, Poland has one of the lowest rates of renewable energy production.

As we have seen, Poland has also been dealing with challenges related to the state of the Baltic Sea. As the only Visegrad country with sea access, Poland has a very strong fishing industry and a large number of fish farms. These farms were built after the country joined the EU and had to accept EU fishing policy (FAO 2007). Today the Baltic Sea is one of the world's most polluted seas; its waters have been contaminated by heavy metals, oil and industrial waste, and industrial accidents, sea traffic and plastic waste disposal are all rising (EEA 2008). The Baltic coast is also burdened by the impact of increased sand mining, wind plant use and oil and gas mining along with the building of defence facilities (WWF 2010). One of the most serious environmental challenges relates to the construction of a nuclear power plant, which was approved in 2010. Slated for completion in 2024, this plant is supposed to decrease Polish dependency on the coal. However, the construction site will be on the Baltic sea coast and it remains unclear where the nuclear waste will be stored.

Though environmental legislation began to develop in Poland in the 1990s, the country's accession to the OECD and the EU was a milestone. Both organisations negotiated with Warsaw to develop environmentally friendly politics and accept new green laws that would reduce the fallout of rapid economic growth after Communism. The OECD and the EU have also provided Poland with various instruments and funds to make environmental management easier and more effective. Since 2007 Poland has participated in the EU's integrated maritime policy and since 2009 it has been part of the EU strategy on the Baltic Sea region. Nevertheless, Warsaw lags behind other EU members; its imple-

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-budapest.eu/danube-forum-budapest/pages/20290-overview). The Hungarian government used both these events to improve the country's image and branding as an environmentally friendly and cooperative actor. Both events featured lavish displays for foreign participants.

mentation of new green norms remains slow, mainly because its environmental management has been so decentralised. The Green Party has never been part of a coalition government or even held a parliamentary seat in Poland (Frankland 2016). Some scholars (e.g. Turnock 2001a) have also linked this situation to the weakness of the country's environmental lobby.

In line with the pattern in other post-Communist societies in Central Europe, societal values have been transformed in Poland as interest in environmental sustainability has increased. Interestingly though the environmental situation is worse for Poles than it is for Czechs or Slovaks, Poles tend to report their situation is satisfactory (Polish Ministry of the Environment, cited in OECD 2015: 35). They also claim they are satisfied with the environmental information provided to them (Special Eurobarometer 416: 2014). Even when there has been rising interest in green issues and environmental policies among Poles, the country has maintained its own approach to certain issues; for example, Poles use twice as much water per capita as the citizens of other OECD countries but campaigns to reduce water use have not worked in Poland. Poles have also opposed moves to expand national parkland and build water and sewage infrastructure (OECD 2015). Moreover, since 2017 the government has actually allowed logging in the UNESCO-protected Białowieża forest. Municipal and state authorities have both failed to construct sewage systems and public pipelines, and nor have they developed systematic policy documents on the environment situation. References to environmental security are quite rare and always general and the situation is only changing very slowly (see, e.g., National Security Strategy of Poland – NSS 2007; NSS 2014).

In summary, Poland is only just beginning to develop a responsible environment policy and robust environmental management system. The key issues facing the country are the development of renewable resources and transformation of coal-based industry. Poland is also challenged by the spill-over effects of pollution from neighbouring countries. This is why environmental cooperation with neighbouring countries and other European states is such a vital goal.

## *Slovakia*

Like the other V4 countries, Slovakia has had to contend with the environmental legacy of Communism. Even so, it must be said that the environmental degradation and damage linked to Communist policies in the country are not as serious as seen in Poland or the Czech Republic. Inside Czechoslovakia, heavy industry was concentrated in Bohemia and northern Moravia while Slovak territory tended to be used for agriculture and forestry. During the years of industrialisation, however, several chemical, aluminium and steel factories were also constructed in eastern and central Slovakia. Slovak land was also damaged by centrally controlled agriculture and forestry policies, which disrupted land

planning and biodiversity management. Fast-growing monocultures unable to withstand strong winds were planted in the mountain regions. At the same time, fields were collectivised, rivers and streams were artificially regulated and land retention capacity was damaged. Other environmental problems now affecting Slovakia are similar to those in the Czech Republic. They include high concentrations of nitrogen oxide, water shortages and long-term droughts, erosion, torrential rains and floods, increased traffic, a lack of environmental sustainability planning, the loss of forests, widespread pesticide use and poor waste management (Kopečný 2016; MŽP SR 2017). The areas facing the most serious problems are the Danube region and central and eastern Slovakia, particularly the regions bordering Hungary.

As in the other V4 countries, Slovakia has experienced a transformation of values, including environmental values, in the post-Communist period. Today Slovaks tend to emphasise green issues and widely accept the need for environmental responsibility. This is also reflected in the post-Communist era history of the green parties, which were quickly elected to Slovak parliament and became part of coalition governments. Public institutions support environmental education, environmental analysis and sustainability, and a number of environmentally friendly measures have been adopted. New conservation areas have also been established and new environmental conventions and international norms have been accepted (Štátna ochrana prírody online n.d.). Slovak environmental laws have been found to be the most rigorous among the OECD member countries (MŽP SR 2017). The country's authorities are, however, not always willing to enforce them. Bratislava has also been avoiding the debate about environmental security for some years, however – as in Poland – things are changing. When state authorities released a draft new national security strategy in 2017, a separate chapter on environmental threats and challenges was included.

Overall Slovakia has done much to improve its environmental situation since 1989, but economic development and increased urbanisation and traffic have produced several new problems. Today the most challenging issues facing the country are the management of monocultures in mountainous areas, the treatment of wind-induced damage in hilly regions and water quality management. Water management is sure to be one of the most serious problems across all Slovak regions, and solutions will require cooperation with all other V4 countries and Austria. Slovakia particularly needs to maintain good working relationships with Hungary and Austria: the Danube enters Bratislava from Austria, and almost all Slovak rivers extend through the country into Hungary.

## **Environmental cooperation among the V4 countries**

The analysis above has introduced the environmental issues and problems in particular Visegrad countries. It is clear that the environmental problems fac-

ing Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic are similar and many of them are to some degree connected. Without coordination and cooperative action, we cannot expect any significant successes. The Visegrad countries have a common Communist heritage of centralised and exploitative decision-making; these were regimes in which the emphasis was on heavy machinery, mining and intensive centralised agriculture. They also share new challenges including rapid urbanisation and rising traffic. For many years, environmental protection and interest in environmental changes and threats came very low on the priority list of the Central European political establishment. But this situation is changing. It must be stressed that this transformation is not connected to any visionary political agenda but rather to particular crises and catastrophes (floods, droughts, torrential rain and landslides) and external pressure (EU law and OECD environmental assessments). When the V4 countries joined the OECD, NATO and EU, they were required to release environmental reports and national environmental assessments including information about air, water and land pollution in particular regions (see Environmental Directorate OECD, <http://www.oecd.org/env/>). OECD and EU membership established the basic framework for domestic environmental laws and policies and the communication of environmental issues to the public. Moreover, OECD and EU environmental policies are responsible for the growing interest in environmental security and the adoption of new documents, plans and measures to protect against future environmental threats. These developments also explain why – despite minor differences – visions of environmental security are quite similar across the V4 countries.

As we have seen, the initial environmental challenge for the Central European countries was dealing with the ecological burden of the Communist period. The environmental situation in post-Communist Central Europe attracted the attention of several international organisations. Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary and Poland received generous financial support from the Global Environmental Facility, the World Bank, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and last but not least from the EU under the PHARE framework. This funding was intended to reform environmental policies, develop or buy green technologies, launch revitalisation projects, close opencast mines and start renewable energy projects (Turnock 2001a; Turnock 2001b). Combined with their 2004 EU accession, the improved economic performance of the V4 countries brought a decline in international support for green projects. Today the basic framework for environmental issues in the V4 countries consists of domestic laws and policies along with EU policies and joint programmes, international agreements and systems and bilateral agreements. On this basis, we may understand environmental cooperation in Central Europe as a series of concentric circles: the first circle contains the Visegrad Group countries, their national environment issues, agenda, policies and bilateral agreements;

the second circle includes the V4 group and neighbouring countries while the third circle contains the V4 group and wider Europe.<sup>2</sup>

An analysis of the first circle shows that environmental issues have featured in Visegrad Group negotiations many times. As a result, green issues are mentioned in several declarations, and V4 environment ministers continue to meet regularly. At the same time, environment policies and nature conservation are not a V4 priority and there is no permanent cooperation around these issues. Green issues on the V4 environment agenda have included green economies; the restoration of environmentally damaged cross-border regions (e.g. the so-called Black Triangle of Upper Silesia, Region Novozámecko and Košice Region); water resource management including the management of regionally important river flows; development of anti-flood measures; the maintenance of bio-corridors and original animal migration routes (particularly in the Carpathian-Danube corridor) and the management of cross-border conservation areas.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, however, within the V4 group, there is almost no scope for common environmental projects. The reasons for this are twofold: first, the environmental problems which need to be solved go beyond V4 borders and second, the V4 group's institutional and bureaucratic structure remains a barrier. The only framework for cooperation on green issues among the V4 countries is the International Visegrad Fund, which is limited both financially and organisationally. This fund only offers support to non-state actors such as universities and NGOs. As such, cooperative projects among V4 state institutions must look for assistance elsewhere.

The first instance of environment-related cooperation among actors from the V4 countries occurred in 1986, shortly after the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident. For the citizens of Central Europe, this was a profound ecological awakening. The experience mobilised ecological activists: the first green organisations emerged and the first regional cooperation took place. Before 1990, responses to environmental issues had mainly been driven by state interest as well as the concern of the general population. The only groups highlighting green issues had been dissidents. There were, for example, well-known and regular meetings of Czech and Polish dissidents in Krkonoše where green issues were discussed. Wider interest in environmental issues, environmental protection and nature conservation arose after 1990. The first environmental NGOs and social movements appeared and the first green parties were established. Central Europe also saw its first region-wide protests against pollution and en-

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2 We could, of course, conceive of a fourth circle. This would include the V4 countries and all other actors in the global system. A global level assessment of the environmental situation of the V4 countries is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

3 After the V4 countries joined the EU, they had the chance to join NATURA 2000. This is a system of protected areas deemed to be of European importance under an EU resolution. The NATURA 2000 map (see <https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/figures/natura-2000-birds-and-habitat-directives-1>) clearly shows that cross-border areas of the V4 region are environmentally rich and cannot be protected without significant cooperation.

vironmental hazards. Later cross-border environmental projects were created, including several cross-border conservation reserves (Turnock 2001a; Turnock 2001b). As Central European borders opened up, more cross-border and regional environmental projects and activities began to develop. International support played an important role in fostering this regional cooperation on green issues in the V4 area, with special grants from the World Bank and the EU. Today the most active green NGOs in the region come from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Their Polish counterparts have remained separate and shown a preference for non-V4 issues.

Environmental issues across Central Europe are not only a cause for cooperation. Recent years have seen a rise in the number of ecological and eco-political conflicts among the V4 countries (see Cabada on p. XX of this issue). Air pollution has been an ongoing source of tension among the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland with Prague largely ignoring recent pollution reduction measures. A new problem arose after Polish companies constructed large greenhouses with permanent lighting on the border between the Czech Republic and Poland. Though many Czech villages in mountain areas complained about the light pollution coming from the Polish side, Warsaw and local authorities ignored the problem (i.dnes.cz 2016). For years, the construction of a hydropower plant on the Gabčíkovo/Nagymaros border was another hot topic between Slovakia and Hungary. While Slovakia finished its part of this construction project, Budapest did not and unilaterally declared the area a nature reserve. Since 2017, criticisms of Hungary have intensified following its decision to build a nuclear power plant in Paks along with a large nuclear waste storage facility using Russian technology.

Returning to the three circles, we have seen that the second circle represents environmental cooperation among the V4 states and neighbouring countries and regions. This cooperation chiefly involves southern Poland, south-eastern Germany, Bavaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, northern and eastern Austria, part of Hungary, western Ukraine and the western regions of Romania. This second circle is not sponsored by the V4 but takes place under the auspices of the EU, NATO and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Its actions usually occur in response to a concrete environmental problem such as cross-border water mismanagement, the need for early warning anti-flood systems or an ecological accident. This extended regional cooperation has resulted in projects such as the International Commission for the Protection of the Odra River against Pollution (a network including the Czech Republic, Germany, the EU and Poland)<sup>4</sup> and joint cross-border early warning system trainings.

The third circle of environmental cooperation contains the V4 countries and other European countries, that is, wider Europe. Key issues for this broader cooperation include water management and joint conservation of original animal

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4 See MKOOpZ available at: <http://www.mkoo.pl/index.php?lang=CZ>.

migration routes through the Alps-Carpathians and Danube-Carpathians corridors. This environmental cooperation is based on EU policies and strategies such as Natura 2000, the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the Operational Programme for Infrastructure and Environment 2014–2020 (combining environmental protection, climate change adaptation and infrastructure construction) and the Cohesion Policy as well as specific environmental and development strategies. Here the EU Strategy for Danube Region should be highlighted especially. This strategy has given rise to two projects: Interrreg and Transgree, which include campaigns such as the Danube Habitat Corridor and DANUBEparksCONNECT-ED. As a result of this Danube strategy, the development of green infrastructure has also begun. Moreover, we have seen cooperation in maintaining original animal migratory routes, nature conservation in the Danube and Tisza areas and support for the coordination of anti-flood systems.

One interesting joint environmental project in Central Europe is the hybrid platform known as the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC). REC was established in 1990 with the support of the US, the EU and the Hungarian government. Today it is active in several Central, South and East European countries and provides support for research and projects on cross-border and local environmental issues. REC has received support from development agencies in Sweden, Canada, Austria and Finland as well as private donors who believe that environmental mismanagement and damage are threats to all parts of the world and not only the regions where they happen. The programme aims to develop environmentally-oriented projects and communication channels with the participation of citizens, local authorities, companies and politicians.<sup>5</sup> REC's projects and activities have even reached Central Asia where it has developed the Environmental and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) in cooperation with NATO, the EU, the OSCE, the UNDP and national governments.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Environmental issues are by their very nature non-local. These problems extend beyond the territory of any country and affect wide regions or even become global. Additionally, the environmental situation is influenced by long-term trends and processes that may start locally but then turn regional or global. It follows that while some environmental problems may be resolved locally, most ecological issues extend across state borders and require coordination and cooperative action. In other words, these environmental issues do not respect political boundaries and call for a cooperative approach. These principles hold true for Central Europe and the V4 region. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Slo-

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<sup>5</sup> For more details about REC, available at see <http://www.rec.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> For more details about ENVSEC, available at: <http://www.envsec.org/index.php?lang=en>.

vakia and Poland must solve very similar ecological problems and they share a number of environmental challenges, issues and needs. Nevertheless, though green issues have received some attention within the V4 cooperative framework, no V4 green projects have emerged. Environmental cooperation has instead been based on bilateral agreements on the one hand and broader regional programmes on the other.

In this context, the most active and successful environmental cooperation is occurring in the space I have called the third circle, an area which covers the V4 countries, their neighbours and other European countries (in short, wider Europe). The most important frameworks for supporting and developing this cooperative action have come from the EU and the OECD, which have offered several strategies and policies and support with these issues. My assessment of the situation in the V4 region shows that environmental cooperation among the V4 countries not only cannot be expected but it would have only limited value. To begin with, there is no real interest in developing deeper V4 environmental cooperation among the political representatives of the V4 countries. In addition, because of their geopolitical situation and physical geography, Poland and Hungary are involved in environmental issues that go beyond Central Europe and require much wider environmental action. If environmental threats are to be faced successfully and the Central European environment is to be protected efficiently, efforts cannot be limited to V4 group. What is needed is clearly a cooperative, cross-border Europe-wide approach. To expect increased environmental cooperation among the V4 countries would be a mistake.

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# The Cybersecurity Strategy of the Visegrad Group Countries

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**Abstract:** *The Visegrad Group is the most dynamic transnational group in the Central and Eastern European region, connecting the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. Together these countries have established a useful framework for engaging with and coordinating policy at a regional level. At the same time, they are implementing EU programmes by creating cooperating networks with neighbouring countries based on their common security needs and strategic culture. This article focuses on the cybersecurity policies of the Visegrad Group countries. My analysis aims to reveal similarities and differences among these states that may be crucial for their future cooperation on a joint Central and Eastern European cybersecurity strategy. A cybersecurity strategy is a basic document created in a governmental context that reflects the interests and security rules at work in cyberspace. This document establishes the framework for future legislation, policies/standards, guidelines and other security- and cybersecurity-related recommendations. This study is also an attempt to assess the development of cybersecurity policies; as such, it provides an opportunity to hypothesise about the future of cybertechnology in the Visegrad Group region.*

**Keywords:** *Visegard Group, Central and Eastern Europe, cybersecurity, cybertechnology*

## Introduction: Analytic framework and research approach

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the countries of the Visegrad Group (the V4), i.e. Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, have been seen as models of transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, recording progress across

the political, economic and social spheres. These changes have occurred at the same time that technology has assumed growing importance. The modernisation of many areas of these countries was one of the conditions of their accession to the Western structures of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, changes in the use of cybertechnology only began to gain momentum in the first decade of the 21st century when these tools became widespread in the public domain. As such, the evolution of cybertechnology has been simultaneous with the process of Europeanisation and synonymous with changes to state management.

European integration, when considered in all its political, economic and cultural as well as technological and cybernetic dimensions, is a relatively long and complex process. This is especially clear if we take into account the evolution of social attitudes to democratic processes.

The first part of this article explores theoretical considerations, tracing the history of the Visegrad Group's cooperation and the main factors shaping security policies in the Central and Eastern European region. In the second part, I turn to the cyberstrategies of individual countries based on an analysis of published documents.

By analysing individual state cybersecurity policies, I aim to determine whether these strategies might pave the way for a new kind of cooperation within the V4 framework. Along the same lines, I ask whether neighbouring countries with similar historical traditions could jointly pursue solutions to the current problems in Europe.

Analysing the cybersecurity strategies of particular V4 states allows us to ascertain the extent to which governments are focusing on military and civil tasks. In this way, this study should help establish how individual governments define cybersecurity policy and whether this conflicts at all with democratic principles. The topic of cybersecurity itself leads us to ask whether digital transformation is a stage in the democratisation process that took place in Central and Eastern Europe in the '90s or it represents a separate and independent process that has different origins and is unfolding in another time scheme.

This study, thus, suggests how political factors can shape state cybersecurity. At the same time, it highlights similarities and differences in the cybersecurity strategies of the V4 countries.

My hypotheses hold that 1) cybersecurity policies reflect current processes taking place in the European political space and 2) the attitudes of individual states to security policy could affect the future of the V4's cooperation.

The starting point for this discussion is the concept of security policy, which aims to ensure the security of the state as the basic form of societal organisation. Such a policy also covers the state's involvement in creating international security as a way to prevent and counteract various types of threats (Gryz 2013: 46-47). Cyberspace has a fundamental role to play in this context and it adds

a dimension to state security policy. Cybersecurity, generally understood as part of politics, is, thus, crucial to this work. For our purposes, cyberspace is both a means of implementing state tasks and a virtual space where significant processes and phenomena take place from a state security perspective. Cybersecurity policy refers to the development of security policy that is specifically about cybertechnology.

## **The Visegrad Group**

After the fall of Communism in 1989, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe began to adapt their political systems to liberal democracy. At the same time they had to define their main foreign policy goals. In 1991, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland decided to create the Visegrad Triangle to enable their development and subsequent membership of NATO and the EU. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, this joint initiative became the Visegrad Group. For countries in this region, the most obvious and logical course for foreign policy was a new political and economic orientation towards the West.

By 2004, the Visegrad Group had achieved its most important political goals and the need arose for a new direction for cooperation. Many public policy issues, including transport infrastructure, the environment, tourism, migration, culture and education, had proven to be more effectively resolved at V4 level. Work on a common cybersecurity policy presented a chance for deeper cooperation among these countries.

On 13 May 2004, a new Visegrad declaration was adopted at the V4 summit in Kromeriz, replacing the document signed on the group's creation in 1991. The V4 representatives announced that the previous goals had been achieved and declared their readiness to foster their countries' cooperation as EU and NATO members. The Visegrad countries, thus, decided to work together on security policy-related issues, emphasising cross-border cooperation and the fight against terrorism and organised crime. Other matters raised included Schengen-based cooperation on illegal migration, critical infrastructure management and cooperation related to defence as well as the defence industry itself (Czyz 2007: 131–144).

In hindsight, it would seem, however, that the most important area of this cooperation was the sectoral dimension. In this regard, current V4 cross-border cooperation may focus on environmental protection, public transport or the development of regional infrastructure. The existence of reliable communication infrastructure remains critical, however, if there is to be effective communication among these states. Cybertechnology is, thus, key to the modernisation of this region, which hosts communication lines from Western Europe to the former Soviet republics. Something similar may be said of the building of energy and communication infrastructure between the North and the South,

which has served as the foundation for the Three Seas Initiative project (Törő – Butler – Grüber 2014: 364–393).

Currently the V4 group is an active regional alliance that allows its four member countries to speak with a single voice both within the group and in their dealings with other states and political entities. This V4 cooperation is based on the assumption that geographic proximity leads to a common understanding of security among these states, which share boundaries and neighbourhoods and therefore have more reasons to act together.

There is, thus, great potential for the V4 countries to pursue common challenges whether this means modernising the Central and Eastern European region or applying a broad European security and defence policy to aspiring EU member states (Rosteková – Rouet 2014: 181–193).

Among the big challenges that lie ahead for the V4 group members is the expansion of their security-related cooperation to deal with energy diversification and cybersecurity. Located on the outskirts of the EU, the Visegrad countries have close relations with neighbouring Ukraine and Belarus – a fact that translates into a major security policy goal. This issue has also been important in establishing the V4 states' new political priorities, which have gradually come to influence the EU's Eastern policy.

## **Main determinants of the Visegrad Group's security policy**

Implementing security policy projects is not an easy task. Undoubtedly there are factors that make joint activities impossible and in some cases even rule out their discussion. One of these factors is the great disparity in the security policy budgets of different countries. In particular, the defence expenditure of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia is different from the level in Poland, a situation which frustrates the fulfilment of NATO policy commitments.

As a result of EU enlargement on 1 May 2004, the EU faced a completely new situation at its eastern borders: the former Soviet republics of Belarus, Ukraine and Kaliningrad Oblast (part of the Russian Federation) became the Union's neighbours, and the same was also true of Moldova after Romania's accession in 2007. Meanwhile within the Visegrad Group, the eastern borders of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia became the EU's eastern border and, thus, the most important dividing line in Europe.

Central and Eastern European security policy has unquestionably been influenced by the many decades that these states experienced within the Soviet bloc. Another key factor is the belief of modern Kremlin authorities that the former Soviet countries belong to Russia's exclusive sphere of interest (Gerasymchuk 2014: 42–54). The V4 countries have strong economic connections with their eastern neighbours, especially Russia. In Central Europe, Russian enterprises continue to dominate the energy sector, which remains particularly attractive

to Russian investors given the use of key (road and rail) transport corridors and the supply of oil and gas.

The Visegrad Group has put great emphasis on various forms of energy security, which it sees as a safeguard for economic competition and a defence against Russian use of gas and oil supplies as a political tool. The V4's common strategic goals for security policy include the diversification of energy transmission routes, cooperation around security and environmental protection and providing transformation assistance to Ukraine. Cyberspace has emerged as another important issue that is beginning to shape V4 security policy (Marušiak 2015: 28–46).

Russia continues to be one of the main players on the global energy market. At the beginning of 2006, members of the European Union acknowledged the importance of this situation. Since then, the Russian–Ukrainian conflict has led to a reduction of gas supplies to the V4 countries. The former Soviet bloc countries are also struggling with the dependence of much of their military (army) equipment on Soviet era technologies (Sarvas 1999: 99–118). Turning to the main theme of the current study, Russian authorities have started to pursue a policy of confrontation through non-governmental organisations and separatist and national movements in neighbouring countries. These groups use cybertechnology to try to influence the political and economic situation in selected countries.

The Visegrad Group governments have repeatedly stressed their commitment to Ukraine's European integration. In order to strengthen the financial support from the Eastern Partnership, they introduced the Eastern Partnership Visegrad Programme, which aims to enhance Central and Eastern Europe regional cooperation through the International Visegrad Fund (Nováky 2015: 244–266). The V4's clear political objective is to promote a pro-European stance in Ukraine, which could work as a kind of safety belt and foster stability. This could result in further enlargements that would shift European borders to the east and distance Central European countries from the risky border area. At the same time, the V4 security policy threatens to create tension with Russia, which has invested substantially in keeping control of Belarus and Ukraine.

The Visegrad Group countries have rarely taken a common stand on the Russian Federation given their different interpretations of the threats posed and the significant variation in their perceptions of their national interests (Marušiak 2015). In contrast to Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary have all been reluctant to treat Russia as an existential threat. The reasons for this are probably twofold. First of all, there are geopolitical factors at work since apart from Poland, none of the V4 countries has a direct border with Russia. Secondly, there is the existing protection available based on the principle of common defence in Article 5 of the NATO charter. This is seen as

a highly credible deterrent and guarantee of security against potential threats (Törő – Butler – Grüber 2014).

A final political issue worth returning to is the differences within the V4 on the question of increased military spending. With the exception of Poland, all of the V4 countries fall well below the NATO threshold that requires two percent of GDP to be dedicated to defence spending (Kuzel 2017). Central and Eastern European states' different assessments of events and threats may also reflect their perceptions of their own national interests, which are, in turn, affected by policies in Brussels and Moscow.

### ***Selected “cyber incidents” in East-Central Europe***

Widespread access to cybertechnology, which has almost unlimited applications across many areas of life, has increased the pressure to use it in the political sphere. The transformation of public space with the help of cybertechnology, which took place after 2000, ran almost parallel with the European integration of the V4 countries. It remains unclear whether the V4 countries, which were less economically and technologically developed than existing EU members, had greater difficulty in adopting and applying cybertechnology. And while this question cannot be resolved by this study, it is certainly one worth posing. In any case, we can assume that the implementation of cybertechnology has been affected by the organisational culture of public institutions and ongoing upgrades to economic infrastructure. On joining a more advanced community, the V4 countries had to accelerate their own development to keep pace with more advanced economies and those with more experience of the liberal marketplace.

At the outset, we may also presume that current threats resulting from the popularity of cybertechnology have been influential in reviving the debate about security policy. Moreover, this situation has had an impact on the attitudes and political decisions of the V4 states. The dynamics and effectiveness of the Visegrad cooperation have, thus, been affected by both internal and external factors. In this context, cyberspace does not fit easily into any existing categories.

Seen more broadly, cybersecurity policy is the result of cumulative factors, including economic and technological considerations, internal political ambitions and the geostrategic imperatives that shape the security policy of individual Visegrad states. It is therefore questionable whether the issue of cyberspace is actually bringing these countries any closer together. There are also questions about whether the V4 countries can adapt to new threats from cybertechnology, how they perceive cybersecurity and whether the documents of individual governments – that is, their cyberstrategies – can serve as the basis for a joint security policy.

In 2017, allegations were made about Russia's participation in the US general election, with some expressing suspicions that Russian hackers had infiltrated

the electronic component of the American electoral system. These events produced anxiety in EU member states that were planning their own elections and were, thus, similarly exposed to the risk of cyber attacks (Sussex 2017).

Each of the V4 countries has a relatively well-developed nationwide IT sector. However, the popularity of the Internet, and hence the large number of users, increases states' vulnerability to cyber-threats. Cybercrime is on the rise in V4 countries in line with trends elsewhere in Europe and around the world.

Between 2015 and 2017, the Visegrad Group countries did not experience serious cybercrime on the scale seen in states like Estonia. In this regard, Estonian state infrastructure, which is based on cybertechnology, was the target of a distributed denial of service (DDoS) campaign as early as 2007. That attack came in response to the government's decision to remove a Soviet statue in Tallinn (Haataja 2017). In contrast, in 2017, the global "WannaCry" attack revealed a significant weakness in the cybernetic security of EU countries, and thus, of V4 members (e Silva 2018). In this context, several incidents in Central and Eastern Europe should be mentioned.

The Czech Republic has in fact been the target of several notable cyber attacks in recent years. These have included DDoS attacks on media websites and the most popular search engine in the country (*seznam.cz*) as well as Prague Stock Exchange, the Czech National Bank and the two largest Czech mobile telephone networks (Kostyuk 2014). In September 2016, Czech intelligence services noted disinformation and cyber-espionage activities which, they alleged, were being carried out by Russians. In February 2017, a similar case was reported, and the head of the Czech diplomatic service, Lubomír Zaorálek, told reporters that Czech Foreign Ministry email accounts belonging to the minister and deputy ministers among others had been hacked. Zaorálek also observed that a foreign state was probably behind the attacks (Tait 2017).

In 2014, the Hungarian government was also the target of an extended campaign launched by a group of Russian hackers called "ATP28" who were indirectly linked to Russian intelligence. This group also directed its activities at Poland, Georgia and NATO (Jones 2014). In April 2016, Hungary again experienced several large-scale cyber attacks that paralysed the government's official website. These concentrated attacks revealed deficiencies in the state's cybernetic defences including an inability to protect fully against cyber-threats. While government websites were the chief target, these events exposed the huge risks facing private companies that might be exposed to similar attacks. As such, they brought home the need to take action to protect data (Cyber attack temporarily shuts Hungarian government website 2018).

Given the tense relations between Poland and Russia, it is safe to assume that Russia has been the main source of cyber attacks on the Polish IT system. In mid-September 2009, soon after Prime Minister Putin's visit to Westerplatte and just before the Sejm resolution of 17 September and the Katyń massacre, an

organised attack took place on the servers of Polish state institutions. According to the Polish media, these attacks recur quite often but thanks to the systems and protocols of the Governmental Response Team for Computer Incidents (CERT.GOV.PL), the security of government networks and websites has been ensured so far. Nevertheless, Poland's infrastructure is vulnerable to cyber attacks, as seen by a number of assaults on government systems in 2012. The scale of the cyber-threats was made clear by an attack on the ground-based IT systems at Warsaw Chopin Airport, which led to the cancellation of a dozen or so Polish Airlines flights, leaving around 1,400 passengers stranded (Babinski 2015).

Based on these examples, we may conclude that the V4 states are a vulnerable zone on the geopolitical and cybernetic map in the 21st century. Central and Eastern European countries are connected not only by roads and gas pipelines but also by a digital highway. The region is also highly important to organisations whose activities focus on cyberspace.

## **Cybersecurity strategies of the Visegrad Group countries<sup>1</sup>**

A security strategy is a basic and starting document used for the formulation of regulations, standards, methodologies, rules, (security) policies and other tools needed to ensure cybersecurity. Because national strategies are an effect of the political environment, we may assume that this strategy reflects the unique political culture of the given state. A state's security system is not stable and to a large extent depends on processes taking place in the political, social and technological environment. Cybertechnology tends to develop rapidly so we should consider whether policy documents address dynamically changing conditions and provide ways for citizens and public institutions to adapt to cyberspace. The documents analysed in this section contain guidelines that may steer the next stages of security policy implementation from both legal and practical perspectives. They should also help us determine the powers and competences of the various institutions involved in basic state operations.

Arguably the future development of Visegrad Group is closely tied to the use of cybertechnology both in general political life and at the level of specific projects. To understand the factors shaping this cooperation framework, however, we need to turn to the cybersecurity policy positions of individual states. The sources of this analysis are documents developed by these countries and presented as their cybersecurity strategy. These documents set out the political plans of individual governments, thus allowing us to map out their present and future actions.

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1 This analysis of the cybersecurity strategies of the Visegrad countries is based on the documents available at: <https://ccdcoe.org/cyber-security-strategy-documents.html> (12 March 2018).

## *The Czech national cybersecurity strategy<sup>2</sup>*

According to the Czech Republic's cybersecurity strategy, modern cyber technology presents a key challenge for the state, with particular consequences for any public and private entities that depend on information and communication tools. In contrast with the strategies of the other V4 states, the Czech document emphasises the critical role of information security, the loss of which, we are told, could have unpredictable consequences for society:

The public and private sectors' dependence on information and communication technologies becomes ever more obvious. Information sharing and protection are crucial for the protection of security and [the] economic interests of the state and its citizens. Whilst the general public is mostly concerned about their personal data abuse or afraid of losing money and data, cyber security as such encompasses much more. Major risks include cyber espionage (industrial, military, political, or other), ever more often carried out directly by governments or their security agencies, organized crime in cyberspace, hacktivism, intentional disinformation campaigns with political or military objectives, and even – in the future – cyber terrorism. (p. 5).

The document stresses that upholding basic cybersecurity principles will require a proactive approach from not only the state but also its citizens. As such, achieving a culture of security is said to require awareness-raising among the general public as well as the private sector. Czech cybersecurity is, thus, tied to the ongoing development of not just durable information infrastructure but also an alert and educated society:

Due to the open and publicly accessible nature of the Internet characterized by [the] absence of geographical borders, [the] security and protection of cyberspace demand a proactive approach not only from the state, but also from its citizens. (p. 6). The Czech Republic shall encourage [the] development of an information society culture through awareness raising among its citizens and private sector subjects. They shall have free access to information society services and to information on responsible behaviour and use of information technologies. (p. 8). [We need to] train experts specialised in [...] active counter-measures in cyber security and cyber defence and in [an] offensive approach to cyber security in general. (p. 18).

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2 National Cyber Security Strategy of the Czech Republic: available at <https://ccdcoe.org/cyber-security-strategy-documents.html> (10 March 2018).

The strategy notes that cybersecurity must go together with the protection of basic human rights and freedoms and the principles of a democratic state. In this regard, the open and neutral nature of the Internet, freedom of expression and privacy laws are said to guarantee the protection of civil liberties in cyberspace:

In ensuring cyber security, the Czech Republic abides by fundamental human rights, democratic principles and values. It respects the Internet's open and neutral character, safeguards the freedom of expression, personal data protection and [...] privacy rights. It therefore strives for [...] maximal openness in access to information and for [...] minimal interference in individuals' and private entities' rights. (p. 9).

Another important element of the strategy is its classification of the threats arising through cyberspace. These threats include cybernetic espionage (divided into industrial, military, political and other kinds), cybercrime, hacktivism, disinformation and cyberterrorism.

The Czech strategy has four main parts: the first offers a vision of state cybersecurity with goals extending beyond the designated time period of 2015–2020. The second part sets out the basic principles that should shape cybersecurity policy. The third identifies specific cybersecurity challenges for the state and international organisations while the fourth describes the strategic goals whose achievement is crucial for Czech cybersecurity policy in this period. The document also stresses the state's obligations resulting from its role in international organisations and NATO's collective defence structures:

The Czech Republic shall actively support its international partners in preventing and solving cyber attacks, fulfil its commitments arising from the membership in international organizations and from the collective defence within the NATO, and promote security in other states. (p. 7). The Strategy follows the principle of indivisible security; the Czech Republic's cyber security is thus indivisible from global, namely Euro-Atlantic cyber security. (p. 9).

Other sections highlight the need for state cooperation with the private and academic sectors on research and development concerning secure information and communication technologies. At the same time, the state confirms its support for the production, research, development and use of advanced technologies:

To cooperate with [the] private sector and academia on research projects (including primary and experimental research) and on activities in technical disciplines and social sciences, at the national, as well as European and international, transatlantic levels. (p. 19).

The Czech Republic addresses cybernetic security comprehensively and so the document rightly observes that cyberspace is a global phenomenon transcending geopolitical boundaries. The authors note that the state and its agencies cannot be solely responsible for cybersecurity. Instead the active cooperation of the Czech public, private entities and entrepreneurs is required:

The state and its agencies cannot bear the sole responsibility for cyber security; [...] active cooperation of the Czech Republic's citizens, private legal persons and individual entrepreneurs is needed. (p. 10). To ensure, in cooperation with [the] private sector, a cyberspace offering a reliable environment for information sharing, research and development and provide a secure information infrastructure stimulating entrepreneurship in order to support the competitiveness of all Czech companies and protect their investments. To provide education and raise the private sector's awareness of cyber security. Provide the private sector with guidance on how to behave in crisis situations, particularly during cyber incidents but also in their day-to-day activities. (p. 18).

As such, this area of security policy is said to require various forms of cooperation across the public and private sectors, civil society and the academy.

### *The Hungarian national cybersecurity strategy*<sup>3</sup>

The Hungarian cybersecurity strategy focuses largely on the enforcement of national interests within the context of the state itself. Reading the document, we come away with a strong sense of its highly national concerns. Established targets of security policy (for example, guaranteeing economic security, adapting to technological innovation and ensuring international cybersecurity cooperation) must all be compatible with Hungarian state interests:

The purpose of this Strategy is to determine national objectives and strategic directions, tasks and comprehensive government tools which enable Hungary to enforce its national interests in the Hungarian cyberspace, within the context of [...] global cyberspace. The strategy aims at developing a free and secure cyberspace and protecting national sovereignty in the national and international context [...] Furthermore, it aims at protecting the activities and guaranteeing the security of [the] national economy and society, securely adapting technological innovations to facilitate economic growth, and establishing international cooperation in this regard in line with Hungary's national interests. (p. 2).

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3 National Cyber Security Strategy of Hungary: available at <https://ccdcoe.org/cyber-security-strategy-documents.html> (10 March 2018).

The document also lists tools for maintaining and improving the level of cybersecurity. The safe use of cyberspace, according to these authors, depends on the clear and effective coordination of government activities. This cooperation should be strengthened:

However, due to the complexity of this area, these responsibilities can only meet the Government's objective regarding [the] free and secure use of cyberspace through [...] clear and efficient government coordination. Therefore, [...] central government coordination through the Prime Minister's Office shall be strengthened, a mandatory step for the coordinated and concentrated use of government and sectoral resources. (p. 4).

The introduction to the document sets out two specific goals for the cyberstrategy: it should manage threats and risks arising in cyberspace (understood here as both a location and the source of harmful processes) and it should enhance government coordination and resources. There are also references to values such as freedom, security and the rule of law and the need for international and European cooperation. In this way, the Hungarian strategy highlights the international materials that have served as signposts for the national document. Those sources include recommendations from European Parliament, documents from the European Commission and the High Representative for EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and the main tenets of the NATO strategy:

At the same time, the Strategy is in conformity with the recommendations of the European Parliament for the Member States included in Decision No. 2012/2096(INI) on cyber security and defence, adopted on 22 November 2012, and with the joint communication published by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union on 7 February 2013 under the title "Cybersecurity Strategy of the European Union: An Open, Safe and Secure Cyberspace." Furthermore, the Strategy is in line with the Strategic Concept of NATO accepted in November 2010, the Cyber Security Policy of the Organisation adopted in June 2011 and its implementation plan, as well as with the cyber protection principles and objectives set forth in the documents of the NATO summits held on 19-20 November 2010 in Lisbon and on 20-21 May 2012 in Chicago. (p. 2).

Hungary's strategy also introduces and defines a concept of "Hungarian cyberspace," which includes both electronic information systems located within state territory and social and financial processes occurring within and through cyberspace. Those processes may result in data and information found in the Hungarian public domain or outside state borders but affecting the level of Hungarian security.

Significantly, the drafters understand the concept of cybersecurity in a military context. The idea of an “information war” is invoked, with cyberspace described as one of the most important theatres of modern warfare. Turning to the security standards of international organisations, the cyberstrategy appeals to a notion of community defence based on the common defence principle under Article 5 of the NATO charter. Hungary, thus, recognises the cooperation with NATO as key to cybersecurity:

Hungary considers it highly important that cybersecurity has become an issue for collective defence under Article 5 of the founding treaty of NATO. (p. 3).

The strategy also notes the dynamic way that new technologies such as cloud computing and the mobile Internet develop leading to the continuous appearance of new security threats. Subsequent sections, thus, define cybersecurity as an ongoing and planned process of cyber-threat minimisation through political, legal, economic, educational and technical means. There is an emphasis on scientific development and relations with the scientific community. The unique role of this cooperation and its significance for security policy are made clear by the use of the word “strategic.”

The Hungarian text also refers to civil liberties and human rights. These values are said to coexist with another important and often irreconcilable value: the right to security. This is apparent, for example, in the following statements about ensuring freedom from fear while also guaranteeing the protection of personal data and the free and safe use of cyberspace:

This Strategy reflects the basic values enshrined in the Fundamental Law of Hungary, specifically freedom, security, [the] rule of law, international and European cooperation, in a separate field within security and economic policy. (p. 2). The protection of Hungary’s sovereignty in [...] Hungarian cyberspace is a national interest, too; free, democratic and secure functioning of the Hungarian cyberspace based on the rule of law is regarded as a fundamental value and interest. In Hungary, the freedom and security of cyberspace is ensured through the close cooperation and coordinated activities between Government, academia, business sector and civil society based on their shared responsibility. (p. 3).

The authors highlight potential threats to the state that may arise from an information leak, maintaining that this is why the protection of state data is so essential. In this context, they also draw attention to the security of key cyberspace infrastructure. Another important issue, more marginal in other V4 countries’ strategies, is the need to provide a safe online space for children and young people:

Child protection. Hungary regards the creation and maintenance of an environment allowing the healthy development of children as a basic element of cybersecurity, and treats it as a priority in all affected areas, achieving, at the same time, the objectives of the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children. Particular emphasis is laid on encouraging the creation of quality online content for young people, supporting awareness-raising and preparatory measures, the prevention of the harassment and exploitation of children, and the establishment of a secure online environment. For this purpose, Hungarian non-governmental organisations with a proven record in online child protection are regarded as key partners. (p. 6).

The document focuses on cooperation and the effective exchange of information. To this end, it calls for the creation of forums for effective cooperation including economic and scientific experts who should prepare and present recommendations and opinions on cybersecurity activities.

The strategy also underlines the importance of specialist security policy institutions. Implementation, it notes, should be entrusted to organisations with specific skills and powers. Those organisations should cooperate not just with one another, but also with other authorities responsible for data protection and classified information:

These tasks affect organisations responsible for national security, defence, law enforcement, disaster management and critical infrastructure protection, as well as authorities responsible for electronic information security. (p. 5).

It is worth noting that the organisations responsible for cybersecurity policy are not clearly indicated in the document, and in practice, this provision may result in many controversial actions. The drafters stress the aim of expanding Hungary's role in EU and NATO cybernetic protection initiatives and cooperation as well as in UN and OSCE cybersecurity cooperation projects. Finally they announce the continuation and expansion of cooperation in the Central and Eastern Europe region.

### *The Polish cybersecurity doctrine<sup>4</sup>*

The starting points for the Polish security strategy are provisions of EU documents. Like the other V4 countries, Poland sees the chance to strengthen its cybersecurity as a potential benefit of its membership of NATO and EU allied defence and cybernetic defence structures. The document, thus, emphasises

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<sup>4</sup> Cybersecurity Doctrine of the Republic of Poland: available at <https://ccdcoe.org/cyber-security-strategy-documents.html> (10 March 2018).

that any Polish provisions should be compatible with the strategies of allied states and international organisations like the EU and NATO:

It is important that the evolution of security in Europe favours coherence and solidarity, as well as [the] development of defence capabilities of NATO and the EU, and not a decrease in Member States' ambitions related to this domain [...] [Objectives include] developing the defence and protection capabilities that would be adequate to the needs and capacities of the state, as well as increasing their interoperability within NATO and the EU [...] reinforcing NATO's readiness and ability to provide collective defence, as well as the coherence of EU's actions in the field of security; building a strong position of Poland in the two organizations. (p. 17).

Like its Slovak counterpart (see the discussion below), the Polish strategy assumes the need to establish a defining framework for processes and phenomena at the very outset. The document, thus, contains an explanation of the basic concepts that it uses when discussing the cybersecurity problem. The strategy's main goal is to ensure Poland's safety in cyberspace. In this context, however, cybersecurity is understood mainly in terms of the efficient functioning of key state and private sector infrastructure, particularly as this affects the financial, energy and health sectors. In other words, the focus is on the structure of the state and its economic environment, including the private sector, which directly determines security policy:

Particular importance is attributed to: cooperation and coordination of protective actions with entities from the private sector – in particular the finance, energy, transport, telecommunications and health care sectors; conduct of preventive and prophylactic activities with regard to threats in [...] cyberspace; elaboration and use of appropriate procedures for social communication in this field; recognition of offenses committed in cyberspace, their prevention and prosecution of their perpetrators; conduct of information struggle in the cyberspace; Allied cooperation, also at the level of operational activities aimed to actively combat cyber offences, including the exchange of experience and good practice in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of domestic measures. (p. 21).

The strategy next highlights the co-existence of public and private entities in cyberspace. Entities in the financial, energy, transport, public health and advanced technology sectors are seen to be at particular risk, especially when it comes to data theft and attacks on their integrity or breaches of confidentiality related to the scope of their activities and availability of services. One of the few references to the social risks of cyber technology appears in the discussion of

public administrative and financial services. In these realms, data and identity theft and the loss of control of private computers are all seen as serious threats:

[The] improving position of Poland in the international arena, as well as its membership [of] NATO and the EU, result in an increased interest of foreign secret services in our country. Possible unauthorised disclosure or theft of classified information and other data protected by law may cause damage to the national security and interests of the Republic of Poland. (p. 10).

If cybersecurity policy is to be effective, the document notes that appropriate standards and good practices must be established to support private and non-public organisations (NGOs and scientific and research institutions) with cybersecurity risk management. There is also a need for preventative education and information to protect citizens from potential cyber- threats:

Education for security comprises activities thanks to which citizens gain knowledge and skills related to security. It is provided within the framework of general and higher education, by central and local state institutions, as well as associations and non-governmental institutions. It is [a] priority [...] to increase social awareness in terms of the understanding of threats to [...] security and to shape competences [...] to respond to such threats in a deliberate and rational manner. (p. 21).

The Polish authors detect a high risk to national security coming from private operators and ICT service providers (especially transnational entities with decision-making centres abroad) given the limited state influence on their operations. Unregulated or improperly regulated relations between these entities are, thus, an important challenge for Polish cybersecurity policy. At the same time, the text notes a potential threat to democracy arising from efforts to balance two sets of values, i.e. the protection of personal freedom and personal rights in the virtual world on the one hand, and the use of adequate security measures on the other. This tension may complicate the introduction of effective new cyberspace security systems:

[...] ensuring that citizens freely enjoy freedoms and rights, without detriment to the safety of others and of the security of the state, as well as assuring national identity and cultural heritage. (p. 12).

As technology has advanced, the counterparts of all traditional security threats have arisen in cyberspace. Of particular importance are those threats affecting critical state infrastructure controlled by IT systems. The development of information technology has led to a range of new external threats including

cybercrimes and cyber-conflicts with state and non-state entities, which may, in turn, produce cyber-threats. Cyberspace operations are, thus, now an integral part of political and military conflicts.

One contemporary external threat that Poland identifies in cyberspace is cyber-espionage. This refers to operations by foreign state services and non-state entities, including terrorist organisations. These entities use special tools to gain access to sensitive data. Other sources of danger include extremist organisations, terrorist organisations and organised transnational criminal groups whose cyber attacks may have ideological, political, religious, financial or criminal motivations:

Together with the occurrence of new information and communication technologies (ICT) and the development of the internet, new threats have appeared, such as cybercrime, cyberterrorism, cyber espionage and cyber conflicts, with the participation of non-state entities, and cyber war understood as [a] confrontation between countries in [...] cyberspace. Current trends in the development of threats in the cyberspace clearly indicate [the] increasing influence of the level of security of the cyber domain on the general security of the country. Considering [the] increasing dependence on ICT, conflicts in [...] cyberspace may seriously disrupt the functioning of societies and states. (p. 13).

The strategy outlines some of the challenges that Poland continues to face.

The country's most important cybersecurity tasks include developing and adopting a systemic approach, which will have legal, organisational and technical dimensions. Like the strategic proposals of all the V4 countries, the Polish document notes that the expansion of cybersecurity brings with it the potential for significant scientific collaboration. There is, thus, a need to create a support system for cybersecurity and education research and development, including projects to be implemented with scientific and commercial enterprises.

Another key point reiterated by all of the V4 states is the importance of ongoing development of the armed forces. Here the Polish drafters pay particular attention to intelligence and counterintelligence services:

The substance of defensive actions is [the] continuous maintenance of readiness to effectively respond to threats to the independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Poland. Complementary actions include active seizing of opportunities and anticipatory reduction of risks in the field of security by, inter alia, [...] participati[ng] in international efforts aimed [at] the reduction of sources of threats, including international security operations. It is achieved by means of: diplomatic efforts for security, military actions, intelligence and counterintelligence in the domain of defence, as well as functioning of the scientific and industrial defence capabilities. (p. 20).

As can be seen, Poland calls for the expansion of intelligence services' powers and capacities in cyberspace since this will enable them to neutralise foreign intelligence activity and be an effective counterespionage tool. In this context, cybersecurity policy must introduce a safe system of oversight, that is, an independent communications network to manage national security (this could be done from within the government communications network, for example). It will also be important to ensure the national control of ICT systems.

### *The Slovak cybersecurity concept*<sup>5</sup>

The drafters of the Slovak strategy emphasise that cyber-threats are a constant accompaniment of everyday life. As such, cooperation with NATO allies is essential under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which concerns collective defence and response coordination in the event of an attack on an alliance member. Like the Czech strategy, the Slovak document stresses the need for ongoing planning by raising political, legal, economic, social and technical-organisational awareness:

At a state level, it is a system of continuous and planned increasing of political, legal, economic, security, defence and educational awareness, also including the efficiency of adopted and applied risk control measures of a technical-organizational nature in cyber space in order to transform it into a trustworthy environment providing for the secure operation of social and economic processes at an acceptable level of risks in cyber space. (p. 6).

The document also notes the lack of any coherent, formal cybersecurity terminology. As such, it includes an appendix with basic explanations of all the key terms used. The authors emphasise that cybersecurity issues are neither isolated to the Slovak Republic nor limited to one or a few segments of the socio-political environment. Rather, due to its global nature, cybernetic security is a general social phenomenon. This interdisciplinary approach to cybersecurity is also clear from the assumption that implementing cybersecurity policy requires continued cooperation among a wide range of entities: the armed forces and civilians, the state and the private sector and national and international bodies:

Due to its global nature, cyber security is a society-wide phenomenon. Cyber security must be based on a complex approach, requiring intense joint use of information and coordination of activities on both national and international

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<sup>5</sup> Cyber Security Concept of the Slovak Republic: available at <https://ccdcoe.org/cyber-security-strategy-documents.html> (10 March 2018).

levels. When building cyber security, it is necessary to pursue collaboration between the civilian and security units of the state, [the] public and private sectors, as well as national and international institutions. (p. 6).

The Slovak strategy emphasises its compliance with the cybersecurity principles set out in EU and NATO documents. It is also supported by references to existing Slovak laws, including provisions on defence planning, crisis situation planning and coordination and intelligence services:

Cyber security is perceived as a key component of state security. The basic components forming and implementing the security system of the Slovak Republic are, according to the law: foreign policy, defence planning, civil emergency planning and coordination and intelligence services. (p. 7).

Like the cyberstrategies of other V4 countries, the Slovak document highlights the need for cybersecurity education. However, the text points out certain shortcomings that may affect the general level of knowledge about cyber-threats. Education, it notes, does not take place at the level of specialised fields of study. Instead it is mainly handled in discrete courses offered by selected educational institutions based on selected needs:

What is absent is a Centre of Excellence that would focus on questions related to cyber security. The collaboration of the public sector with the private sector, academic institutions and civil society has not developed in the necessary scope and a framework of systematic, coordinated and efficient collaboration, mostly at a strategic level, is lacking. (p. 8).

As a NATO and EU member, Slovakia is, like all the V4 states, involved in drafting international strategic documents which also cover cybersecurity. This implies an obligation to apply the adopted documents and transpose them into national law. In this respect, the Slovak government is cooperating closely with the NATO Cybernetic Defence Excellence Center in Tallinn as well as the European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA) and the European Cybercrime Center (EC3), which was established in 2013.

Slovakia's cybersecurity strategy describes a cybersecurity culture made up of basic elements that are also noted by other countries. The cybersecurity policy consists of several key activities. The first of these is establishing an institutional framework for cybersecurity administration. The second is creating and adopting a legal framework for cybersecurity. The third is maintaining and applying basic systems for secure cybernetic space administration. The fourth is supporting, preparing and implementing a system of cybersecurity education. The fifth is introducing and applying a communication risk control

system among interested parties. The sixth is active international cooperation and the seventh and final activity is supporting cybersecurity-related science and research.

Prevention is the key to the strategy and it entails the use of protective tools that will avert cyber-threats. In this context, the focus is not only public education but also intelligence activities that collect and evaluate intelligence data in order to predict and prevent certain cyber-incidents:

[T]his involves the activation of entities active when solving crisis situations and if necessary, an early warning for the public, taking measures aimed at stopping the escalation of the crisis situation and the creation of conditions for a return to a stabilized situation. Offensive activities aimed at weakening and/or eliminating the cyber and even physical capacities of the attacker and to discourage the attacker from continuing in the attacks. Intelligence activities aimed at supporting defensive and/or offensive activities (e.g. intelligence information about the cyber capacities of the attacker). (p. 16).

The strategy demonstrates the system for responding to existing or potential threats, i.e. the steps taken to respond effectively to specific events. At the same time, it highlights the repair mechanism that should reduce the damage caused by cyber-attacks and restore the status quo:

Removal of the consequences of the crisis situation and return to a stabilized state. Organizational, personnel, technological and other specific measures to avoid the reoccurrence of the crisis situation and/or threat. The nature of the fight against cyber attacks implies the necessity to use all security mechanisms and tools with efficient cross-sectoral and international cooperation. (p. 17).

In a characteristic move for strategies of this type, the document calls for the creation of a formal cooperation platform at national level. This structure should ensure representatives of the business and academic communities are involved in preparing and drafting government decisions. In particular, these representatives should provide opinions on the development and ongoing improvement of the cybersecurity system.

## Conclusion

There are still some serious obstacles to the Visegrad Group's cooperation. On top of the historical, cultural and political-economic difficulties that the V4 states encountered especially during the transition from communism to democracy and the adoption of a market economy after the Cold War, they must overcome some specific obstacles to formulate a security policy. Ensuring

cybersecurity is now one of the most important tasks facing not only the V4 group but all states and public institutions.

The IT revolution has meant that post-communist countries and those which have long operated within the liberal economy are now confronting the same problem regardless of their pasts. Analysing the cybersecurity strategies of the individual V4 states reveals various answers and solutions to specific problems. At the same time, it highlights the different political ambitions and limits that come into play when addressing current challenges for the EU.

In their strategies, the V4 states are unanimous about their plans to strive to increase national cyber-defence capabilities and expand the resources for counteracting cyber-attacks. Each of these countries also makes use of international cooperation to exchange cybersecurity intelligence and technical assistance. Membership of NATO since 1999 and the EU since 2004 has led to closer cooperation between the V4 countries and the most advanced economies in the world on the areas of policing, combating terrorism and military training.

The Visegrad Group countries are also involved in an international alliance against the sexual exploitation of children, an EU-US initiative established to combat this type of crime. The current cybersecurity policies also comply with their responsibilities as members of NATO and the EU. They have been part of the Central European Platform for Cyberspace Safety since 2013 and base their security policies on cooperation with Europol, the European Cybercrime Center (EC3) and the European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA) (Bossong – Wagner 2017).

A special hotline has been set up in each V4 country to enable anonymous reporting of harmful and illegal cyber-content. Such content includes child abuse, explicit material, racism, extremism and items inciting hatred and violence. Furthermore, each V4 state's cyber-strategy underlines the need for state cooperation with the private sector and the academic community. The second pillar of cooperation often stressed in these documents is international relations, which should include exchanges of knowledge and experience as well as warnings against possible threats.

At the same time, it is worth noting the differences and variations in some of the V4 states' approaches to cybersecurity. A characteristic feature of the Hungarian security system is the extensive scope it allows for the collection of telecommunications information without any judicial oversight. As such, the extent of state monitoring of cyberspace is unclear and this presents a threat to freedom of expression and the work of the mass media. Hungarian law permits the blocking or restriction of the Internet and other telecommunications services in the case of unexpected attacks, emergencies or national crises or for reasons of preventive protection. This could seriously disrupt business operations given the growing dependence on Internet communications networks. In

January 2016, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that these practices of telecommunications supervision violated the European Convention on Human Rights.

Similar allegations have been made about Poland's security system since Polish parliament adopted anti-terrorist legislation on 10 June 2016. One point of great controversy is the role of anti-terrorist operations, which use a variety of tools and techniques that may exceed the limits of ethics and the law. The disproportionate new law strengthens the powers of special services by restricting freedom of assembly, blocking Internet content, allowing discriminatory proceedings against foreigners and requiring the registration of prepaid cell phone cards (Górka 2016).

The reconciliation of the conflicting values of freedom and security appears to be impossible. Privacy and other civil liberties are often violated at times of crisis. When a situation threatens national security, the government often imposes restrictive laws and requires greater recognition and acceptance of secret services. It must also be said that the general wording in security strategies can leave great scope for their interpretation.

Cyber-attacks undeniably pose a major threat to state security. The growing problem of cybercrime may seriously reduce the efficiency of enterprises that rely largely on information technology. This is particularly important for the Central and Eastern European economy, which is still undergoing modernisation and is far more sensitive to cyber-incidents of various kinds. Cooperation on a security policy framework is therefore particularly important for the countries in this region. Decisive considerations will include the different interests, needs and motives of the individual states as well as their political ambitions to play a dominant role in the Visegrad Group.

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# Migration Policy of the V4 in the Context of Migration Crisis

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**Abstract:** *The migration crisis opened up new themes on the basis of the Visegrad Group, which has become the subject of negotiations. Reaction at the EU level showed no/coherence clusters and no/ability to share common positions in negotiations in the EU institutions. There has been a tendency to represent the Central European region as a unit with common interests and needs. The text analyzes 1) the migration policy of the Visegrad Group as a regional organization within the EU and 2) the separate negotiations of the V4 member states at the time of the migration crisis. Our basic assumption for the analysis is the assertion that the Visegrad Group has made it easier for Member States to formulate common positions and objectives in migration policy at a time of migration crisis.*

**Keywords:** *migration crisis; Visegrad Group; migration quotas; Viktor Orbán; Ewa Kopacz; Robert Fico; Migration Crisis Response Mechanism; effective solidarity*

The Visegrad Group was formed as a grouping of the states of Central Europe, the primary goal of which was to return to Europe and enter into the European Union and NATO. In 2004, when this primary goal and the significance of cooperation between the four countries of the region was fulfilled, the question arose concerning whether there was a relevant reason for this group, founded under the Visegrad Declaration, to continue on in its activities. Entrance into the EU, however, opened up a number of new topics that have strengthened V4-based cooperation. These topics were political and economic, but also dealt with culture and foreign policy. In 2015, the platform for shared discussion expanded to include a new topic: migration policy implemented within the

EU and among V4 members; this also dealt with countries that are situated on migration routes (countries of the Western Balkans, Syria, Iraq, or countries on the African continent).

The migration crisis pointed out the in/coherency of the group and the inability to share mutual stances in negotiations within EU institutions. There appeared a tendency to represent the region of Central Europe as a unit that has shared interests and needs. On the contrary, it is also necessary to point out individual and specific aspects that the migration crisis revealed. This specifically concerns the separate steps of the political elites who, led by varying motives, implemented their own policy independent of the V4. The migration crisis revealed a weakness in the V4's operation that had been the subject of criticism of the group's operation since it was founded – its informal character. The group functions on a voluntary basis and the willingness to negotiate and share mutual interests.

When studying the operation of the V4 in the context of the migration crisis, it is therefore necessary to follow it on two levels. The first is the V4's policy as a regional organization that compounds the interests of the four countries and reacts to EU policy (in this chapter, this concerns dealing with the migration crisis). The second level is represented by individual V4 members – The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

The following text will analyze the activities of the V4 in the period of the migration crisis, i.e. in the period starting at the end of 2014 until the end of 2016 (and partially overlapping into 2017) in the context of EU activities. Special attention will be paid to the difference between activities in terms of individual states. The Visegrad Group will be presented as a unifying entity in which member states make use of shared interests stemming from their geographical location and cultural proximity in order to more easily promote their interests on an EU level. The primary goal of the text is to analyze the operation of the V4 as an organization that unifies the interests of its four member states. Its preliminary assumption is the hypothesis that the V4 has made negotiations easier between the V4 and the EU in the time of the migration crisis (in the given time frame) and has helped these states to clearly formulate shared stances and goals in terms of European migration policy. As a final consequence, the operation of the V4 in the period of the migration crisis has helped its members emphasize specific needs and point to the significance of the countries in the region.

The following text will be divided into three main chapters. The first will explore V4 policy (shared standpoints, conclusions, and resolutions) in the area of migration policy and its operation on the EU level. The second will analyze the policy of the four V4 members in the field of migration with special consideration to the specific characters relating to each given state. The final chapter will analyze how the shared interests of the V4 members have been reflected in relation to the EU.

## Migration crisis, European Union, and the Visegrad Group

Discussion on the issue of the migration crisis began at the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015 as migrants primarily from Africa and Syria began to arrive to EU space with heightened frequency. A large number of migrants died en route across the Mediterranean and the European Council labeled the situation tragic (European Council statement 2015). The EU's first reaction was a very careful one; in addition to cooperation with the countries of origin, this dealt with relocation programs based on the voluntariness and willingness of the member states to cooperate.<sup>1</sup> Several exceptions aside, it was not possible to observe a strong reaction on the part of the member states. This specifically involved Greece and Italy, as these two states were exposed to the largest pressure by migrants. V4 countries expressed their condolences for the victims but did not develop any greater activity. The EU launched a more active policy in May 2015 by declaring the European Agenda on Migration (European Commission 2015), which introduced and referred to the shared responsibility and solidarity between members states of the EU. In the spirit of solidarity, it defined the number of migrants that were to be relocated from Italy and Greece to the other member states of the EU. This was not a voluntary engagement in dealing with the migrant crisis but an effort to involve all member states into a mandatory relocation mechanism.

These changes in the activities of the EU evoked a reaction from V4 countries, which triggered a more active approach to this issue in June 2015. The first mention of migration is included in the Program of the Czech V4 Presidency (2015/2016), which speaks of the necessity to find a shared stance on 1) the Agenda on Migration and 2) European legislation on migration (Visegrad Group 2015). At the same time, criticism of European migration policy appeared in the declaration of the heads of government of the V4 countries. These countries interpreted the Agenda on Migration as insufficient, as it did not deal with the problem of transit countries, primarily the states of the Western Balkans. Here it is possible to observe a strong solidarity stemming from long-term interest and partnership with the countries in the region. In addition, V4 countries did not agree with the system of mandatory redistribution of asylum seekers according to set quotas (Visegrad Group 2015a). The V4's mutual declaration pointed to the fact that each state should have the opportunity to decide on the number of migrants in its territory.

In the interest of preserving state sovereignty, the group of member states (including V4 countries) led a debate on the implementation of the quota system into practice. The discussion took place primarily in the summer months of 2015. The primary topic of the negotiations was the refusal to redistribute 40,000 mi-

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1 For more, see European Council meeting on migratory pressures in the Mediterranean (23. 4. 2015).

grants from Italy and Greece. All members of the V4 refused the quota system; Hungary implemented the most radical solution to the migration crisis (see below) as it had become the third most overloaded country of the EU in terms of the number of migrants on its territory. From June to August, we can observe individual activities of V4 countries that corresponded to a shared standpoint; these states, however, used these activities for their own “unique” solution to the situation. In other words, with the onset of incoming migrants to Europe, V4 countries began more and more to veer toward their own individual activities, via which they intended to defend the interests of their states. The disagreement with the quota system functioned as a binding element in negotiations with the EU. V4 states acted as a unit defending a mutual standpoint that represented the shared interests of the Visegrad Group’s countries. V4 negotiations made it easier to find mutual standpoints, although on a practical level it is evident that each of the states selected a different strategy to deal with the migration crisis.

On the V4 level, the migration crisis was openly dealt with at a special summit in September, 2015. There were two reasons for convening these joint negotiations: 1) the number of migrants that entered the EU illegally over the course of 2015 had reached 1.83 million migrants, while only a total number of 1.25 million migrants had applied for asylum in EU space (European Parliamentary Research Service Blog 2016); 2) the need to react to the “second legislation package” presented by the EU. New European legislation included Hungary among the states that needed to relocate migrants from their territory. In addition, the legislation tightened conditions for refusing relocation rules (Council of the EU 2015). V4 states were interested in coordinating a mutual standpoint in order to negotiate in a unified manner in the EU (Orbán 2016). The primary goal of the meeting was therefore an effort to find a mutual standpoint on the migration crisis that would be presented during EU negotiations. After the summit, three primary conclusions clearly stemmed from the final declarations of the heads of government of the V4 states. V4 states 1) respect European legislation in the area of migration and asylum policy; 2) V4 states criticize the EU for its inadequate implementation of measures leading to the elimination of the number of migrants in Europe (in terms of country of origin and transit); 3) V4 states accept the principle of solidarity only in regard to the specific nature of each state and therefore refuse the mandatory quota system created within the EU.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of these summer months, a strong grouping of countries in Central Europe that had long refused to accept the system of mandatory quotas formed in the EU. Negotiations on a V4 level served as a unifying platform that helped to clearly formulate an opinion. The EU was divided into two proverbial camps – countries supporting the system (namely Western European countries)

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2 For the whole final declaration: Government of the Czech Republic (2015): Mutual declaration of the heads of government of the Visegrad Group states.

and countries that were against it (primarily countries of Central and Eastern Europe, i.e. the V4, Baltic States, and Spain). EU representatives and politicians from member states openly criticized the standpoints and policy of the V4 countries. Refusing quotas for dividing up refugees at an EU level was linked to the discussion on changes in the Schengen system. The incongruousness between member states also pointed to weaknesses in integration as such, as an effort appeared within EU member states to give preference to their own state interests over EU-wide interests. The rhetoric of individual V4 politicians did not vary significantly. The rhetoric of V4 countries considerably intensified after the acceptance of migration quotas and the declaration made by Chancellor Merkel that Germany would not accept the Dublin system in the case of asylum seekers from Syria<sup>3</sup>. For example, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán openly accused the European Commission, saying that it had: "... in the past ten years implemented left-wing policy allowing free entry into European space. The EU has failed to deal with the situation, the problem is the EU, which is not able to protect itself" (Traynor 2015). Czech President Miloš Zeman made similar comments on EU policy (Security magazine 2015).

Negotiations on the quota system at an EU level continued on in October and November 2015. Consensus had still not been reached at an extraordinary summit of EU ministers of interior (September 14, 2015). All the ministers representing the V4 refused the system suggested by the EU and followed the mutual stance that arose from the extraordinary V4 summit (see above). The final form of refugee quotas was approved at an EU level on September 21, 2015. Three of the four V4 countries did not agree with the proposal – the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. Poland accepted the system and did not follow the unified stance agreed upon by the V4 group. Poland's agreement with the quota system clearly points to the informal nature of the arrangements, which were based on joint meetings. Polish Prime Minister E. Kopacz referred to solidarity with the EU and the necessity to perceive decision making on a European level as a commitment for a member country. In regard to the change in political representation in Poland after elections in the autumn of 2015, Polish rhetoric returned to its dismissive stance and also to the opinion platform of the V4 (see below for more on Poland's position on accepted quotas). Slovakia together with Hungary openly refused the system approved by the Council of the EU and linked their negative stance to a complaint submitted to the European Court of Justice (see below). The Czech Republic also refused the quota system, but did not join in with such a "radical" solution as its V4 partners. The primary argument was the Czech Republic's fear of losing its position in the EU (ČSSD

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3 Germany decided to accept asylum requests from Syrian refugees although it was clear that it was not the first country in the Schengen Area that these migrants had come through. Germany renounced the so-called Dublin II rule, according to which refugees should be returned to the country where they had first been registered (for more see Dernbach, 2015)

2015). Poland also refused to join in the complaint, but supported one in 2017 before the European Court of Justice (Institut pro politiku 2017).

At subsequent EU meetings (sessions of the European Council or the Council of the EU), V4 states each time appeared as a unit and represented mutual standpoints in the field of migration policy. At the same time, it should be mentioned that the issue of migrants, countries of origin, and the protection of external borders became a common part of negotiations of V4 countries at all levels (e.g. at the V4 and Korea summit in December 2015; in January 2016 at a meeting with representatives from Slovenia, Serbia, and Macedonia, etc.). Hungary entered the forefront of the discussion as the state most affected by the migration crisis and one to which other V4 countries were willing to provide security aid.<sup>4</sup>

Two summits took place in the beginning of 2016. The January and February summit showed that V4 states are interested in the operation of the Schengen Area and are willing to follow steps proposed by the EU. The representatives of four countries agreed with measures implemented and planned by the EU, e.g. the establishment of European border and coast guards and implementation of a joint EU – Turkey action plan. They also openly backed countries of the Western Balkans, to which they promised to provide aid in handling the massive wave of migration. The relocation mechanism, which continued to be refused by all members of the V4 (Government of the Czech Republic 2016), remained an exception. The summit that took place in February 2016 was also the second extraordinary V4 summit focused on dealing with the migration crisis and was a reminder of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Visegrad Group. V4 negotiations showed that the relationship between the EU and V4 in relation to the migration crisis had calmed; openly negative rhetoric came individually from respective V4 member states.

Discord between the EU and V4 states arose again at the end of April and beginning of May 2016. The European Commission repeatedly opened discussion on revising asylum policy in its report *Towards a Reform of the Common European Asylum System and Enhancing Legal Avenues to Europe* (European Commission 2016). Among other things, the new law assumed that the use of relocation mechanisms would become common practice and not an extraordinary solution in the time of the migration crisis. This modified European strategy was reflected in the Slovak EU presidency (June-December 2016). During its presidency, Slovakia suggested an alternative system of flexible solidarity with which the V4 countries agreed (see below). In addition, they agreed on the need for cooperation with states on external EU borders and support in renewing the Schengen system. At the end of 2016, a meeting of V4 interior ministers

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4 They promised 50 police officers from each V4 member state. Poland sent five specially equipped vehicles to Hungary (Joint statement of the Visegrad Group Countries 2015).

took place that summarized stances on the migration crisis shared among the states. The states once again agreed that the mandatory relocation mechanisms or ad hoc solutions are not effective, they do not prevent the entrance of migrants into Europe, and they are dividing EU member states into camps. The primary change suggested by the V4 was the foundation of the *Migration Crisis Response Mechanism* (MCRM), the primary goal of which is to create an information sharing platform; states can voice their needs and coordinate joint activities linked to migration. The mechanism is open to all EU member states that express interest (Visegrad Group 2016). MCRM's clear ambition is to ensure cooperation between states in the field of migration. On the other hand, it is more of an informal forum that doubles EU activities. In light of the fact that it is a separate project of V4 states, we can expect the mechanism can to be used only in a limited manner by a regional group and will not have a more significant impact on dealing with the migration crisis in a Europe-wide context.

In general, it can be said that V4 countries in the period of 2014/2015–2016 persevered in their negative position toward mandatory quotas. They agreed with the individual efforts by the EU to reform migration and asylum policy, but they criticized it for inconsistency in implementing the law in practice. The resistant stance on mandatory quotas is evident also statistically, as 12 migrants had come to the Czech Republic by mid-2017; 16 came to Slovakia, while Poland and Hungary had none.

## **Member states of the Visegrad Group and the migration crisis**

The following subchapters will deal with the individual activities of the four V4 member states.<sup>5</sup> In regard to the abovementioned, it is obvious that states are able to come to an agreement in fundamental matters and present a shared standpoint. On the other hand, however, it is necessary to take into consideration the informal nature of the Visegrad Group. All decisions presented by the V4 are not legally binding. Therefore, individual states can implement individual state policy. At the time of the migration crisis, significant differences appeared, primarily in the tools they used to confront the wave of migration.

### *Hungary*

Hungary is an ethnically homogenous country (92% of its population are Hungarian) (Population census 2011); Romas and Germans form considerable minorities. A continual growth of the number of foreign migrants can be observed

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<sup>5</sup> In terms of time and content, the ambition of this chapter is not to analyze in detail the development of migration and asylum policy of V4 countries. Therefore, the subchapters study the current state of migration and asylum policy at the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015 with regard to membership in the EU and subsequently point out un/preparedness to engage in a solution to the crisis on an EU level.

in Hungary since its entry into the EU. Geographically, migrants settle in the central part of the country and around its capital city; in the southern part of the country, they settle on the border with Serbia and in the northeast on the border with Romania and Ukraine (Kokaisl, 2014: 238–251). The homogenous character of society did not force Hungary to create its own strategy or concept of migration policy. The basis of its migration policy was to respect free movement within the EU, to support the immigration of Hungarians living in neighboring states, and a careful approach to migrants from third countries outside the EU zone. In 2011, a new naturalization law granting Hungarian citizenship to migrants who can prove their Hungarian origins was adopted. A result of the acceptance of this law was a massive growth in the number of requests for acquiring Hungarian citizenship. In 2010, it was “only” 6,086 applications; in 2011–2012 it was 230,000 (Euroskop 2012).

Due to the large number of asylum seekers, Hungary was placed on the list of countries that, similarly to Greece or Malta, arrested illegal migrants. In 2012, a wave of demonstrations for strengthening the rights of asylum seekers took place (the main reservation included e.g. guaranteeing the right to medical care, the right to learn Hungarian, and the need to create rules for the integration of migrants into Hungarian society). The result of public pressure was the acceptance of a new law on asylum, which became valid in 2013 (AIDA, 2013). The newly adopted law was criticized, as it established a rule for detaining migrants without any detailed specification, i.e. it provided space for a wide interpretation of the reasons for detention.

In regard to the rather passive approach to asylum and integration policy, it can be said that Hungary before the migration crisis was not prepared in terms of its infrastructure or even legislation for the influx of a large number of migrants. For instance, according to the Helsinki Committee, the state of buildings meant to house migrants was critical and the local conditions did not conform to human dignity (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2013). This clearly led to the problems that Hungary faced before and during the migration crisis.

In 2015, in the context of the migration crisis, Hungary was one of the largest opponents of the mandatory quota system for the redistribution of migrants even before its negotiation on an EU level (in May 2015). Prime Minister Orbán dubbed the plan “mad and unfair” (Euractive 2015d). In Hungary, refusal of European law and resistance to the influx of migrants was strongly linked to nationalistic rhetoric supported by government policy. First, the government issued a controversial questionnaire linking migration with terrorism and accusing European policy of supporting the influx of refugees (ibid). The party in government FIDEZS published (June 2015) a plan for the effective protection of state borders linked to the construction of a border fence (Euractive 2015a). The fence was built on the Serbian-Hungarian border at a length of 175 kilometers. An anti-migration media campaign also took place in the country, the goal of

which was to discourage asylum seekers.<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister Orbán made efforts to change Hungarian legislation that would not allow the acceptance of the mandatory quota system in the country. In order to legalize the change, he first chose to hold a referendum. However, registered voter participation was low and therefore, despite its positive result, the referendum was only of a recommendatory nature (National referendum 2016). The refusal of mandatory quotas was and still is a government priority and after the failure of the referendum, the government suggested accepting constitutional amendments. In order to adopt a constitutional amendment in Hungary, it is necessary to possess a 2/3 majority of votes in the legislative body, i.e. the one chamber parliament. Nonetheless, the ruling party FIDESZ did not possess a sufficient amount of deputies during the election period of 2014–2018 and was not successful in elections in gaining the support of the two remaining deputies for a necessary majority (Reuters 2016). A draft constitutional amendment was therefore not accepted. From a long-term perspective, Hungarian politics has refused to deal with the migration crisis on European territory and has given preference to implementing projects in countries of origin or on migration routes. One of its priorities is to support the construction of hot spots beyond the external borders of the EU. After elections in April 2018, the governing party FIDESZ gained a constitutional majority and what amendments will be accepted in the future remains a question.

Hungary selected controversial tools for dealing with the migration crisis also because it was facing the largest number of migrants in terms of V4 countries and the whole EU (in terms of its population). The primary reason for this strong flow of migration was Hungary's location on the primary migration route leading from the Western Balkans through Hungary to Western Europe (primarily to Germany). Hungary was not able to handle the large number of migrants administratively or logistically. In September 2015, the media showed food being divided up in migrant camps by being thrown into the crowd. Registration of refugees and dealing with their situation on the spot also proved to be problematic. The controversial construction of a fence was "accompanied" by the use of the army, which was allowed to use rubber projectiles or tear gas against the migrants. The primary argument made by the government justifying this stance toward migrants was the effort to protect the Hungarian population and Hungarian borders (Virtue – Kegl 2015). After Germany withdrew from the Dublin system for refugees from Syria, special trains for migrants headed to Western Europe were sent from Hungary, regardless of the fact that these refugees did not have the proper papers. Prime Minister Orbán accused Germany of accelerating the wave of migration to Europe (Euractive 2016c).

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6 In Hungary, billboards were hung that read, for example: "If you come to Hungary, you cannot take away Hungarians' jobs" or "If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture!" (Kolár 2016).

The tough stance against relocation mechanisms remained intact, and Hungary has therefore not accepted any refugees according to the established mandatory quotas. Together with Slovakia, Hungary sees the quotas as a tool that endangers their state sovereignty and has joined in the complaint submitted against the decision to instate a mandatory relocation mechanism. Proceedings on the failure to fulfill obligations stemming from European legislation commenced in 2017 with Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (Denková 2017). The V4 states continued to insist on the ineffectiveness of the relocation mechanisms that will (or will not) help to solve the situation in Italy and Greece. However, in September 2017, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) issued a decision of refusal of the submitted complaint, based on which all member states and thus Hungary and Poland, must act in agreement with the decision of the Council of the EU.<sup>7</sup> There is a danger that proceedings will be brought against Hungary before the Court of Justice of the EU.

### *Czech Republic*

From a long-term standpoint, the Czech Republic is an ethnically homogenous state. The majority of foreigners are geographically concentrated in Prague, the Moravian-Silesian Region, and the Carlsbad Region (ČSÚ 2016). The Czech Republic launched a more active policy regarding migrants in connection with its entrance into the EU. At the time of the migration crisis, the Czech Republic was neither a target country nor a high-priority transit country in the EU. The Czech Ministry of the Interior has pointed out the fact that the wave of migration has sidestepped the country (Ministry of the Interior 2016). Despite this fact, activities can be observed in the Czech Republic that the state used to defend itself against a large wave of migration. The Czech Republic refuses the system of relocation quotas. According to government rhetoric, relocation is only possible based on the voluntary decision of each state. An example of such activity was a project from 2015, when the Czech Republic adopted a plan to relocate 15 Syrian families from Jordan to the Czech Republic.<sup>8</sup> The plan, however, was implemented in 2016, when 89 persons were relocated to the Czech Republic.<sup>9</sup> In light of the failure of the project<sup>10</sup> (it was terminated in April 2016)<sup>11</sup> and the

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7 For more information on the submitted complaint concerning invalidity and the declaration of the Court of Justice of the EU, see the case law of the Court of Justice, available at: <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/documents.jsf?num=C-643/15>.

8 Implementation of the project was covered by the Generace 21 charity fund.

9 The project revealed the unwillingness of the majority of refugees to integrate and their attempts to reach neighboring Germany. The project was terminated after four weeks (Ministry of the Interior 2016).

10 The Office of the Government of the Czech Republic (2016): Minutes from the sitting of the Commission for the Rights of Foreigners (19 April 2016).

11 For more on the activities of the Generace 21 charity fund, available at: <http://www.gen21.cz/vyrocnizprava-2015-a-2016/>.

general fact that the Czech Republic is not a target destination for migrants, the Czech government holds a negative stance toward relocation, including voluntary relocation. The country does not view relocation as a tool for dealing with the crisis, as migrants can leave to their country of choice due to open borders (Institut pro politiku a společnost 2015).

The Czech Republic has supported the Slovak proposal of flexible solidarity; nonetheless, in practice it gives preference to financial or technical support in regions migrants are arriving from, engagement in special EU agencies, and focusing on transit countries of the Western Balkans, which are traditional partners. In the period of the migration crisis, the Czech Republic sent several contingents of police officers to overburdened areas in the region, e.g. two contingents to Hungary, five to Macedonia, one to Greece, three to Slovenia, and one to Bulgaria.<sup>12</sup>

The migration crisis is not directly linked to the Czech Republic; however, this issue has been an area that has shaped political debate and public opinion. Primarily Eurosceptic and anti-migration parties have launched a strong campaign addressing the public. This campaign was also reflected in elections to local governments in the autumn of 2016. This included actions by the Dawn Movement, the Block against Islam founded by Martin Konvička, or the Freedom and Direct Democracy movement, which is linked to T. Okamura (Kolár 2016). Czech society has a highly sensitive view of the issue of migrants and links the topic with the threat of terrorist attacks. Society has reacted to official government policy, which has interpreted migrants as a potential security threat. This primarily includes statements linked to former finance minister Andrej Babiš, who took a stance against governing politics, requested for an end to the Schengen system, and expressed wishes to support the Slovak and Hungarian complaint, or the statement made by Czech Interior Minister Milan Chovanec, who also linked migrants to security threats (ČT 2016). Anti-Muslim and populist rhetoric has also come from President Zeman (The Guardian 19. 4. 2016). All asylum seekers are very strictly monitored and only a small number of them meet Czech rules. This is one of the main reasons that the first four refugees were accepted in April 2016 based on mandatory quotas (iRozhlas 2016). By the end of 2017, the Czech Republic had accepted 12 refugees. According to a government declaration, the country would not accept subsequent refugees according to the quota system (Zachová 2018).

The resistant position of the Czech Republic against the quota system lasted over the course of 2016 and 2017. Minister of Interior Chovanec spoke of thoroughly vetting migrants that came to the Czech Republic without the proper documents that would otherwise guarantee their clean record. The autumn

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12 The Police of the Czech Republic (2016): Information service: The second contingent on its way to Hungary, cf. Police of the Czech Republic (2016a): Information service: Police are headed for Bulgaria.

pre-election period (2017) was marked by lingering and heated anti-migration rhetoric presented primarily in the radical statements made by Tomio Okamura's Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD).<sup>13</sup> After the elections, the state's position on EU migration policy remained unchanged. Prime Minister Babiš has refused to accept the idea that the country would not be able to decide on the specific migrants that would be relocated from Italy and Greece. The government has pointed to the large sums it invested into third world countries in the form of developmental aid. Financial aid is interpreted as a tool used to limit the number of potential migrants in source and transit countries. Refusal to fulfill set migrant quotas has led the EC to initiate proceedings with the Czech Republic on the failure to fulfill obligations stemming from European law (proceedings have also been initiated with Hungary and Poland) (Ministry of Interior, Czech Republic 2018). The country is currently (as of March 2018) in danger of sanctions from the EU for failing to fulfill quotas (ČTK 2018) and the initiation of proceedings with the ECJ.

## *Poland*

Poland is one of the most homogeneous societies in the EU (Cienski 2015). In addition, the majority of Polish society is strongly Catholic; two thirds of its population are actively religious. In the time of the migration crisis, Poland joined the group of states that refused the division of migrants according to mandatory quotas. Prime Minister Kopacz agreed with accepting migrants, but only based on the capacities that each state determines. The basic criterion for accepting migrants in Poland is the religious profile that corresponds to the majority of society. For these reasons, the prime minister gave preference to accepting Christians from Syria (Euractive 2015b).

Poland agreed with V4 partners on not accepting refugee quotas. However, at negotiations in September 2015, it supported the system recommended by the EU. This change in Poland's position can be interpreted in terms of the domestic political situation. The government cabinet led by the Civic Platform, which implemented Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz's policy, expressed its agreement with the European proposal. Kopacz was nominated to her post after the former Prime Minister Donald Tusk was elected president of the European Council. The Civic Platform, which both politicians represented, belongs to a group of pro-European or Euro-optimist parties. Also, close ties between Tusk and Kopacz are evident. Kopacz found herself under pressure that was three-fold – first by the EU, second by Polish society, and third by the V4. The change in Kopacz's stance can be demonstrated in examples of her speeches. In the beginning of September,

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13 Radical rhetoric found a response from the electorate, as SPD became the fourth strongest party in the Chamber of Deputies.

Kopacz declared: “Solutions not taking into account the given country’s abilities may prove completely counterproductive. That is why we are against any automatic quotas, but we are willing to talk about the scale of our engagement on voluntary terms” (Radio Poland 2015). Subsequently, on September 4 at a V4 summit, Kopacz agreed with the plan to reject the quota system. On September 12, she stated: “permanent binding quotas would go against the EU spirit of compromise” (Independent 2015). In roughly mid-September, a gradual change in her rhetoric can be observed: “We will show solidarity with those people who are fleeing harm’s way or death” (Scully 2015). Finally, she agreed with the mandatory quota system and the dominant governing Civic Platform Party also committed to building ten refugee centers (Deutsche Welle 2015).

The shift from a shared stance among V4 countries did not last long. Change came in Poland very quickly. After elections in October 2015, the opposition conservative-social and Euro-skeptic party Law and Justice took power. The party gained more than 37% of votes and created a one-color cabinet (Kolár 2016). The new Prime Minister Beata Szydło launched a dismissive and populist policy in which she refused to accept refugees, stating that “thousands of migrants [...] come here only to improve their living conditions.” Primarily after the terrorist attacks in Paris (November 2015), she stated that “among these migrants there are also terrorists.” Radical statements against migrants are also linked to the Chairman of the Party Jarosław Kaczyński, who accused refugees of “bringing in all kinds of parasites, which are not dangerous in their own countries, but which could prove dangerous for the local populations in Europe” (Szczerbiak 2015).

After the Law and Justice Party took power, Poland’s rhetoric on quotas returned to the opinion platform of the V4, i.e. the refusal of mandatory quotas. This was joined by strong populism. Poland even retroactively supported the complaint submitted by Slovakia against the system of mandatory quotas (Poland became an intervener in the proceedings).<sup>14</sup> Poland’s resistance is evidenced in the fact that, until the present (March 2018), it has not accepted a single refugee according to the relocation mechanism (Independent 2017). The European Commission is leading proceedings with Poland on the failure to fulfill its obligation stemming from European law.

## *Slovakia*

Contrary to its V4 partners, Slovakia has had experience with significant minorities (primarily Hungarians and Romas). Its rules for establishing and granting asylum status are very strict. Legislation even after the country’s entry into

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<sup>14</sup> The decision of the Council of the EU on relocation mechanisms was supported in proceedings by Belgium, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

the EU has not changed considerably and harmonization with EU migration and asylum policy has still not been completed. The goal of Slovak integration policy for foreign nationals is to create a homogenous society with one shared Slovak culture. Despite the fact that Slovakia was not a target or transit country during the migration crisis, we can observe very strict rhetoric refusing foreigners on Slovak territory. The government of Robert Fico refused the acceptance of migrants of Islamic faith in the effort to “prevent the creation of a unified Muslim community in the country” (EuroZprávy.cz 2016). The Slovak government linked the argument against the quota system with fears of an influx of individuals from the Arab world.

According to the adopted quota system, Slovakia was to accept a total of 802 migrants from Greece and Italy. Slovak Prime Minister Fico long used harsh rhetoric against European plans to relocate migrants. He dubbed the quota system “dictation” on the part of the EU that violates state sovereignty. At the end of September 2015, the Slovak government accepted and submitted a complaint against the redistribution of refugees among EU member states and directed the complaint toward the European Court of Justice (Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2015). Hungary also joined the complaint (see above).

Slovakia (similarly to the Czech Republic) prefers relocation on a voluntary basis, which is linked to the possibility of selecting individual asylum seekers. Religious profile is a condition for the acceptance of migrants to Slovakia. Therefore, the first voluntary relocation program was supported by the Catholic non-profit organization *Pokoj a dobro*. In December 2015, the first group of Syrian Christian (149 individuals) travelled from Iraq to Slovakia. A portion of the migrants, however, proceeded to return home.<sup>15</sup> The integration process has confronted a number of problems and cannot be considered successful (Sulovská 2016). Anti-Islamic rhetoric increased after events in Germany on New Year’s Eve of 2015. Prime Minister Fico refused the idea of a multicultural Europe, as the influx of migrants increases the threat of terrorism or violence that took place in Germany at the end of 2015 (EuroZprávy 2016).

Slovakia’s rhetoric against the EU became more moderate at the time of its presidency in the Council of the EU. As one of the primary opponents of the mandatory quota system, Slovakia suggested its own tool for dealing with the migration crisis that could be used to replace the present system. The plan arose during Slovakia’s EU presidency in the second half of 2016. One of the priorities was sustainable EU migration and asylum policy (Programme of the Slovak Presidency 2016) and the subsequent adoption of an “effective solidarity” document<sup>16</sup>, the primary goal of which is to remove arguments within the EU

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15 The primary reason for this return home is the fear of foreign culture and the inability to adapt to a foreign environment, especially among the elderly.

16 The original plan spoke of flexible solidarity.

over the quota system and propose a model that would be acceptable throughout EU member states. The plan stemmed from a three-pillar structure, the basis of which was in identifying the gravity of the situation. The document speaks of normal, worsening, and grave circumstances. None of the situations was linked to the need to use mandatory quotas. The basis upon which the mechanism would operate was the provision of aid that the state had at its disposal, e.g. financial or technical aid or the sharing of asylum seekers. Slovakia based this upon its own experience in which asylum seekers from Austria were accommodated in Slovakia (Geist 2016). The Slovak proposal was not accepted by all states in the EU, e.g. Malta held the presidency in the Council of the EU after Slovakia and did not agree with the proposal. The final report of the European Council states that “effective enforcement of the principle of responsibility and solidarity remains our shared goal” (European Council 2016). The proposal of effective solidarity was supported based on the V4.

The Slovak example shows the willingness to relocate, but only based on the country’s own state decision. In addition, the willingness to cooperate with neighboring states that have a large number of migrants on their territory (see cooperation with Austria) is also evident. In 2017, a differing approach toward EU migration policy could be observed in Slovakia. As the only state of the V4, Slovakia decided to react to EU and European Commission pressure and stated the amount of migrants it was capable of accepting. This Slovak decision meant that the European Commission did not launch proceedings on failure to fulfill its obligation (Zachová 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The issue of the migration crisis revived negotiations and the operation of the Visegrad Four regional group. The decision on mandatory relocation quotas issued by the EU strengthened the ties of these four Central European states. From a long-term perspective, the issue of migration policy has not been one of the areas negotiated in a significant manner on the V4 platform. However, the mass influx of migrants to Europe gave rise to this topic, which has brought all four states of the V4 closer together. Despite the fact that the V4 platform is often interpreted as a non-binding forum, the issue of migration has shown that the topics discussed and the mutual conclusions reached during joint V4 meetings have helped to unify a shared opinion presented during negotiations on an EU level.

The migration crisis has shown two levels of dealing with issues of migration. The first is the level of the Visegrad Group. On this level, V4 states identified their shared interests and goals at the beginning of the crisis that stem from their geographical and cultural proximity. The ability to reach an agreement on a V4 level was clearly shown in the two extraordinary summits devoted to the

migration crisis and negotiations at the EU plenary, where this common and shared opinion was sustained. Poland's vote to accept the system of mandatory quotas was an exception; in this case, the shared stance was not successfully maintained. At that time, the Polish political scene was influenced by its ties to the president of the European Council and also the pro-European direction of the governing party.

The migration crisis also showed a second, state level, on which states attempt to implement their own policy. It is evident that the V4 countries do not have long-term experience with a larger-scale influx of migrants and that their migration and integration policies (i.e. integrating foreigners into society) are not ready for real use in practice. The acceptance of migrants is linked to the effort to remove all differences and create a homogenous society. A heavy emphasis in all four countries is placed on cultural and often religious symbols and state sovereignty. A sovereign state, according to the conclusions of the V4, has the right to its own definition of solidarity and establishment of rules for the acceptance (or rejection) of migrants or refugees. A common denominator in all four countries is populism, the linking of migrants and terrorism, and fears of Islam on both a level of state politics and society. On a governmental level, statements differ with regard to the structure of government and its stance on European integration. The most radical policy is linked to the Hungarian plan for dealing with the migration crisis, i.e. building a fence and utilization of the army. The strong position of Prime Minister Orbán and populist statements against Germany and the EU should also be mentioned. Hungary is also specific in terms of V4 states, as it is realistically afflicted by the migration crisis, which has revealed the unpreparedness of Hungarian migration and integration policy. On the contrary, Hungary's partners – the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia – were not forced to face an influx of migrants on their state borders. Despite this fact, their rhetoric is similar to that of Hungary. After the election victory of Law and Justice, there has been a special and evident shift in governing politics from a pro-European direction, which was manifested in, for instance, the submission of a complaint against mandatory quotas to the European Court of Justice. The Slovak government supported the complaint and refused mandatory quotas. Nonetheless, Slovakia presented itself more carefully in the period of the EU presidency and presented an alternative plan of flexible solidarity, which was shared ideologically on a V4 level. The last of the V4 countries, the Czech Republic, ideologically shares the conclusions of the V4 and its partners. However, the country has led a more careful policy toward the EU – the official statements of Prime Minister Sobotka, for instance, were not as radical as in the case of the other states studied in this paper. At the same time, it is necessary to follow the rhetoric of various ministers and the country's president, who are similar to their partners in the V4. The year 2017 and the beginning of 2018 have shown that V4 states are still resistant to mandatory quotas and refuse

the newly proposed reform of EU asylum policy. The only exception is Slovakia, which is not in imminent danger of proceedings before the ECJ, as it agreed to list the number of refugees it is willing to accept in the future.

Although the states examined in this paper presented separate and mutually independent steps to dealing with the migration crisis, it was clearly shown that the V4 platform ideologically unified and supported the shared stances of the four countries in the Central European region. The migration crisis proved that the V4 is a realistic regional player that influences European policy and strengthens local interests. The topic of the migration crisis has intersected a number of areas in which V4 states have found shared interests (e.g. in the area of foreign policy toward countries of the Western Balkans, the protection of external borders, cooperation with EU agencies, etc.). Therefore, it is possible to confirm the hypothesis established in the introduction that claimed that the V4 helped states to defend their interests on an EU level during the period in question. At the same time, the strength of state sovereignty should not be overlooked (e.g. the case of Poland), as it continues to persevere and significantly shape the functioning of the V4.

In relation to European integration and the EU, it is evident that V4 states have created a special grouping that has caused them to be interpreted by Western European states and EU institutions as problematic actors. Failure to respect migration quotas led the European Commission to launch proceedings before the European Court of Justice. In relation to cooperation within the V4, each state has proven to be using its own method of negotiating with the EU in the effort to prevent proceedings from the European Court of Justice.

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# The V4 and European Integration

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**Abstract:** *The activities of the Visegrad Group countries in the EU have clearly demonstrated a range of themes that Member States are willing to address on a common platform. The chapter analyzes the extent to which the V4 countries are able to seek common interest, which is subsequently presented as a common position representing V4 interest at EU level. The analysis is based on the presidency of the Visegrad Group countries in the EU. The Presidency will be analyzed in view of the merging of the interests between the Visegrad Group and EU policies. In particular, energy policy, enlargement policy and neighborhood policy were chosen plus the partial policies influenced by the integration process at the time, such as migration policy or quota system issues.*

**Keywords:** *Visegrad Group; Central Europe; EU energy policy; neighborhood policy; EU presidency*

In the 1990s, the Visegrad Group became a symbol of the attempts to relinquish a communist past and return to Europe. The effort to integrate into the EU and NATO was defined as the main goal of the four countries of the region. Entry into the EU did not spell the end of cooperation on the V4 platform. On the contrary, cooperation was extended into additional areas that were logically linked to entrance into the EU. The goal of the following chapter is to analyze the significance of the Visegrad Group in the context of its operation (i.e. the operation of its individual states) in the European Union. The text's initial assumption is the hypothesis that the V4 makes it considerably easier for its members to implement mutual policy on an EU level; the Visegrad Group functions as a tool to formulate a shared interest outside European structures and thus gives the states greater space for discussion and finding shared interests, which they then promote at an EU level.

In light of the fact that the agenda linked to V4 activity in European integration is very broad and could not be encompassed in full in this chapter, the following text will focus on clearly defined areas. The selection of areas was influenced by the desire to 1) point out the shared interests that are characteristic for the region of Central Europe; 2) point out the individual policies of V4 members in order to demonstrate the degree to which the V4 can be an actor that joins together differing interests.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first reflects briefly on the pre-entry period and predominantly the period after 2004 and analyzes the primary directions of shared interests of V4 countries and their activities in terms of European integration. The second chapter focuses on the field in which the states of the Visegrad Group formulated Central European interests and were able to realistically implement them. This deals with the period of the European Union presidency in which all V4 countries have taken part. V4 countries held the EU presidency from 2009 to 2016 for a period of six months each. This half-year period of the presidency will be analyzed with regard to the overlap of interests between the Visegrad Group and European Union policies. Selected topics include energy policy, enlargement policy, neighborhood policy, and other individual policies that influenced the integration process in the given period, e.g. migration policy or the issue of the quota system. The selected policies mutually complement one another, as the issue of energy policy is linked to the policy of a foreign character, primarily in terms of neighborhood policy (i.e. relations with Russia and Ukraine).<sup>1</sup> In the context of the unification of states in the region, a question arises concerning whether the cooperation in the Visegrad Group supports mutual promotion of regional interests on an EU level and to what degree regional cooperation is coherent.

## **Entry into the EU as a challenge for the Visegrad Group**

In the pre-entry period, the relationship between V4 countries was dominantly influenced by the desire to enter into the EU. The operation of the Visegrad Group itself was never coherent; member states searched for their own interests stemming from separate problems, which they dealt with in their domestic and foreign policy. The actual operation of the V4 was not strong, especially in the second half of the 1990s. On one hand, Poland was convinced of its leading role in the group. On the other hand, the Visegrad Group actually worked in a V3 format, as Slovakia was a hybrid regime after 1993 and the country, represented by Mečiar, was not invited to V4 negotiations (Dangerfield 2008: 640). The role of political elites that were skeptical of the Visegrad cooperation project

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1 In light of the focus of this text, the domestic policy of the Visegrad Group countries primarily will not be reflected in the following chapter.

and European integration (primarily in the Czech Republic's case) should also not be ignored (Vachudová 2001). Beginning only in 1999 after the change in government in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, we can see a clear profiling of topics that the Visegrad Group was negotiating and which dealt with pre-entry talks. Coming closer to the EU unified the operation of the Visegrad Group, which found mutual and shared topics of negotiation, e.g. issues linked with migration policy, organized crime, or cooperation in the field of science, education, and the environment. At the same time, the operation of the V4 became more institutionalized (regular meetings were held among ministers, presidents, and representatives of legislative bodies). In terms of the following operation of member states within the EU, the creation of a V4 presidency was also important, as it has since had an impact on the relationships between the states in the region and also formulated the foreign policy of the group and policy within the EU.

By entering into the EU, the primary goal of the group was fulfilled and it was necessary to define new goals and directions of the V4 within the European integration process. Discussion on the relevance of the V4 also arose, as its activities were exhausted via its achievement of this primary goal (see e.g. Pehe 2004). Dialogues and documents adopted primarily at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century clearly show that the Visegrad Group has accepted new topics that stem from EU activities. The reality of European integration, however, has given rise to new stimuli and issues that supported (and still support) V4 integrity by creating a space for the creation of shared interest among V4 states. Therefore, after 2004 the Visegrad Group began to act as an opinion platform upon which member states deal with "European" issues on a regional level. Subsequently, a shared stance or request is shifted to the level of European institutions.

The first document containing this aforementioned information is the *Contents of Visegrad Cooperation*<sup>2</sup>, which was adopted in Bratislava in 1999 and deals with cooperation in economic areas. In 2002, a second document was adopted – *Annex to Contents of Visegrad Cooperation*.<sup>3</sup> Both documents show the desire to cooperate in new, additional areas that are closely linked to potential integration into the EU. This, for instance, dealt with activities in the area of border protection in the context of entering the Schengen system, the fight against illegal migration, the creation of shared projects within the EU's 5th Research and Technological Development Framework Programme, etc.; the Visegrad Group, for example, supported a mutual strategy in submitting a request for support from structural funds (Král 2003). The need to ensure greater

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2 Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 1999, available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/contents-of-visegrad-110412>.

3 Annex to Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 2002, available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/annex-to-the-content-of>.

continuity of cooperation also arose, and therefore the rule of publishing the program of each presiding state was instated. The documents show that cooperation on a V4 basis abandons the idea of EU entry as the only goal and expands into additional spheres.

Entry into the EU led to the revitalization of cooperation and the creation of a new agenda stemming from the Kroměříž declaration, which was dubbed the Visegrad Declaration 2004<sup>4</sup> (2004), and the directives that are to expand the V4's aims. The heads of governments clearly declared the need to continue on in successful cooperation linked to the region of Central Europe and referred to future activities in the EU and outside it (primarily in relation to countries attempting to enter the EU). V4 activities have been divided into four groups – cooperation – cooperation within the V4, cooperation with the EU, cooperation with other partners (countries in the region, countries attempting to enter the EU), and cooperation with NATO and other international organizations. Cooperation with the EU was defined separately and, in terms of content, it is clear that the V4 had an interest in developing the foreign-policy dimension of European policies, specifically the Mutual Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Common Security and Defense Policy, and the European Neighborhood Policy.<sup>5</sup> These directives deal primarily with the framework, agenda, and goal of the V4 after entering the EU. These directives, however, are very general and do not establish mechanisms of consultation or rules for exchanging information among V4 member states. The general character of the adopted documents in the context of EU entry was reflected in the actual policies and the programs of presiding V4 countries, where discontinuity can be observed (see below). Despite the declaratory nature of the documents, the V4 after 2004 can be viewed as a viable group that shared interests linked to the region of Central Europe. This can be observed in the EU presidency of the individual countries (see below).

Before and intensively after entry to the EU, the V4's specific goal of cooperation was to integrate into the Schengen system. The shared interest in entering the Schengen system was accompanied in a number of cases by dialogue on a V4+ level. The V4 states established cooperation with Benelux countries<sup>6</sup> (2003), drawing inspiration and sharing experience with them before entering the Schengen system<sup>7</sup> (Fields of Cooperation, 2005). Already in July of 2003,

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4 Visegrad declaration 2004, available at <http://www.visegrad-group.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1>.

5 Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412>.

6 The first negotiations with Benelux states took place in 2002, during which the first areas of cooperation were established. Thematically speaking, this dealt with areas linked to the risks stemming from the Schengen system and terrorism (Summit Meeting Luxembourg, 2002).

7 Working Group for Schengen Cooperation, February 2005, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2005/fields-of-cooperation>.

the *Visegrad Group National Schengen Action Plans* was published. The document encompasses close cooperation in the field of implementing Schengen law and the resulting cooperation of the police and customs authorities. On April 16, 2003, V4 countries signed the Schengen Agreement. Schengen rules were planned to take effect beginning in 2006.<sup>8</sup> A result of cooperation was a statement in 2004 that V4 countries had fulfilled the EU's conditions for entry into the Schengen system. Acceptance of this system, however, pointed out various problems linked to individual states. The Schengen issue was dealt with primarily in Poland, as it has the second longest external border with relatively problematic states (Belarus and Ukraine), from which a relatively large group of migrants have entered into EU space. Hungary also dealt with similar problems, as migrants from the Western Balkans were entering the country across its external border. Slovakia, on the contrary, has only a relatively small external border, with which it had no significant problems. The Czech Republic has no external border (Gačiarz 2012). Each of the V4 states had to deal with specific problems linked to the easing of border regimes. A unifying element among the group was the interest in entering the system as soon as possible. Disunion was evident in the relationship with Ukraine and the issue of renewing the visa obligation for its citizens. The Czech Republic and Slovakia renewed the visa obligation while referring to security aspects and rules linked to European law. On the contrary, Hungary and Poland interpreted visa liberalization as a tool of their own foreign policy and both states reinstated a visa-waiver; Hungary also instated a waiver for Montenegro and Serbia (Kaźmierkiewicz 2005).

V4 countries adhered to the timetable for entering the EU, which was meant to be completed in October 2007 with full-fledged integration into the Schengen system (Euractive 2006). Entry into the Schengen system, however, was delayed by the EU with reference to technical problems in launching the SIS2 electronic database, which was meant to be capable of holding data of new EU member states as well.<sup>9</sup> An alternative plan presented by Portugal (SISone4ALL) was accepted by V4 countries but was perceived only as a temporary alternative that should not obstruct entry on the set date. Entry was completed on December 21, 2007, when checks were cancelled on land borders; on March 31, 2008, checks were cancelled at international airports (Nejedlo 2007: 2). By removing border controls at land and air borders, V4 countries achieved another defined goal. In the period following, the interest of Visegrad cooperation focused on other areas – neighborhood policy and enlargement policy.

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8 Statement of the Ministers of the Interior of the Visegrad Group (11 September 2003), available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2003/statement-of-the>.

9 The European Commission reacted to the expansion of the EU and therefore built the Second-generation Schengen Information System. In 2006, the EU stated that the system would be put into operation later (in the summer of 2008) and the entry of new members would be possible at the beginning of 2009 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2007: 44).

Already in the pre-entry period, the foreign interests of the V4 countries became clearly evident. For example, in the period of the Polish EU presidency at the end of 2000 and beginning of 2001, preferred interests in relations with Romania, Ukraine, and Croatia were expressed (Polish Visegrad Group Presidency Report 2001). Similarly, Hungary supported dialogue with Ukraine in 2001/2002<sup>10</sup>; in the case of Slovakia's presidency, relations with Ukraine were established in the context of integration into the Schengen system (Slovak Visegrad Group Presidency Report 2003).

Upon entering the EU and subsequently the Schengen system, V4 countries launched an active policy toward neighboring countries beyond their eastern border and defined their interests of priority. One of these was participation in the newly established EU neighborhood policy. The first steps were taken by the V4 in dealing with the Ukrainian crisis (Dangerfield 2009: 1734). In doing so, the group launched active policy toward neighboring countries beyond its eastern border. For comparison, the EU from a long-term perspective negotiated with the Russian Federation and focused on the states of Central Europe. On the contrary, the group of states including Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldavia were not given great attention by the EU. The EU's interest only strengthened when it expanded and broadened its eastern border in 2004 and came under pressure from new member states. V4 states had special relationships with neighboring states, e.g. a visa-waiver with Ukraine, which had to be cancelled in 2004 after entrance into the EU; Ukraine and Belarus have also been key partners in energy policy, as strategic raw materials cross over their territory into Central Europe. With the outbreak of the "Orange Revolution" and the attempt to build neighborhood policy, the EU's interest in Ukraine increased (Wolczuk 2005). In terms of the issue of eastern neighbors, interests of the V4 and EU overlapped. In 2007, countries in the Visegrad Group issued the *Visegrad Group Contribution to the Discussion on the Strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy* (according to Dangerfield 2009: 1741), in which they pointed out the need to develop partnership with countries beyond their eastern border. The primary initiator was Poland, whose activities were supported by Sweden and Germany. In 2008, the EU began to react to new states on its eastern border and also to pressure from the Visegrad Group, which pointed out the need for special partnership with these states. In 2008,<sup>11</sup> Eastern Partnership (EaP) negotiations began, which culminated at the time of the Czech Republic's EU presidency in May 2009. The Council of the European Union accepted the decision to create the Eastern Partnership (Council of the EU 2009), which would lead to establishing special political relations and economic cooperation between the

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10 Several meetings with Ukrainian representatives took place in Budapest (Hungarian VG Presidency Program 2001/2002).

11 The creation of the Eastern Partnership was sped up on the part of the EU by the Russian-Georgian crisis that took place in 2008.

EU and countries beyond the external eastern border. For states in the region, the creation of the Eastern Partnership meant the prospect for deeper future cooperation in the economic sphere with the opportunity of integration into the internal EU market and visa liberalization; the issue of energy security also became a subject of discussion. We can view the creation of the Eastern Partnership as a manifestation of the influence of V4 states, which via the EaP achieved much closer cooperation with their eastern neighbors (Dangerfield 2009: 1742).

After the creation of the EaP, a series of negotiations were launched between the V4 and Eastern Partnership countries. The Visegrad Group used the International Visegrad Fund as a financial tool to strengthen relations with neighboring states. This dealt primarily with scholarship programs aimed at Ukraine and Russia in the form of the *Visegrad scholarship* for master and doctorate students. After 2009, the V4's priorities in relation to the EaP were defined in the document *Sharing V4 Know-how with Neighbouring Regions*. An example of the development of good ties with eastern neighbors was the creation of the *Local Border Traffic Agreements* between Ukraine and Poland in 2009. Citizens of Ukraine living in the border region with Poland were allowed to enter a thirty-kilometer zone on the border with Poland as a part of a loosened visa regime, leading to an intensification of cross-border cooperation of both countries with the support of the EU (for more see Frontex 2012).

In terms of the development of the Eastern Partnership, the EU accepted the creation of the first shared center for submitting visa applications (representing 14 EU member states) in Moldavia, the opening and operation of which was provided by Hungary. The reality in Visegrad Group countries served as the motive for creating the center, as the largest number of migrants applying for visas in V4 countries came across the eastern border.<sup>12</sup>

After 2004, V4 countries reformed and specified preferences and goals within the integration process and indicated issues that would be of interest to them in the future. This predominantly dealt with foreign policy, enlargement policy, entry into the Schengen system, and full-fledged participation in the internal market. After 2008, we can observe the formulation of separate interests of V4 members in the context of their EU presidency and also in the context of individual challenges that European integration and the individual member states had to face.

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12 For example, in 2012, more than 700,000 applicants in Ukraine submitted a visa application for V4 countries. The overloaded capacity of the eastern border was also acknowledged by the European Commission, which stated in 2014 that the eastern border, which is subject to the Eastern Partnership, is one of the most overburdened in the world (according to Merheim-Eyre 2016: 112).

## The presidency of the EU as a tool for implementing the interests of the Visegrad Group?

In the following period, the preferences of V4 countries were presented primarily in the period of the EU presidency. The following text works off the assumption that the EU presidency is a tool for implementing national interests (see e.g. Tallberg 2003). At the same time, the presidency can become the framework for presenting regional interests protected by the Visegrad Group. The following part of this text will therefore deal with the presidency of Visegrad Group countries (the Czech Republic held the presidency in the first half of 2009; Poland and Hungary in 2011, and Slovakia in 2016). The goal is to point out the specific aspects of each state that were manifested in relation to the EU but mainly in relation to the Visegrad Group and its operation from 2009 to 2016.

The first of the Visegrad Group countries to take the EU presidency was the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic's position at the beginning of the presidency was influenced by external events that it had to face as the presiding country. The presidency was taken over from France, which expressed skepticism toward this new, small, and Euro-skeptic state. The influence of the global economic crisis was also evident. This uneasy situation was further complicated by the fact that the Czech Republic had not ratified (at the beginning of the presidency) the Treaty of Lisbon or established a date for the acceptance of the unified Euro currency (Kaniok – Smekal 2010: 45–46). The Czech presidency was based on the motto “Europe without barriers” and established three areas of priority: economy, energy, and the role of the EU in the world.<sup>13</sup> In the Czech Republic's case, cohesion with V4 interests was strongly evident, as the country at the time of preparations for EU presidency was also the presiding country of the Visegrad Group. One of the priority interests was the establishment of relations with neighboring countries within the neighborhood policy, which was expressed in the Czech and Visegrad stance (see above). The second priority area – energy – was a topic that united all the V4 countries, primarily in regard to their energy dependency on the Russian Federation. The goal of the Czech Republic and the V4 was to strengthen EU energy security. The issue of energy security became a dominant topic after the gas crisis broke out at the end of 2008 and beginning of 2009, when the supply of natural gas from Russia to Europe was halted for 13 days. The Czech Republic was active in leading negotiations with the countries in dispute (Ukraine and Russia) and called for the creation of a unified EU energy policy and energy market. Just as on the V4 level, the Czech Republic supported the construction of the Nabucco pipeline that would ensure an alternative to gas supply from Russian territory (Czech presidency

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<sup>13</sup> The working program and priorities of the Czech Republic during its presidency in the Council of the EU, available at <http://www.eu2009.cz/cz/czech-presidency/programme-and-priorities/program-a-priority-478/index.html>.

2009). The Czech presidency showed the need to unify the interests that are presented on an EU level. Therefore, negotiations at an EU level were for the first time preceded by meetings at a V4 level, giving rise to an opinion platform that was presented at EU-level meetings (Neuman 2017: 62). In the case of the Czech Republic, an overlap of interests could be seen between Czech foreign policy and V4 interests on the platform of the EU presidency. Specifically, this dealt with the relationship toward the countries of the Western Balkans and their desire to enter the EU and the Eastern Partnership. The Czech Republic's Euro-skeptic stance presented by the ODS-led government and president Klaus also became evident, primarily in relation to the Treaty of Lisbon, which had not yet been ratified by the Czech Republic at the time of the presidency (Kaniok 2014: 58–59). Despite the premature end to the mandate of Topolánek's government, the following caretaker government led by Jan Fischer was able to complete the mandate of the Council of the EU's presidency successfully.

In the context of the Visegrad Group during the Czech presidency, pre-negotiations on the agenda on a regional level proved to be favorable. The V4 states were becoming more acutely aware of the necessity to unify their stances, which were subsequently presented as a shared position at the EU summit. In 2010 the Visegrad Group therefore adopted a new format of negotiations, i.e. mini-summits. Mini-summits take place regularly before EU summits and allow the countries of Central Europe to pre-negotiate issues on a shared platform that are then dealt with on the EU level.<sup>14</sup> Implementation of mini-summits is a symbol of the desire of V4 states to use regional platforms for the mutual promotion of their interests, which has carried on until the present (2018).

In the first half of 2011, Hungary presided over the EU. Its program was introduced under the name “Strong Europe” (The programme of the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the EU 2011) and primarily pointed to the economic crisis, which was to be overcome through strong integration stemming from the “Europe 2020” strategic document. Hungary was the first presiding state to react to the new rules established in the Treaty of Lisbon, specifically the “European semester”<sup>15</sup> and the fact that the presiding country no longer represented Europe as a whole, did not manage the European Council, and did not coordinate the external activities of the EU (Szczerki 2011).

Hungary showed great interest in energy policy, primarily in the diversification of energy sources and ensuring energy security. In connection with the V4, Hungary based its assumptions on the conclusions of the mutual strategy adopted in 2010 entitled *Energy Infrastructure Priorities for 2020 and*

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14 The first mini-summit took place in 2010 and was also attended by European Commission President J. M. Barroso (Euractive 2010). The effectiveness of the mini-summit is mentioned in the document summarizing the Slovak presidency of the Visegrad Group (Slovak Presidency 2011).

15 The goal of the European semester is to monitor the budget and structural policies of EU countries to prevent an economic crisis as was observed in Greece (Euractive 2011).

*beyond*. The goal was to construct (or complete the construction of) the Slovak-Hungary, Romania-Hungary, and Croatia-Hungary gas pipeline. Primarily in Hungary's case but also in the whole Central European region in general, differing interests in the field of energy policy became evident in comparison with Western Europe. Dependence on the Russian Federation and the consequent desire to diversify energy sources flowing into Central Europe became evident. EU-built pipelines in the north-south direction were criticized by Hungary (Túry 2011); at the same time, however, they represented an alternative to energy dependence on the Russian Federation (Szilágyi 2014: 300). In 2011, Hungary demonstrated their own independent energy policy, which deviated from EU requirements. In 2011, Hungary signed a separate agreement with Russian company Surgutneftegaz, which acquired a twenty-percent share of Hungary's oil conglomerate MOL (Djankov 2015: 6).<sup>16</sup> The open relationship with the Russian Federation differentiated Hungary from the other V4 countries, primarily after the annexation of Crimea and the declaration of economic sanctions, during which Prime Minister Orbán called EU policy irrational (Soldatkin – Than 2015). Hungary reformulated its mutual interests with the V4 in the period of its V4 presidency in 2013/2014. The Visegrad Group created a travel map of raw materials and also called on each state to have its own mix of energy (Euractive 2013). From an energy policy standpoint, Hungary behaved (and is still behaving) in a different manner than its V4 partners and has pursued its own separate and strongly pro-Russian interests rather than pro-European or Central European interests.

In its program, Hungary's presidency emphasized its geographic position in Central Europe and pointed to the specific interests in the Eastern Partnership and cooperation between states of the so-called "Danube Region". In the period of its presidency, Hungary showed the shared interest of V4 countries in including the states of the Western Balkans into the EU. Croatia's entry into the EU was definitively agreed upon in 2013. V4 states had a specific interest in adopting the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, which was adopted during Hungary's presidency (Euractive 2011a). In all of the aforementioned issues, the influence of mini-summits was apparent. These mini-summits took place regularly and the V4 states had the opportunity to significantly coordinate differing interests. The Hungarian presidency showed separate interests that became clear in the open support of Bulgaria and Romania's entry into the Schengen system despite the disagreement of Germany and France.

After Hungary's presidency, Poland's presidency followed in the second half of 2011. The platform of Visegrad cooperation or at least regional proximity with Hungary was visible in the mutual communication between both Central European states in terms of the Visegrad Group over the course of 2011. The

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<sup>16</sup> In 2012 and 2013 the share was transferred back to German firms E.ON and RWE.

Polish program entitled *European integration as the source of growth* focused on three priority areas dealing with the ongoing economic crisis, which influenced the operation of the internal market and Eurozone. Poland also reacted to the preparation of a financial framework of several years (2014-2020), in which it requested a redistribution of funds for the least developed EU countries in order to fulfill the Europe 2020 strategy. The second field of the program dealt with security in three specified spheres – food, energy, and defense. Predominant attention was paid to energy security and external suppliers. In the context of the ongoing “Arab Spring”, Poland pointed to the necessity of strengthening the protection of external borders and heightening the role of Frontex. The third field focused on European openness and the position of the EU in international relations. Poland primarily emphasized the Eastern Partnership and the enlargement policy (Premier.gov.pl 2011). The actual policy of the Visegrad Group toward countries of the Eastern Partnership was deepened via the launch of a new program entitled *Visegrád 4 Eastern Partnership*, the goal of which was to implement projects supporting the development of democracy, economic transformation, and regional cooperation (Czech Presidency of Visegrad Group 2012). From a practical perspective, this period was not overly successful, as there was failure in signing an association agreement with Ukraine and in implementing Romania and Bulgaria’s entry into the Schengen system.<sup>17</sup> Poland perceived the failure in the area of the Eastern Partnership as a great setback for the whole presidency.

After 2011, the relationship of the Visegrad Group toward European integration was primarily formulated by the Arab Spring, the reverberating economic crisis, Greece’s debt problems, the annexation of the Crimea, and the stance toward the Russian Federation. The V4’s operation was important within the *Climate package at the Paris global climate conference* in 2014. On the basis of a V4+ format, the V4 states reacted to the need to adopt new legislation in the field of climate and energy policy. They requested, however, that the EU always take into consideration regional needs and circumstances. This is why they expressed their dissatisfaction with the decision of the EC to create a unified European program in the field of environmental and energy policy (Slovak Presidency 2014/2015). In all the aforementioned cases, the V4 countries presented a mutual stance on the topic; in addition, it should be taken into account that the V4 countries often found support from Romania and Bulgaria. In the case of the climate package, V4 states eventually managed to achieve better conditions for reducing emissions in the context of industrial policy through negotiations with the European Commission (Nič 2016: 285).

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<sup>17</sup> Western European countries are against the entrance of both countries into the Schengen system. In 2011, Holland refused suggestions of compromise presented by Poland (Euractive 2011b).

Slovakia was the last country of the V4 to preside over the European Commission in the second half of 2016. The Slovak presidency was based on three areas of priority: an economically strong Europe, a modern and unified market, and a sustainable migration and asylum policy and globally engaged Europe (Slovak presidency 2016). General interests defined in the program corresponded to the interests of Slovakia and the goals of the Visegrad Group. At the same time, however, Slovakia had to deal with several controversial issues from the beginning of its presidency such as Brexit<sup>18</sup> and the migration crisis that were affecting the operation of the EU and the Visegrad Group. In the period of its presidency, Slovakia represented European interests rather than regional ones, i.e. it did not step out on a European level as radically as in negotiations in the Visegrad Group and domestic policy. An example is Slovakia's dissuasive position on migration quotas, which was a position held by all V4 partners. On the other hand, Slovakia did not want to resist the interests of European integration and therefore we may observe an attempt at a suggestion for compromise in the form of "effective solidarity", which would allow member states to react more flexibly to the migration crisis (Virostkova 2016). The Visegrad Group made only general statements on effective solidarity, as the other states did not feel this tool held a solution to the migration crisis. Therefore, the V4 states that "flexible solidarity raises doubts, but the term is worth further negotiation" (Végh 2017). Another issue dealt with by the Slovak presidency was the creation of the *European Border and Coast Guard*, the foundation of which corresponded to the interests of the EU. Slovakia pursued specific interests in relation to the Eurozone as contrary to other V4 members it had already accepted the unified European currency in 2009 (Ogrodnik 2016).<sup>19</sup> In addition, Slovakia devoted itself to the neighborhood policy and Eastern Partnership in attempts to develop good relations with countries of the Western Balkans and primarily with Serbia. Thanks to the influence of the Slovak presidency, two chapters of accession negotiations were successfully opened for Serbia. In the field of foreign policy, Slovakia's interests corresponded with the long-term trends of Visegrad cooperation. Slovakia actively took part in accepting the Paris Agreement on EU Climate Change, i.e. the Visegrad Group expressed interest in implementing and realizing the climate deal (Presidency Programs 2016).

In the context of EU presidency, we can interpret V4 states as "*policy-shapers*" in a score of areas of European integration (Nič 2016: 285). The V4 states have attempted to deal with the specific European agenda. In the case of issues that influence the Central European region, the activity of the V4 states at the time of their presidency is more pronounced and active, primarily in the area

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18 Issues concerning Brexit were not dealt with on a summit level. For Slovakia, Brexit meant that Great Britain would not be taking part in the summit in Bratislava.

19 Slovakia was the first country (2005) of the V4 group to request that the Slovak crown be linked to the ERM II exchange rate mechanism (Euractive 2005).

of foreign policy (Eastern Partnership and enlargement policy in regard to countries of the Western Balkans) and energy policy. Proof of this fact can be found in the strong cohesion between presidencies at a Visegrad Group level and a European Council level. The European presidency is perceived as a tool for promoting specific regional interests. For instance, at the time of the Slovak EU presidency, Poland presided over the Visegrad Group and the cohesion of both groupings stemmed from Poland's program statement (Presidency Programs 2016). Also, for example, Slovakia as the presiding V4 state supported Hungary's presidency in the European Council (Slovak Presidency 2011). The influence of domestic political elites should also not be overlooked, as they have influenced the interests and issues that are preferred (and their relationship to European integration) and also the specific international-political and economic situation that had to be taken into consideration in the presidency. The connection to the Central European region and the interests of the states within it is strongly reflected and this fact is supported by negotiations on the V4 level and their variations in the form of V4+.

## Conclusion

The relationship between the EU and the Visegrad Group countries began to form before entry into the EU and predominantly after 1999. Accession negotiations and the effort to fulfill the primary goal of Visegrad cooperation brought the activities of these four Central European countries closer together. The states in this region realized that effective cooperation on an EU level is possible only if Visegrad cooperation is more deeply institutionalized.

This original goal of the group was fulfilled upon entry to the EU, but the areas of cooperation extended into additional spheres that stemmed from the reality of EU cooperation. After 2004, the Visegrad Group presented itself as the representative of regional interests and reacted to new European challenges, e.g. entrance into the Schengen system or full integration into the domestic market. The Kroměříž declaration formed the basis for further activities of the Visegrad Group. The primary spheres of the group's interest were embodied in this declaration, primarily EU foreign and security policy.

The first success of Visegrad cooperation after 2004 was entry into the Schengen system, i.e. holding a shared interest linked to fulfilling the rules of free movement. Subsequently, the V4 countries' activities focused on the field of European foreign policy. This specifically dealt with the newly established neighborhood policy, enlargement policy, and energy policy. In general, the interest of the Visegrad Group matches the fields in which all states have a shared interest. These are often issues these states use to define themselves with reference to the specific aspects of the region or shared preferences (e.g. energy security, good relations with Eastern neighbors, the shared refusal of

accepting the mandatory quota system, etc.). The EU presidency has shown the effort of individual states to represent the shared interests of the region, which are either traditional or of a short-term character.

The shared direction of the Visegrad Group within the EU, however, is not stable or permanent. Separate interests and issues disrupt the coherence of the group and weaken it in terms of unified promotion of these interests in the EU. For instance, this was evident in the period of Hungary's presidency in the European Council. The separate Hungarian policy toward the Russian Federation in the field of energy policy demonstrates individual and incompatible interests within the V4. Similarly to the course of the Slovak presidency, Slovakia pursued the interests of the Visegrad platform; however, at the same time it was possible to observe the implementation of pro-European policy, which was not compatible with the individual interests of Visegrad Group countries. This fact can be interpreted as Slovakia's effort not to mar relations with the EU and to submit proposals that are of a Europe-wide character (e.g. an alternative plan for dealing with the migrant crisis and the effort to become involved in negotiations on changes in the Eurozone). The Visegrad Group was skeptical toward Slovakia's alternative proposal. On the other hand, policy on the domestic Slovak scene was in agreement with Visegrad interests, i.e. primarily the refusal of migrant quotas and pursuit of long-term shared interests within the Visegrad Group.

Visegrad cooperation is not an absolutized manifestation of a unified opinion or stance of the V4 countries, as member states of the group can in reality represent separate and specific policy in which they pursue their own interests and not those of the whole group. This is valid primarily in the cases of policies that are defined as crucial by a specific state while the other members do not want to follow such goals or opinions. On the other hand, this disagreement in opinions among member states has been a typical phenomenon of the V4 since its foundation and cannot be considered an anomaly. At the same time, it is necessary in the context of European integration to take notice of the effort of V4 states in finding mechanisms that would strengthen their shared interests in negotiations on an EU level. Proof of this effort can be found in the creation of mini-summits, which after several years of operation have proven to be functional and make it easier for V4 states to find a shared stance on a negotiated issue before European summits are held (in a positive and negative sense). In connection to the V4+ platform, the institution of mini-summits represents a tool for extending shared interests in European integration to other member states and institutions of the EU.

In regard to the issues defined in the introduction, it can be said that the Visegrad Group helps to formulate a shared opinion among its member states, for example in the period of the migration crisis or upon entry into the Schengen system, and creates a complete unit defined by shared interests (e.g. in

the area of transport, energy policy, environmental policy, and other fields of cooperation such as culture, science, or regional development, which are not always necessarily linked to their relationship with the EU). This fact, however, cannot be interpreted as absolute and always depends on the specific issue and the country's political elite, who influence negotiations on a V4 basis and actual behavior on an EU level.

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# The V4 Countries' Foreign Policy concerning the Western Balkans

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**Abstract:** *This contribution explores the Visegrad Four's (V4) foreign policy initiatives in the Western Balkans by considering each state's interests and policies and the evolution of joint V4 objectives. My underlying hypothesis is that the foreign policy-related behaviour of individual states is shaped by certain roles that they assume and by their national interests. This work uses role theory to explain the V4 states' foreign policies both generally and in the specific case of the Western Balkans. The V4 have prioritised cooperation with this region, and I analyse the programmes of the last four V4 presidencies (Slovakia 2014–2015, the Czech Republic 2015–2016, Poland 2016–2017 and Hungary 2017–2018) to reveal key foreign policy objectives and explore why they were selected. At the same time, I examine the interests of each V4 country and the reasons for their joint attention to the Western Balkan region. My analysis shows that the V4 perceive themselves as supportive and constructive EU and NATO members and see their policies as reflective of European values. Moreover, they believe they should contribute to EU enlargement by sharing experiences of economic and political transformation with the Western Balkan states and serving as role models.*

**Keywords:** *Visegrad Four (V4), foreign policy, national role concept, Western Balkans*

Cooperation with the Western Balkan (WB) states has been identified as a priority for the four Visegrad states (the V4), i.e. Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The V4 have pledged to support the WB countries in their efforts to gain EU membership. They would also like to be models for the WB region. Aside from joint V4 declarations and policies, each of these states is

pursuing its own foreign policy and interests in the WB countries. This cooperation with the Western Balkans is a requirement for EU members, who are called on to improve relations with neighbouring countries and address regional problems. It is also explicitly supported by the V4 as a whole. The group recognises the value of sharing its experience of political and economic transformation and regional cooperation with the south-eastern European states that are now engaged in EU accession or rapprochement. The cooperation with the Western Balkans is, thus, being pursued on several levels.

This study aims to identify the interests of the Visegrad Four in cooperating with the Western Balkan states. The V4 are driven by a desire to apply ideas and concepts to the WB that they found useful during their own transformation. While they were never faced with state-building processes on the scale that is now affecting the WB countries, they believe their experiences can help overcome these states' problems. As the V4 countries are committed to assisting with EU enlargement, they are also supporting and promoting EU policies in the Western Balkan region.

Hill and Light (1993: 156) have described the complex factors that shape and influence foreign policy decisions:

The overall environment in which decision-makers operate is divided into the "external" (or "international"), the "domestic" and the "psychological" environment, an umbrella term for the set of images held by decision-makers of their world, home and abroad, in contrast to its "operational reality."

My analysis focuses primarily on the "domestic" and "international" aspects of state foreign policy-making since these are the basis for the state's role as a foreign policy actor.

This study begins with an introduction to role theory, which aims to explain states' chosen priorities along with consistencies and changes in their foreign policy behaviour. I then turn to the specific national foreign policy roles that have been assumed by the V4 states. The concept of a national role refers on the one hand to a state's identity (an "ego" dimension) and on the other, to external attributions and expectations of the state (an "other" dimension). The ego part of a national or foreign policy role relates to identity, self-identification and self-image. The other dimension refers to others' interpretations and expectations and the state's position in the international system, which is accompanied by a specific set of behaviours. To identify this other dimension of the V4 countries' roles, I consider their foreign policy activities and priorities in both the regional and international contexts. Within a particular international environment, states' foreign policy behaviour is constrained by their membership of international and regional organisations, which adhere to a set of values. The fact, for example, that all V4 states are members of the EU and NATO implies

certain political behaviour that other members expect of them based on a common understanding of the values, aims and priorities of membership. Given their subjective national interests and geographical position, the V4 states are understandably the most eager promoters of Western Balkan rapprochement with the EU.

This article does not emphasise the material and structural factors (economic prosperity, population size, geographic location, availability of natural resources, etc.) that determine a country's practical capacities and foreign policy. This is because the location of these countries in the same neighbourhood and their geographical similarities mean that they tend to distinguish themselves from one another on the basis of language, culture and, to some extent, history rather than economic development or resource availability. Poland may be an exception to this rule since it is much larger than the other V4 states and seeks to become a regional power in its own right. Still, the main presumption of this article is that national identity largely determines how a nation conceives of its role and this serves, in turn, to justify and legitimate its foreign policy decisions.

Having explored how the V4 states understand their role, I need to consider their policy priorities both generally and in the specific case of the Western Balkan region. For this purpose, I analyse the most recent official foreign policy documents available from the ministries and programmes of the EU presidencies (officially known as the Presidency of the Council of the European Union)<sup>1</sup> with a focus on the underlying values guiding foreign policies and relations with the West Balkan region.

The final part of this study attempts to clarify the V4's role as a foreign policy actor, especially when it comes to the WB states. As such, I revisit the group's policies on the Western Balkans in the programmes of the last four Visegrad Group presidencies (i.e. Slovakia 2014–2015, the Czech Republic 2015–2016, Poland 2016–2017 and Hungary 2017–2018).

Some of the ideas and issues mentioned in this work may appear only to scratch the surface, and it is important to note the broader context against which these developments have taken place: after the EU accession of all V4 members in 2004, they decided to maintain their cooperation and seemed to adopt a more outward-looking policy approach. Since this time, their joint foreign policies have become increasingly important and their cooperation has appeared to pursue new policy directions. The V4's policy objectives include deepening relationships with countries in their neighbourhood, i.e. the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan states. The extension of relations with other states and regions is also actively being pursued.

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1 The Czech Republic held the EU presidency in the first half of 2009. Hungary assumed this role in the first half of 2011 and Poland did the same in the second half of 2011. The Slovak Republic held the EU presidency in the second half of 2016.

## Foreign policy and the concept of a national role

This section addresses the idea of a “role” in the context of foreign policy. This concept emphasises the issues of state identity and self-perception. In this regard, the V4 group’s foreign policy priorities and decisions are the work of states that have particular political and historical backgrounds and are embedded in a system of international organisations and regulations. Role theory, with its focus on identity, can explain the foreign policy choices made by the V4 group as an organisation and by its individual member states.

The underlying reasons why a state makes particular foreign policy decisions may become clearer if we take into account its self-conception, self-image and identity as well as its capacities, self-referential processes and the context in which it operates. States assume foreign policy roles that are defined by their own ideas of what their tasks and obligations should be as well as by other countries’ expectations. In this respect, state behaviour is influenced by the international community, international organisations and neighbouring states. Within the foreign policy sphere, a state’s conduct (role performance) also reflects its sense of its national role; the latter refers partly to its identity, cultural heritage and history (Breuning 2011: 25) and partly to its relations with the international community. As we have seen, this translates into a division into an “ego” dimension, defined as the state’s identity, and an “other” dimension reflecting others’ expectations and the state’s position in the international system.

This notion of a role originates from the disciplines of sociology, social psychology and anthropology; it is tied to a constructivist approach and is relational. States distinguish themselves from one another and at the same time require one another’s recognition (Harnisch 2011: 7). The relations among states shape and influence their concepts of their roles as foreign policy actors. Moreover these actors’ world views are affected by social and cultural structures in the domestic and international environments, and those structures also affect policy decisions (Breuning 2011:16). We can, thus, see the importance of the international environment in which states operate and are embedded. Role theory looks beyond material issues such as state and population size and economic strength in seeking to explain foreign policy decisions; the focus is rather on national identity and the state’s interpretation of the “collective self-understanding of citizen[s]” (Breuning 2011: 20). This is relevant because the state justifies its foreign policy actions based on its identity and expectations of fulfilling its role.

To better understand the role concept, it is worth consulting some established definitions, which also address the notion of role identity. While Holsti (1970: 238) regards a role as a set of norms that “refer to expected or appropriate behaviour,” Hogg and his colleagues (1995: 256) describe a “set of expectations prescribing behaviour that is considered appropriate by others.” Walker (1992:23) notes that roles are “repertoires of behaviour, inferred from others’

expectations and one's own concepts." In contrast, Harnisch (2011:7-8) stresses the origin of roles in cognitive and institutional structures as well as the "social orders or arrangements" that give meaning to particular behaviour.

As we have seen, a role reflects an actor's identity, self-conceptions and self-image (the ego aspect), or what may be summed up as *role identity*, along with the attributions and expectations of others (the other aspect). According to Hogg and colleagues (1995), role identities are "self-conceptions, self-referent[ial] cognitions that agents apply to themselves as a consequence of the social positions they occupy." Distinguishing between identities and roles is difficult, however, since the two are socially constructed based on a combination of internal dynamics and external influences. They are also very much entwined. Wendt (1999: 224) describes identities as "constituted by both internal and external structures," which is quite similar to how roles are constructed. Nevertheless, he stresses that a role identity is not the same as a role: "[r]ole-identities are subjective self-understandings; roles are objective, collectively constructed positions that give meaning to those understandings" (Wendt 1999: 259). Along the same lines, Breuning (2011:25) explains that an identity establishes "how we are," but in the case of role theory, we must also ask "what role do we play [?]" While he is critical of the practical application of role theory to foreign policy, Wendt (1999: 228) argues that when the "sovereignty of the modern state is recognized by other states, [this] means that it is now also a *role* identity with substantial rights and behavioral norms" (emphasis in the original).

Roles may be understood as *active* concepts since states take up roles that are partly self-constructed and partly assigned. In this way, their positions are at once confirmed and endorsed, instilling confidence in the state (Hogg et al. 1995: 257). Given that roles and identities are both constructed, they are also subject to change. This change is an extended process that is initiated by social learning and involves adapting to external/social developments and the reassessment of goals and new strategies (Harnisch 2011: 10).

In consequence, a state's foreign policies may also change. These changes go hand in hand with transitions in underlying values and the state's perceptions of itself and its position in international politics. This might also alter the state's role as a foreign policy actor.

In fact, as Breuning (2011:26) argues, states design their role in foreign policy by way of "domestic sources of identity and/or cultural heritage," which means "tak[ing] advantage of material resources at their disposal, [and] circumnavigating as best as possible the obstacles imposed by their position in the international structure." Outside sources prescribing the state's role include system structures, system-wide values, general legal principles, treaty commitments and informal understandings of "world opinion." We can, thus, see how the state's conceptions of its roles (its identity or ego) and the roles prescribed for it by others relate to and influence each other. These influences are all embed-

ded in the international system that determines the state's status (Holsti 1987: 11). The structure of the international system, including its norms, rules and controls, regulates the state's behaviour and influences its role performance (Breuning 2011: 22).

The V4 are connected to and seek out exchanges with a number of international organisations. As such, the group's foreign policy decisions are guided by priorities based on foreign policy interests, and each state also pursues its own distinct foreign policies. In the next section, I consider the foreign policy interests of the V4 group and its individual member states.

## National interests of the V4 states

An obstacle arises when we try to identify the ego dimension of the V4 states' foreign policy roles. This is because these identities are not clearly defined by the countries themselves.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, their policy documents do offer some insights into the national values, priorities and interests that guide their foreign policy decisions.

The main motivation for setting up the Visegrad cooperation in 1991 was the desire to overcome the legacies of Communism and reduce animosities among states in the region, especially around minority protection. The V3/V4 states wanted to use this cooperation to support one another's efforts to join the EU and NATO. Their arrangement was clearly linked to these particular goals, but once they had been achieved and the cooperation judged a success, the group chose to keep working with countries in its neighbourhood.

At the same time, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, although encouraged by a number of regional organisations,<sup>3</sup> was not yet in a position to resolve disputes between states still reeling from the violent collapse of Yugoslavia. Support and advice from the V4 countries seemed to be welcome. The prevailing assumption was that the experiences of the V4 and WB were similar. Both regions had needed to cope with political and economic transformation during the 1990s and they shared the aim of becoming members of Euro-Atlantic institutions. In fact, this view that the V4 and WB states had comparable ex-

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2 To identify important elements of each state's identity, I have therefore drawn on the preambles to their Constitutions as well as their national anthems. In the case of Hungary, the key element reinforced by the state's history seems to be its position as a historical victim due to its geopolitical situation. Hungary also stresses its role as a Christian European country. In contrast, self-determination is an important aspect of Slovak national identity given Slovakia's endurance of centuries of external rule of various kinds with no chance to develop as a distinct nation, let alone one based on ethnicity. A major part of Czech identity is the civic approach to statehood and the value attached to being part of the "family of democracies in Europe and throughout the world," as the country's 1992 Constitution puts it. For Poland, sovereignty, independence, democracy and the Catholic faith are key elements of national identity.

3 These organisations included the Central European Free Trade Association (CEFTA), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the Central European Initiative (CEI).

periences of political and economic transition and EU and NATO integration has occasionally been questioned (Walsch 2015: 205–224). Šabi and Freyberg-Inan (2012: 268–269) argue that it is only since 2005 that the V4 group has shown a marked interest in the WB region. Hungary began adding the WB to the agenda during its V4 presidency in 2005/6 and it continued these efforts in 2009/2010. Since then, the WB has moved to the centre of the V4’s foreign policy activities. In any case, we can assume that reaching out to the former Communist countries in the neighbourhood became a foreign policy priority for the V4 after their EU accession. Tulmets (2014: 2) claims that this enabled these countries to define their “foreign policy identity in accordance with their differentiated past.”

The following sections consider the foreign policy priorities of the individual V4 states. In particular, I explore their stance on the WB countries, their main foreign policy interests and the values used to justify their chosen foreign policy directions.

## *Hungary*

Hungary is the V4 state located closest to the Western Balkan region, and there is a relatively large Hungarian minority in Serbia that Hungary feels responsible for (Šabič – Freyberg-Inan 2012: 272). Understandably, the Hungarians have an interest in maintaining stable political and economic relations with countries in the region.

After the Hungarian EU presidency in the first half of 2011, the country’s foreign ministry released a review of the nation’s foreign policy. This document described the ministry’s aim of pursuing a “value-based foreign policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 3). These values were to come from the founding documents of international organisations of which Hungary was a member, specifically the UN and EU, and from the country’s 2011 Constitution, i.e. its most fundamental law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 4). According to these sources, the values that should guide Hungarian foreign policy fell into two main groups. The first were universal values:

*[P]eace, security, respect for international law, democracy, human rights, personal freedoms and their group expression in the form of collective (community) rights, social responsibility, the market economy, sustainable development, freedom of self-expression, freedom of the press and respect for cultural diversity.* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 4; italics in the original).

In contrast, the second group were national values such as “sovereignty and territorial integrity,” “a sense of shared national belonging spanning borders” and “development of the Hungarian economy, Hungarian culture and the national

culture[s] of minorities living in Hungary” as well as the “state of Hungary’s environment” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 4).

Turning to the Western Balkans, Hungary saw EU integration as a way to stabilise the region and foster its development. Hungary, thus, expressed its intent to share its experience of “EU accession, the use of EU funds, institutional capacity-building and democratic transition” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 22). Serbia’s EU accession and potential NATO membership were matters close to Hungary’s foreign policy interests, and the Hungarians, thus, pledged to support Serbia. Of equal importance were Montenegro’s aspirations to join the EU and NATO, and these also had Hungarian backing. Macedonia’s progress was hailed as an effort to bring stability to the entire region while Albanian developments were cited as a positive example (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 22–23). The Hungarians, thus, stressed that the EU’s enlargement to the Western Balkans was in Hungary’s fundamental interest while also taking the region’s ethnic divisions into consideration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 34).

In fact, Hungary had been engaged for many years in UN and EU missions to the Western Balkans and the 2011 document reaffirmed its commitments to the KFOR, EUFOR Althea and EULEX Kosovo projects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 23; Wagner 2015: 18–20).<sup>4</sup> The country participated in the IFOR and SFOR UN peacekeeping missions from 1995/6 until 2002. In 1999, it also became a crucial partner in NATO’s war against Yugoslavia, allowing NATO aircraft to fly through its national airspace and providing troops to KFOR to protect facilities close to Pristina. Hungary’s participation in EULEX in Kosovo was the largest contribution by any nation to a non-military EU mission (Wagner 2015: 18–20).

The Hungarian EU presidency in the first half of 2011 made enlargement one of its priorities. The agenda included finalising Croatia’s accession negotiations, an expected European Commission recommendation about Serbia’s status and the potential start of negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Hungary offered its assistance via its EU presidency role (Hungarian EU Presidency 2010/11: 4).

In its EU presidency programme, Hungary also inquired about the “place and role in Europe of our region, particularly of the countries outside the Eurozone” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 34–35). The government responded with a clear recommendation:

Hungary [should] strive to ensure that *Member States playing a crucial role in EU decision-making grant more attention to our region and strengthen their own Central Europe policy*, and that our cooperation with them – as a response to

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4 For an explanation of these and other acronyms related to international missions, see Table 1.

the crisis – contributes to the deepening of the common identity of European society.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 35; emphasis in original).

### *The Slovak Republic*

Slovakia is interested in establishing bilateral relations in the Balkans and it supports the extension of EU membership to states throughout the entire region. Unlike the other V4 countries, however, Slovakia has not recognised Kosovo's independence and it departs from mainstream European policy on this issue (Šagát 2008: 46).

The Slovak aid strategy identifies Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as priority targets in the region, mainly based on Slovak Aid's established cooperation with these states since 2003. It also assumes that the Slovak transition experience will be useful to the countries in the region (Slovak Aid 2013: 10).

In fact, Slovakia took part in a number of military missions in the Balkans including UNPROFOR in Croatia (1992–1995), UNTAES (1996–1998) in Eastern Slavonia, OSCE Kosovo Verification (1998–2001), KFOR (1999–2002) and the EU Concordia operation in Macedonia (2003). Since 2009, it has been active in the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and EULEX in Kosovo (Goda 2015: 44–47; Huszka 2010: 21; Ministry of the Slovak Republic n.d.).

Slovakia held the EU presidency in the second half of 2016, overseeing a programme that focused on Europe's economic recovery, migration, the expansion of the single market and the EU's engagement in world politics (Slovak presidency 2016: 2). The programme made passing reference to the Western Balkans in a section on migration issues, noting that the area was “an important region in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU.” It added that “[t]he Presidency fully supports the region's European perspective and is ready to further strengthen it through [a] widening of mutual relations and through close co-operation” (Slovak presidency 2016: 9, 15). The randomness of this reference, however, suggests that the Slovak presidency lacked the leverage to prioritise EU enlargement at a time of political and economic crisis in the EU.

Slovakia continues to have an interest in the Western Balkan region and it supports these states both politically and financially with foreign aid. Furthermore, according to Huszka (2010: 24), Slovakia has been developing closer relations with Serbia. This connection is motivated by the presence of a Slovak minority in Vojvodina as well as geographic proximity and pan-Slavic sentiments.

### *The Czech Republic*

In its 2015 document “Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy,” the Czech Republic prioritised the region of South-Eastern Europe alongside

Central and Eastern Europe. The document stressed the need to keep helping Serbia and all the other Western Balkan states achieve EU membership in order to foster democratisation and stability in the region. Western Balkan states including Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina were also prioritised as recipients of foreign aid in the Czech 2010–2017 development cooperation strategy. A special development programme was agreed on for Bosnia and Herzegovina, with an emphasis on transformation and support for European integration. The assistance to Kosovo focused on social and economic development. Serbia could rely on a well-established relationship with the Czech Republic, with key cooperation projects addressing the environment as well as economic and social development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 14–16).

Security is an important issue for the Czech Republic, and the country has attempted to address its concerns via NATO's defence plans and the EU's framework. Stabilising the Western Balkan region is seen as essential for future security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 5). The 2015 foreign policy concept, thus, reiterated the Czech commitment to supporting and participating in any peacekeeping and crisis management missions undertaken by NATO, UN, EU and OSCE or other international organisations. The country has been and remains active in a number of policing and military operations in the Western Balkan region, including the EU Concordia mission in Macedonia in 2003, the EULEX mission in Kosovo, the EU Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the NATO KFOR mission in Kosovo (Huszka 2010: 26; KFOR 2017).

The main focus of Czech foreign policy has, however, been the safeguarding of “dignified life,” which can only be achieved through the promotion of human rights and democracy. According to the Czech Foreign Ministry, human rights can be supported by “sharing the Czech experience of the transition to democracy and [a] sustainable social market economy with transition countries and societies interested in this experience” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 9). At the same time, Czech political cooperation has seemed to be driven by an interest in strengthening economic ties with other countries and regions including the Western Balkans (Šabič – Freyberg-Inan 2012: 272).

What is clear from the 2015 foreign policy document is that because of its size and limited resources, the Czech Republic has pursued its foreign policy agenda in association with international and regional organisations that “contribute to national security and prosperity, as well as to the preservation of the liberal-democratic constitutional architecture.” Foreign policy has, thus, been “geared towards consolidating the coherence of national policies with the Czech Republic's international commitments” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 1).

Of the values guiding Czech foreign policy, the 2015 framework states:

The[se] values [...]are entirely consistent with the principles and objectives promoted by the EU in its external relations: democracy, [the] rule of law, universality, indivisibility of human rights, respect for human dignity, equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 2–3).

The Czech Republic took over the presidency of the European Council in the first half of 2009. Its programme mentioned EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and committed to “further strengthen[ing] the EU prospects” of these countries. It also set out a number of more specific related goals. These included making “maximal progress in the accession talks with Croatia,” “improving the EU’s relations with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,” “support[ing] preparations for [the] possible granting of candidate status to other countries in the region,” striving for “stability and safety in Kosovo” and “the gradual normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo,” improving “Serbia’s prospects of becoming a candidate country” and focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina with a view to enhancing the EU’s role in the country. The programme noted the need to prepare for the relaxation of various visa requirements if conditions were met (Czech Presidency 2009: 1). The Czech presidency also pledged to invite the WB states to join in measures to counter radicalisation and the rise of terrorism (Czech Presidency 2009: 21).

## *Poland*

During the 1990s, Poland’s priority was security. After the country joined the EU and NATO and its security was guaranteed through these memberships, it shifted its attention to supporting and fostering democracy (Zornaczuk 2009: 237).

Poland’s foreign policy priorities for the period 2012–2016 focused on the world situation and the country’s role in the international context. The Polish national strategy urged EU member states “to clearly identify their vision of security” (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 4-16) and strengthen their position in world politics. Regional conflicts were said to be threatening peace and endangering global stability. The country, thus, stressed the need for security and signalled its readiness to play its part in the Euro-Atlantic security system. The values guiding its foreign policy were laid out as follows:

Poland’s actions in the international arena are a reflection of the values that are the foundation of its statehood: democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and solidarity. Foreign policy is meant to guard the state’s independence and territorial integrity. It should act to ensure national security, to preserve its heritage, to protect its natural environment and to augment its prosperity

and high level of civilizational and economic development. (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 6).

Upholding these values was said to be matter of creating “a friendly environment for countries and non-state entities.” Here Poland noted that its own goals were to ensure a strong political union, remain a reliable strategic partner in the transatlantic partnership, show openness to regional cooperation and link development aid to the promotion of democracy and human rights. At the same time, it committed to promoting Poland internationally, improving relations with the Polish expat community and ensuring an effective foreign service.

Relations with Germany and France have been strategically important for Poland. These states are seen as “key political and economic partners in Europe,” and thus, consultations under the 1991 Weimar Triangle framework are considered significant. Ukraine has also been named as a foreign policy priority and one that can rely on Polish support in the event of its EU and NATO rapprochement or even accession (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 18). Turning to the Visegrad cooperation, Poland maintains that the V4 must speak in a single voice and consolidate their policy positions in order to promote the region’s interests more effectively together (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 17–19).

Bilateral relations with the Western Balkan countries have been seen as less important for Poland. This is partly because the region is not an immediate neighbour to Poland in the same way that it is to Hungary, for example. It also reflects the fact that Poland has not established intensive economic relations with these states (Zornaczuk 2009: 237, 245). Zornaczuk maintains that the country’s interaction with the Western Balkans has been driven by its EU and NATO memberships. Poland supports the objectives of NATO and the EU and therefore endorses EU enlargement and NATO’s “open door policy” (Zornaczuk 2009: 238). In consequence, Poland’s 2012–2016 foreign policy document did not identify the state’s relations with the Western Balkans, but it did name EU enlargement as a generally effective policy that had Polish support. The country took a similar position concerning the expansion of NATO membership, including to the Western Balkan states (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 11–15).

While Poland was not directly affected by the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, it took part in a number of military operations in the region. Poland’s army assisted UN peacekeeping operations as part of UNPROFOR (1992–1995) and UNCRO (1995–1996)<sup>5</sup> and it joined NATO’s IFOR operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995–1996) and later the SFOR mission. In 1999, Poland was engaged in NATO’s AFOR mission in Albania. In 2003, it joined the EUFOR Concordia

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5 UNCRO was the United Nations Confidence Restore Operation, which occurred in Croatia from March 1995 until January 1996. For more information, see: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/uncro.htm> (4 September 2017)

mission in Macedonia and a year later it was part of the EU-led EUFOR Althea. The same year that Poland became a NATO member, it provided troops for KFOR in Kosovo. It also assisted the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe with setting up its Kosovo verification mission between October and June 1999. The UNMIK mission, which lasted from 1999 to 2008, was supported by Poland, and so too was the EU's EULEX mission, which replaced UNMIK in 2008 (Wojciech 2015: 31–33). In sum, Poland's military was involved in the Balkans from the very beginning, i.e. from the early 1990s when conflict in Croatia destabilised the region, and it remains active in EU and NATO missions in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

In the second half of 2011, Poland held the presidency of the EU Council. The Polish presidency summed up its priorities as “European integration as a source of growth, [a] secure Europe and Europe benefitting from openness” (Polish EU Presidency 2011: 5). Its activities sought to stabilise the economic situation in Europe and increase the cohesion of the Union. Its programme described enlargement as a “strategic political project” of the European Union and supported efforts to help Western Balkan states fulfil their aspirations of joining the EU. The signing of an accession treaty with Croatia was named explicitly as a goal of the presidency. Outside of this, however, there were no references to the Western Balkans. In contrast, the programme highlighted the Eastern Partnership co-operation several times, describing ambitions in this area in greater detail than the EU enlargement policy on the Western Balkans. This was a clear sign that the Eastern Partnership was more important to Poland's foreign policy interests.

Zornaczuk (2009: 240, 246) argues that Poland's foreign policy is mainly influenced by its membership of international organisations. In other words, the international political structure determines Poland's understanding of its foreign policy role. While Poland is not the most eager of the V4 countries to co-operate with the Western Balkans, it conforms with the expectations and wishes of the other V4 members and supports the region's pursuit of EU and NATO integration. As an EU, NATO and V4 member, Poland also backs these goals.

**Table 1 Involvement of the V4 states in international missions**

COUNTRY	MISSION	DATES	COOUNTRY	ORG.
<b>Hungary</b>				
	IFOR (Implementation Force)	1995–1996	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	SFOR (Stabilisation Force)	1996–2002	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	KFOR (Kosovo Force)	1999–2011	Kosovo	NATO
	EUFOR / Operation Althea	since 2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
	EULEX Kosovo	since 2008	Kosovo	EU

<b>Slovak Republic*</b>				
	UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force)	1992-1995	Croatia	OSN
	UNTAES (UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium)	1996-1998	Croatia (Eastern Slavonia)	OSN
	SFOR (Stabilisation Force)	1996-2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission	1998-2001	Kosovo	OBSE
	AFOR (Albanian Force) Allied Harbour	1999	Albania	NATO
	OMIK Mission	2000-2001	Kosovo	OBSE
	KFOR (Kosovo Force)	1999-2002	Kosovo	NATO
	EUFOR Concordia	2003	Macedonia	EU
	EUFOR / Operation Althea	since 2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
	EULEX Kosovo	since 2004	Kosovo	EU
<b>Czech Republic**</b>				
	UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force)	1992-1995	Bosnia and Herzegovina	OSN
	UNCRO (UN Confidence Restoration Operation)	1995-1996	Croatia, Krajina	OSN
	UNTAES (UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium)	1996-1998	Croatia (Eastern Slavonia)	OSN
	AFOR Albania Force Allied Harbour	1999	Albania	NATO
	IFOR (Implementation Force)	1996		NATO
	SFOR (Stabilisation Force)	1997-2001		NATO
	OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission	1998-1999	Kosovo	OBSE
	KFOR mission	1999-2002	Kosovo	NATO
	Essential Harvest	2001	Macedonia	NATO
	EUFOR Concordia	2003	Macedonia	EU
	EULEX Kosovo	since 2008	Kosovo	EU
	EUFOR / Operation Althea	2004-2008	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
<b>Poland</b>				
	UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force)	1992-1995	Bosnia and Herzegovina	OSN

	UNCRO (UN Confidence Restoration Operation)	1995–1996	Croatia	OSN
	IFOR (Implementation Force)	1995–1996	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	SFOR (Stabilisation Force)	1996–2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	AFOR (Albania Force) Allied Harbour	1999	Albania	NATO
	OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission	1999	Kosovo	OBSE
	KFOR (Kosovo Force)	since 1999	Kosovo	NATO
	UNMIK	1999–2008	Kosovo	OSN
	EUFOR Concordia	2003	Macedonia	EU
	EUFOR / Operation Althea	since 2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
	EULEX Kosovo	since 2008	Kosovo	EU

Sources: Compilation based on information in Goda S., ed. (2015): In search for greater v4 engagement in international crisis management, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), Bratislava and Huszka, B. (2010): Hungary's Western Balkan policy in the Visegrad context. EU Frontiers – Policy Paper No. 3, Centre for EU Enlargement Studies, Central European University, Budapest.

\* Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic (n.d.): History of military operations abroad. Available at: <http://www.mosr.sk/history-of-military-operations-abroad/> (20 April 2018)

\*\* Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces of the Czech Republic (n.d.): History of Czech Military Participation in Operations Abroad (1990–2017). Available at: <http://www.army.cz/scripts/detail.php?id=5717> (20 April 2018)

## The image and role of the V4

The examination of the last four V4 presidencies (2014–2015 Slovakia; 2015–2016 the Czech Republic; 2016–2017 Poland; 2017–2018 Hungary) in this section sheds light on the Visegrad Group's self-image. This includes the group's values and interests, its perception of its role within the EU and its policies towards the Western Balkan states. This analysis focuses initially on the elements of the V4's shared identity. I then summarise specific V4 policies that are directed at the WB states.

The V4's support for the EU integration of the WB states – in accordance with the EU enlargement process – is one of the group's policy priorities. V4 presidency programmes outline the priorities of individual presidencies as well as the long-term plans being pursued. Given the geographic proximity of these states, efforts at closer cooperation with the countries of the Eastern Partnership (i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and/or the Western Balkan region (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) are reasonable foreign policy initiatives.

In addition, the V4 group has chosen a number of areas for its cooperation including security and defence, EU affairs and work with neighbouring regions and international organisations. The main focus has been on “coordinating positions of the V4 countries on the current European agenda” and maintaining a “strong voice in the EU” (Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2016–2017: 7–8). The Slovak presidency’s programme highlights this coordination process:

We [the V4] shall also continue to support and initiate the coordination of national positions with respect to NATO and the EU. [This] also contributes to [the] better visibility of all four countries and presents a strong V4 region as an integral component of international organizations and multinational alliances. (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2014–2015: 24).

Given the V4’s focus on strengthening military capacity and defence and security cooperation, they have emphasised “coordination of V4 standpoints in every area of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy” (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 16). On this basis, the V4 agreed in 2013 to establish a V4 Battle Group under Poland’s leadership (Wojciech 2013). More recently, security emerged as a central concern during the migrant crisis of the summer of 2015.

As we have seen, strengthening and deepening cooperation with the EU, NATO and other international and regional organisations and countries worldwide have been strong themes in the V4’s policies. The future of the European Union is also a pressing issue (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 7). As the V4 group has gained recognition, other countries have shown more interest in cooperation: “The growing international prestige of the V4 has been transposed into increased interest among third European countries and global players in cooperation with Central European countries” (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2014–2015: 30). Since the migrant crisis, the group has become infamous for its political critique of EU migration policies. That critique is reiterated in the programme of the 2017–2018 Hungarian presidency: “The Visegrad countries have also been strong advocates for the protection of external borders since the beginning of the migration crisis” (Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017: 8).

Based on this prominence and its shared position on refugee issues, the V4 group has come to see itself as a significant force within the EU. Branding has, thus, been a topic on the cooperation agenda. The group believes that “culture” is the basis for this regional branding and that this has been leading outsiders to the V4 in a kind of cultural tourism (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2014–2015: 43). One programme puts it:

[The] V4 has become a well-known brand – a symbol of a successful initiative for pursuing joint interests and a central element of cooperation in Central Europe. (Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2016–2017: 5–6)

The same programme suggests that the group’s role should be to “*effectively represent [the] sensitivities of EU Member States from Central Europe.*” The V4’s identity, it notes, is rooted in “*a common historical heritage and common European values.*” The challenge is, thus, “*to consolidate the Group’s identity and strengthen its external visibility*” (Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2016–2017: 5–6; emphasis in the original).

The V4’s Slovak presidency adds some historical perspective:

Over the years the V4 as a whole has recorded a successful shift from the periphery towards the very core of European integration. It is crucial for the V4 countries to remain at the centre of the European integration process and maintain an active influence on European policies. (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of Visegrad Group 2014–2015: 4).

A focus on fostering the “internal cohesion of the Visegrad region” is a hallmark of the Czech V4 presidency programme. The document highlights the concepts of trust and togetherness. The V4, it states, need to reaffirm the “meaningfulness” of the Visegrad cooperation. This may be done by “strengthen[ing] mutual trust and solidarity.” Moreover, the “unique level of mutual trust within the V4 derives from an open exchange of opinions as well as from informal, multilayer[ed] contacts” (Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2015–2016: 5–6).

This analysis of presidency programmes shows that the V4 group sees itself as a well-known brand that is the result of years of successful cooperation. The V4 have taken on the role of representing the Central European EU member states, which – as a group – have become more engaged in foreign policy, security and defence issues. At the same time, the V4 have realised that their recognisable group identity boosts their image and increases their appeal to other international actors. Interestingly, the elements of this identity are a common heritage, shared European values, similar approaches to cooperation, the pursuit of shared cultural projects and a common communication strategy.

The role assumed by the V4 states is that of a reliable partner to the EU and NATO, and they have sought to foster dialogue about EU reform on this basis. The group, thus, claims to be working for a “strong, well-functioning European Union with the aim [of] avoid[ing] further fragmentation.” At the same time, they want to ensure that the V4 countries’ ideas and recommendations are genuinely taken on board by all EU member states. In this vein, the Hungarian V4 presidency has argued:

[I]nstead of the slogan “more Europe,” we should focus on creating “a better and stronger Europe,” a more efficient Europe. To reach this goal, it is necessary that the European Union takes into account the opinion of every Member State and pays more attention to the voice of European citizens. (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 7).

Over the last few years, the V4 countries have also been advocates for the Western Balkan region. There are a number of reasons for this development. First of all, the Western Balkan states – like the Eastern Partnership countries – are the V4’s neighbours. Second, the Visegrad Group has political and economic interests in the WB region. Third, improving and fostering regional cooperation with the Western Balkans are EU requirements. Fourth, the V4 states have an interest in the political stability of the region. And finally, the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries calls for reforms that will enable the adoption of the *Acquis Communautaire* into national law. The V4 can identify with the region’s situation. They have, thus, branded themselves as role models who can help the WB states achieve successful economic and political transformation leading to full EU membership.

## **The V4 presidencies and Western Balkan policies**

Under its Slovak presidency, the V4’s objective was to maintain political dialogue with the Western Balkan states and provide them with financial assistance through the International Visegrad Fund. The purpose of this funding was to “promote Euro-Atlantic integration, [...] strengthen local civil society and [...] foster regional cooperation” (Slovak Presidency Programme 2014/2015: 5). At the same time, Slovakia expressed the general support of the V4 for countries wishing to join the EU and NATO: “V4 countries are open to shar[ing] experience and best practices regarding [the] development and implementation of sector-specific policies related to their transition and Euro-Atlantic integration.” The focus was on the group’s function as a role model: “The Visegrad Group remains [...] ready to share with countries of the Western Balkans its considerable experience as a successful model of mutual support used in the framework of their integration processes” (Slovak Presidency Programme 2014/2015: 5, 29–30).

Under its Czech presidency from mid-2015 until mid-2016, the V4 group reaffirmed these policies on the Western Balkan region. Political support, the Czech programme noted, should be kept alive and the WB should be supported with any reforms. The International Visegrad Fund was to be used “to achieve the objectives of transferring experience with transition and supporting civil society of the V4 to the Western Balkan region.” The programme approved the continuation of traditional meetings between the foreign ministers of the V4 and WB states, including Slovenia and Croatia. The V4, it said, would help found

and launch the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), an initiative based in Tirana to be modelled on the International Visegrad Fund in Bratislava (Czech Presidency Programme 2015/2016: 10–11).

The 2016/17 Polish presidency described the benefits of EU integration to the European Union and the Western Balkans alike: “The V4 will remain committed to promoting the enlargement process, strongly believing that it serves the best interest of both the EU and the enlargement countries.” The programme noted that political contact between the V4 and WB states would be maintained through planned meetings with foreign ministers and in two other spheres of action. The first of these was a network (the “Network of Experts on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights and Enlargement Academy”) set up to share the V4’s experiences. The second was the political consolidation process around EU enlargement in which the goal was to “promote the principles of fair conditionality and a merit based process” (Polish V4 Presidency Programme 2016/2017: 7, 25–26).

The most recent V4 presidency under Hungary has highlighted the Western Balkan region. This priority is confirmed in the latest presidency document. Describing the V4 as a “group of countries traditionally committed to supporting the Western Balkans both in European political fora and in the form of joint projects,” the programme states that the group will “actively facilitate initiatives aimed at strengthening the region’s stability, security and economy under the Hungarian Presidency” (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 8). At the same time, the V4 give their support “to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkan countries as well as to the deepening of the economic integration and political association of, and cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries, since these contribute to Europe’s security and stability.” This support for the EU and NATO integration of the WB states fits perfectly with the recent shift in the V4’s approach to security and its developing securitisation agenda. The Hungarian presidency reasons that “[t]he key to the stability of the Western Balkans is the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region’s countries.” Thus, the V4 “support [...] the EU and NATO enlargement processes” (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 8, 13).

While the V4 are understandably motivated to cooperate with the Western Balkans for reasons of geographical proximity, it is, as Šabič and Freyberg-Inan (2012: 270) note, surprising that they have not developed a specific WB policy. Instead they continue to echo EU policy.

As we have seen, the V4 have identified the Western Balkans as a foreign policy priority separate from other regional interests such as the Eastern Partnership countries. The focus has been on supporting reform that will help WB states fulfil the criteria for EU and NATO accession. The V4 states have offered to share their experiences of Euro-Atlantic integration and they clearly see

themselves as role models for the Western Balkan countries. While all the V4 presidencies have referred to the region, the 2017/18 Hungarian programme appears to give special impetus to the V4–WB cooperation.

It is important to mention that the Visegrad Group's anti-EU image is not reflected in the policies in V4 documents. Instead the V4 emphasise the constructive work they have been undertaking as part of an EU framework and demand that their voice – while critical of certain EU policies – be taken seriously and acknowledged as equally significant to that of the “old” EU member states. The V4's objectives are to cooperate with the EU, NATO and other international or supranational organisations and to implement joint V4 policies that comply with EU regulations. At the same time, they demand to be respected as equal partners when expressing diverging standpoints on particular EU policies or their implementation.

## Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to address the national identities of the Visegrad Four together with the foreign policy roles they have assumed and the impact of these identities on foreign policy. In addition, I have analysed the V4's joint policy concerning the Western Balkan states.

The V4 countries have a common history based on their Communist past and their desire to “return to Europe” after the end of the Cold War. These states decided to cooperate and support each other to achieve the shared goals of NATO and EU membership. After the EU enlargement of 2004 and their accession to NATO in 1999 (or 2004 in the case of Slovakia), the V4 confirmed their continued cooperation and began to pursue new policy goals. While V4 presidency programmes have since addressed a wide range of issues and topics, they have consistently identified the Western Balkan region as a major cooperation partner. During this time, security – whether military, economic or energy-related – has also emerged as a foreign policy priority and a key area of cooperation among the V4 states. This focus on security can be traced back to the V4's historical experience of being subordinated to other empires and reduced to client states of the Soviet Union. There is, thus, a wish for protection against external powers. The decision to establish the Visegrad Battle Group was made back in 2013 but the securitisation agenda has been pursued more eagerly since the migrant crisis in 2015.

The V4 states have assumed the role of EU and NATO members who follow the rules, regulations and values of these organisations. The image that they wish to convey is that of responsible and reliable EU partners who uphold European values but are self-confident enough to criticise the EU on specific policies. The foreign policy values of each of these states reflect their historical experiences and a general awareness that they are part of a European tradition and cultural

heritage. As such, their identities and related values are very much compatible with European values. At the same time, the V4's narratives and interpretations of EU policies have seemed to diverge from those of the majority of EU member states. There is a sense that the Visegrad Group sees itself as a victim of the relationship with "Brussels" rather than as an equal partner.

Having said this, the Visegrad Group does appear to have found its voice and purpose in representing the countries of Central Europe. The group's self-confidence has been boosted by the interest of other countries and regions in working with the V4 countries.

Values serve as guiding principles for foreign policy and they also shape identity. Democracy, freedom, human rights and the right to prosperity, security and a dignified life are some of the values underscored by the V4 countries. These states refer to these values in their foreign policy documents and have joined organisations that are rooted in similar values. The V4's foreign policies are, thus, driven by the values and commitments of international organisations. The V4 themselves have assumed the role of active participants who are truly committed to working within these formats: they are members – and act within the structures and norms – of these organisations.

While the reasons for V4 members' relations with the West Balkan region differ, there is an underlying understanding that the EU and NATO membership of the WB states will benefit these countries, the entire region and the EU. The EU's enlargement policy and NATO's open door policy are supported by the V4 states as initiatives that will stabilise and, thus, secure the region. Political and economic interests are surely also driving this close cooperation, and so too is the wish to promote EU reforms and actively assist with adapting to EU standards.

Though there has been a public perception in recent years that the V4 are pursuing anti-EU policies, the V4 states generally believe they are the EU's "good pupils" but are not recognised as such. Their alternative image as the EU's "bad boys" is currently being reinforced by V4 state leaders' negative EU commentary. Nevertheless, when it comes to the Western Balkans, the V4 are assisting with the implementation of EU policies despite perceptions otherwise. The branding of the V4 is a new group undertaking, and once their image is consolidated, a foreign policy will be designed accordingly.

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# The Visegrad Cooperation in the Context of Other Central European Cooperation Formats

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**Abstract:** *This study considers the plethora of contemporary institutional frameworks for Central European cooperation. While the Visegrad Group has been the most visible and stable format for Central European cooperation in recent history, it has been challenged by a number of alternative or complementary projects. These include the Austrian concept of Strategic/Regional Partnership, the Austrian–Czech–Slovak project Austerlitz–Formate/Nord-Trilaterale, the Polish–Croatian Three Seas Initiative and the European Union’s macro-regional Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). I focus on the development and prospects of each of these projects as well the rivalries among them and their intersections or interference with one another. This survey then turns to the future Central European constellations suggested by the very different cooperation trajectories within the region. My thesis is that the region’s identity has been challenged by offers to merge with Europe’s West. Central European cooperation must find new challenges and themes if it is to survive.*

**Keywords:** *Central European cooperation formats, Visegrad Group, Austerlitz-Formate, Three Seas Initiative, Strategy for the Danube Region, spaghetti bowl effect*

Central European regionalism builds on a tradition that is at least two hundred years old. The origins of this tradition are usually linked to the Vienna Congress and the demarcation of Central Europe as a “space in-between” that was surrounded by two Western actors (France and the United Kingdom) and three Eastern (Prussia, Austria and Russia) actors under the Concert of Europe. As a result of Germany’s growing power and influence, the epicentre of Central

Europe moved from the Netherlands–Switzerland–Italy axis to the East and, by the mid-19th century, the region had stabilised based on its links to the Habsburg Empire and its effort to preserve a distinct Central European identity alongside Germany. In contrast, Germany, which was unifying under Prussian leadership, promoted the equivalence of Central Europe with the German state. During the inter-war period, Central Europe became a region of small nation states gripped by a critical security conflict: this was the cleavage between the German and Russian/Soviet states with their aggressive geopolitical visions of regional absorption and/or division. This situation ultimately led to the incorporation of a large part of the region into the Soviet bloc/Eastern Europe. It has also caused Central European intellectuals to reflect on the specific cultural identity of Central European nations compared with that of East European nations (cf. Cabada – Walsch 2017).

While debates and considerations about the region's shared geopolitical fate and its hundred-year-long effort to "catch up" with the West dominate Central European regionalism today, critics often overlook key features seen in other traditional European transnational regions (for example, in the Benelux and Nordic groupings). However, the most distinctive element of Central European regionalism neglected in these discussions is the sense of identity that has developed over time at all societal and institutional levels, and above all, the civic identity that has been cultivated from the ground up. This civic identity could be observed to some degree at least in the dissent movements of the 1970s and 1980s, but it also had its roots in smaller traditional intellectual epistemic communities. From the very outset, the Visegrad cooperation was a product of these movement(s) that – based on historical coincidence – took hold in three and eventually four Central European countries during the democratic transition. However, as early as 1993, the same traditional forces that have intruded on integration elsewhere were evident in the V4 and Central Europe – these included mutual rivalries, the prioritising of national over regional interests, competing visions of regional cooperation including its membership and configuration and efforts to dominate. While the V4 have succeeded several times at revitalising their mission in order to enforce common interests, the group can hardly be called the only or definitive platform for Central European cooperation. This means that the V4 states see – and occasionally have also searched for – alternatives.

Certainly the V4 group remains the most significant format for Central and East-Central European regional cooperation today. Nevertheless, this cooperation has been compromised repeatedly and – in some analysts' view – irreversibly by the lack of any internal regional identity or common regional interest that would override the national interest(s) of individual states. One reason for these complications is Poland's predominance within the V4 based on the country's size and multi-vectoral policies. A second cause may be the internal

conflicts over some (European) policies. Last but by no means least, we must note the actions of certain external actors who do not accept their “peripheral” status in (East-)Central Europe when faced with the “core” position of the V4 in the region. Here we should mention not only Austria but also Croatia and Slovenia. These are, in any case, some of the factors that may be behind the initiation of new and/or parallel regional integration activities.

Set against this backdrop, this article aims to reflect on contemporary discussions about the Visegrad Group and other/alternative (East-)Central European cooperation formats and their respective definitions of the Central European region. My main hypothesis is that individual states within the often addressed Central and East-Central European area are striving to reconfigure Central European cooperation formats to promote their own national interests. These states use either their non-formal alliances with the Visegrad Group or new/existing cooperation formats to advance their activities and goals. This hypothesis also holds true for the V4 members themselves. In this regard, we may point to (occasional) moves to discharge the cooperation and/or replace it with other formats. These moves reflect internal politics, ideological preferences, attempts to gain distance from the leaders of certain member states and relations with “external” actors, most critically the EU.

## **The V4: A relatively stable but “toxic” community**

Despite repeated crises and a loss of internal cohesion resulting from a range of factors,<sup>1</sup> the Visegrad Group remains the most prominent and successful Central European cooperation format. This formal cooperation, created following the lack of interest of Austrian diplomats in the early '90s in fostering Central European cooperation based on “Habsburg-era nostalgia,” has persisted for more than 27 years. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to argue that the Visegrad Group is a permanent constellation.

In my view, the main advantage of the Visegrad arrangement is the absence of any institutional demand for “permanent” consensus among the member states. As such, the V4 may be reduced for long periods to formal meetings of prime ministers and government members where no fundamental issues are presented. In contrast, there are issues – EU budget negotiations, resistance to the EU’s highly environmentally-focused energy policy, opposition to illegal migration and relocation quotas, etc. – around which the group can cooperate very intensively. Furthermore, based on this V4 format, the group is able to attract other partners for ad hoc cooperation. This usually refers to other newer EU members from the group of former Communist states, but in particular

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1 Some of the causes of these crises/ruptures include the Klaus governments in the Czech Republic, Slovakia’s Mečiarism period, opposition to certain post-2010 policies of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán and Poland’s increased focus on hard security.

instances, can extend to other partners (for example, the European southern nations, Austria and the United Kingdom).

This means that we can understand the V4 as a stable regional group although its regionness” is greatly limited both in form (given the dominance of intergovernmental cooperation and the almost complete lack of any bottom-up regional identity) and content (given the absence of positions shared by all four countries on many important policies and issues). This situation has given rise to both critique and the realist position that despite all the problems, the V4 is the most successful regional activity in Central Europe. The criticisms have been well summarised: “The V4 countries were not able to elaborate jointly the infrastructural projects, to talk with one voice in the EU and NATO, collectively define the risk areas and cooperate in the process of their elimination. The V4 economies do not produce positive synergies, but strongly compete among themselves – mainly with effort to attract the foreign investments. The V4 also does not produce a “mark”: it is still weakly organized, also within the societies of the member states. The V4 does not create the network for the cooperation, as we can observe in the cases of Benelux or Nordic cooperation“ (Kuźelewska – Bartnicki – Skarzyński 2015: 146).

These scholars also point out that each of the member states understood the V4’s creation differently: “For Poland it was the instrument of balancing between Russia and Germany. For Slovakia – the opportunity to step out from the political isolation and become [a] fully-fledged member of the region. Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary declare the aspiration to lead the group. Poland as the biggest nation with the biggest economic growth seems to be [the] natural leader. Nevertheless, [this] idea is not shared by the other members” (Kuźelewska – Bartnicki – Skarzyński 2015: 158).

In response, Kořan (2012: 201) has called the V4 a “subregional group,” meaning that Central Europe is more extensive. He stresses the group’s “surprising ability to overcome long and repeated phases of justified scepticism,” noting that “[t]he V4 serves as the hub [...] as the messenger and promoter of Central European visions in [a] broader European context.” Like some other authors, he is convinced that the socialisation associated with democratic consolidation, Europeanisation and regional integration “led towards something that might be marked as Visegrad quasi-identity.” This quasi-identity has had no distinct impact on the societies of the Visegrad countries, but it is “deeply rooted in the thinking of politicians, diplomats and other official representatives that engage in international policy.” The quasi-identity is also tied to a sense of quasi-institutionalisation. This is shown by the fact that politicians, officials, foreign policy commentators and scholars regard the V4 cooperation as natural and tend to prefer it to other formats like the Central European Initiative or the Regional Partnership. At the same time, we may question the extent to which Kořan’s position remains valid six years after he made these observations. This is especially important in the cases of the Austerlitz alliance

and the Polish–Croatian Three Seas Initiative, i.e. the alternative cooperation formats that I analyse below.

According to Kořan (2012), the Visegrad Group exchanged its rather defensive style for a more pro-active approach after 2009, having announced its ambition to become an essential driving force behind European integration. The V4 group, he notes, has united around three clearly stated goals and policies: support for the eastern and south-eastern vectors of EU enlargement; support for the eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy and a shared vision of regional energy policy. My own analysis confirms this view of the V4's focus and priorities. Nevertheless, it is worth observing that these themes have clearly overlapped with the group's resistance to mainstream EU migration policies since 2015. The desire to become an alternative "core" or engine of the European Union has been overshadowed by the group's problematic image. As the Hungarian political scientist Boglárka Koller stressed during the debates on Central European cooperation at a recent Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA) conference,<sup>2</sup> while Western Europe sees the V4 states as *stragglers*, these nations understand themselves as *pioneers*.

Wientzek (2017: 47) emphasises that regional cooperation may be both a driver and an obstacle to European integration: "It may, however, also function as a brake or serious obstacle to the European integration process if it becomes a cartel, acting against the EU's interests and thus causing serious damage to the European integration project as a whole. The Franco-German disregard of the Stability and Growth Pact in 2003 is one negative example".

As a result, Wientzek appeals to the V4 to promote a "positive agenda." In his view, the V4 has come to be defined by its position on the migration crisis, a situation that has typecast it as a "negative coalition." While this characterisation is simplifying and distorted, it does capture the important fact that the V4 group is seen as a "purely defensive project" at European level.

Similarly, Hokovský (2017: 53) argues that because of the sharply different positions and economic rivalries that have emerged over Visegrad Group's history, it has "not played a visible or influential role within the European Union. This has changed with the migration crisis of 2015." This argument emphasises that the demand of V4 leaders to stop illegal migration in 2015 – a position formulated in opposition to the EU mainstream – had become the general message of most EU member state politicians by 2017. Nevertheless, the reality that the leaders of most EU states adopted the positions of V4 country leaders has not erased the group's negative and even "toxic" image. As Hokovský (2017:54) puts it: "Strong statements of criticism and refusal, unaccompanied by constructive proposals, have not helped Western politicians to understand and appreciate the Visegrad positions. Apart from the restrictive approach to migration, the

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2 This was the 23rd annual CEPSA conference held in Wroclaw on 14–15 September 2017.

V4 has become known for the controversial constitutional moves by the governments in Budapest and Warsaw. These illiberal tendencies have only reinforced the image of Visegrad as a regressive group of post-communist societies unable to fully integrate with post-modern multicultural open-minded Europe”.

According to this account, the clear dominance of the France–Germany duo and more generally the “western” part of the EU has confined the V4 to the role of an obstacle. Such an obstacle may, however, be seen as destructive/subversive or as a source of “healthy and constructive regulation.”

In sum, it is clear that both sceptics and optimists believe the V4 group is a stable regional cooperative structure that will continue to exist – at least formally – in the future. This group has the potential to be a fairly assertive proponent of broader (East-)Central European or even Europe-wide alternatives to the EU engine represented by France and its main partners (the Benelux Group). At the same time, the V4’s current negative image could lead (some) EU member states to seek out alternative cooperation formats within the Central European region and/or avoid the “toxicity” of Visegrad membership.

## **Alternative formats of Central European cooperation**

As we have seen, at the beginning of the 1990s, the Visegrad constellation was particularly influenced by Austria’s lack of interest in developing a partnership with the democratising post-Communist states of Central Europe. Austria clearly preferred the option of early membership of the European Community, which had taken shape at the end of Europe’s bipolar division. With this goal fulfilled, Austrian diplomats began to contemplate a more active role in the Central-Eastern region. One concrete outcome of this shift was the Regional Partnership proposed by Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel’s new government in 2000. Austria invited its Czech, Hungarian, Slovak and Slovenian neighbours to join and extended the invitation to its “cultural neighbour” Poland. The initiative’s original title, “Strategic Partnership,” was rejected by the invited partners and replaced with a more neutral-sounding name that stressed the alliance’s “regional” character. In these early years, the Regional Partnership had the basic objectives of supporting partner nations in their preparations for EU membership and defining and promoting their shared interests in the Union.

Three key Austrian concerns had a decisive effect on the development of the initiative. The first of these was the Austrian economy, which like the economies of other EU-15 nations, stood to gain from the EU’s eastern enlargement. Austria, thus, promoted the shift from bilateral to multilateral/regional relations with the (East-)Central European states. The second factor was the sanctions imposed on the new Austrian government in the first half of 2000 after the election of the populist Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) led by Jörg Haider. Feeling abandoned by other EU member states, Austria was keen to

find new strategic partners. The third driver, though never officially stated, was the country's wish to play a more important role in Central Europe. It must be stressed that Austria was not included in the Visegrad cooperation. Moreover, as a non-NATO nation, it was not privy to certain communications channels about security policy. Nevertheless, the Austrian government maintained that a strategic or regional partnership was justified on the basis of many other common issues (Kiss – Königova – Luif 2003).

The Regional Partnership attracted considerable scepticism from among the invited nations. It was dubbed the “V4 plus Austria and Slovenia” and greeted especially coldly by countries with complicated bilateral relations with Austria, particularly the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which had security concerns about their nuclear power plants. Polish diplomats were also fairly critical and from the very start viewed the Austrian activity from the standpoint of representatives of a “real” regional power. On the other hand, this initiative was clearly intended to compete with the existing V4 format, and since Slovenia had stayed out of that arrangement, it welcomed the developments (Cabada – Walsch 2017: 118).

There were also less cynical voices within the Czech Republic, who asked whether a modified Regional Partnership might be a good alternative to the Visegrad cooperation. The most discussed issue was the possibility of excluding Poland from the Central European cooperation as a large nation whose interests differed to some degree from those of the smaller Central European states. As examples of these differences, critics noted Poland's “high-power” cooperation with France and Germany in the Weimar Triangle (Smith 2007: 279-280), its role in the EU's Eastern policy and its predominance within the V4 group. Sceptics responded that the Regional Partnership would be a community of small(er) Central European nations. Naturally, some also objected that this constellation – even more than a Regional Partnership including Poland – would appear like a “revival” of Habsburg-era Central Europe (Walsch 2015: 94–97).

Another reason for the Austrian proposal's cold reception was the failure to establish supportive institutional structures. Instead meetings were limited to the discussion of fairly extensive cooperation based on current impulses and needs. By far the most successful area of cooperation was justice and internal affairs, which was handled through the Salzburg Forum for cooperation among interior ministers and officials from their departments. The forum's overriding concerns were internal security related to the Schengen Area enlargement, combating terrorism and cooperation related to third countries, for example, through the use of shared consulates and the coordination of visa matters. Like the “V4+” format, this forum proved flexible when it came to member numbers, and as such, the Western Balkan states were often included in internal security matters (Walsch 2015: 236–238).

This cooperation around internal affairs revealed the interest of the new member states in working with Austria, especially in areas where the collabo-

ration had been shown to have added value. In the case of the Salzburg Forum, the integration of these states into the Schengen Area in December 2007 and subsequent coordination activities were seen as proof of this value. In other political spheres, however, there were not such obvious signs. This is also why official promotions of the Regional Partnership stopped in 2012. Around this time, Austria announced its plans to promote its interests through existing regional and European institutions. However, this decision was set aside less than three years later when Austria joined with the Czech Republic and Slovakia to establish the Austerlitz group. Since 2016, Austria has also been one of the members of the Three Seas Initiative, a broad regional alliance set up in cooperation with Poland and Croatia.

The Austerlitz Triangle or Nord-Trilaterale is an intergovernmental cooperative arrangement among Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia that was officially launched in January 2015. Czech diplomats cited the convergence of Austrian and V4 interests as one of the goals of this group. However it is more than clear that the intention of the three governments, dominated by their respective Social Democrat prime ministers Werner Feymann, Bohuslav Sobotka and Robert Fico, was to distance themselves from conservative nationalist governments in Hungary and Poland. Given the subsequent victories of Sebastian Kurz in Austria and Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic and their still unclear positions on the EU and regional integration, it is hard to say whether the Austerlitz Triangle will replace the V4 or lead to an “improved V4” arrangement that could eventually include other countries (Slovenia, Croatia and perhaps even Hungary, which would displace Poland from this narrower Central European configuration). It seems more likely that discussions will resume about the potential expansion of the V4, either through the incorporation of Austria alone or by some larger enlargement (including Croatia, Slovenia and Romania). Any such enlargement would, however, bring the V4 closer to the format of the Three Seas Initiative, which would make these steps senseless (Cabada – Walsch 2017: 210–211).

The Three Seas Initiative is a new and highly ambitious attempt to promote broad regional cooperation in East-Central Europe, i.e. in the area between Germany and Russia. Polish diplomats have been observing other V4 states’ efforts to make alternative regional arrangements with a mix of concern and contempt. Aside from the Austerlitz Triangle, these projects include Hungarian cooperation with Croatia and Slovenia in the “HCS Triangle” and the EU’s macro-regional Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), which since April 2011, has linked nine EU member states, three candidate states and parts of two Eastern Partnership states from Baden-Württemberg to the Danube delta; it has, however, left out Poland (cf. Bos – Griessler – Walsch 2017). After Poland’s parliamentary elections and change of government at the end of 2015, it proceeded to develop its own project. The Three Seas Initiative is, then, the

effort of the most dominant nation in (East-)Central Europe to take charge and establish a regional cooperation platform far broader than the V4.

Poland and Croatia officially launched the project in 2016. Representatives of 12 countries were invited to its first summit in Dubrovnik, Croatia in August 2016. Aside from Austria, all of the invited parties were post-Communist EU member states. Poland, at the helm of the new initiative, presented the move to strengthen the North–South European connection as a corrective to the current emphasis on the West–East axis. The main focus of the cooperation was said to be economic, partly with a view to security. Attended by a representative of the Chinese New Silk Road initiative (no official representatives of the EU or the European Commission were invited), the Dubrovnik summit paid particular attention to energy, transport and communication infrastructure, highlighting the Klaipėda–Thessaloniki highway and gas pipelines supplying East-Central Europe from Polish and Croatian liquid gas terminals (LGT). At a second summit held in Warsaw in July 2017 in parallel with US President Donald Trump’s visit to Poland, the Three Seas Business Forum was established (Wiśniewski 2017).

While Polish diplomats strongly reject the view that the Three Seas Initiative continues the country’s interwar *Intermarium* project, which had a significant “imperial” component, it cannot be overlooked that – as in the case of the V4 – Poland is the lead and dominant actor in the group. Furthermore, it should be recalled that the Initiative was launched less than two years after the creation of the Austerlitz Triangle and may, thus, be seen as an effort to overcome the emerging V4–Nord-Trilaterale rivalry via a brand new cooperative platform. The main challenge and risk for the Initiative lies in the fact that with the sole exception of Austria, its creators were all post-Communist nations and it mechanically takes up the EU division between West and East. This split may have been useful when creating a coalition at European level but it has unwittingly set the stage for a multispeed Europe. As such, many East-Central European nations (for instance, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Baltic states) have opposed this proposal, and it is unclear how stable their ties with the Three Seas Initiative are and will continue to be.

Despite these rather lively developments around (East-)Central European cooperation formats in recent years, the Visegrad Group has remained the favoured framework for joint action. In my view, there is currently no alternative or overlapping alliance that could replace or challenge the V4. Turning to macro-regional formats, the EUSDR’s structural-functionalist project could significantly affect the agenda of its member states and the overall region (in the case of the V4 members, this would have the greatest impact on Hungary). Nevertheless, these activities are not – and are unlikely to be seen as – an alternative to the V4. The same may not be true of the Three Seas Initiative, which could lead to the permanent institutionalisation of the “V4+” format in its most expansive form (including all post-Communist EU member states and Austria).

On the other hand, important differences have already emerged among the four V4 nations when it comes to their “ideal” solutions to important issues and policies. Within a group of 12 countries, the search for common interests and regional solutions would be far more complicated. It is, for example, very hard to imagine a comprehensive set of themes that could be shared by Austria and Bulgaria. Some Initiative member states support the idea of a common European currency or even the strengthening of the EU’s core. In contrast, other members have ongoing conflicts with the rule of law and delight in the prospect of permanently opposing “Brussels.”

## **The V4 as a stable structure with unclear prospects**

Does the fact that the V4 group has stayed relatively stable in the face of other (East-)Central European cooperation formats mean it is protected from decline or even disintegration?

At the outset, we need to distinguish between the V4’s formal existence (as shown by financial transfers to the group’s only institutional body, the International Visegrad Fund, and occasional meetings of member state politicians) and the true working cooperation that is based on shared interests, priorities and – above all – implementation strategies. The history of the V4 has seen the group break up at different times into two “mini-groups” either in the form of a “3+1” or a “2+2.”<sup>3</sup> This was the case, for example, immediately after the division of Czechoslovakia when the Klaus government distanced itself from the cooperation. Later Slovak Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar also assumed a pose of “internal opposition” as his country veered towards illiberal democracy. Hungary has repeatedly been isolated in the group, largely due to its critique of the Beneš decrees (Poland has exercised self-restraint on this issue). The period 2015–2017 saw more internal rifts with the Czech Republic and Slovakia using the Austerlitz Triangle to dissociate themselves from conservative nationalist and deeply Eurosceptical governments in Hungary and Poland. These splits were exacerbated by the actions of external players such as newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron. Soon after his election, Macron described the V4 group’s approach to the migration crisis and especially its rejection of relocation quotas as “tricky and cynical.” During a trip to Eastern Europe in August 2017, he used the Austerlitz Triangle to call out the two “problematic” actors – Hungary and Poland – as well as the more promising pair of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Macron’s meeting with the Czech, Slovak and Austrian prime ministers in Salzburg on 23 August 2017, and a subsequent trip to Bulgaria, bypassing Budapest and above all Warsaw, reaffirmed the French recognition of a 2+2 format within the V4 group (Cabada – Walsch 2017: 206).

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3 Confirming these divisions, Dostál and Végh (2017) stress the clear societal affiliations between Czechs and Slovaks on the one hand and Poles and Hungarians on the other.

At the same time, given the post-election situation in the Czech Republic in the autumn of 2017, and especially the assertions of the main Czech foreign policy creator Prime Minister Babiš, the 2+2 seems likely to revert to a 3+1 model. Indeed, we may assume that the new Czech government will steer towards the positions of Hungary and Poland and away from those of Slovakia. In contrast, since the October 2017 Czech elections, Slovak leaders have clearly conveyed their nation's preference for the positions of the EU core over any other alliance, including Central European regional formations. Putting all this aside, I do not believe that the disintegration of the V4 group is on the cards. Rather, in the coming negotiations over the 2020–2027 EU budget, there is real potential for V4 members to create and lead a “Friends of Cohesion” group. This may be one of the last actions taken by this rather negative coalition that seeks to limit and prevent changes to the logic of funding distributions. Slovakia at least (and perhaps also the Czech Republic) has expressed a desire to propose relevant topics rather than “only” reacting negatively to the agenda of other actors, especially the France–Germany dyad.

If we reject the simplistic position that all post-Communist states are essentially alike, it is clear that Central Europe differs from the “rest” of East-Central Europe mainly because of its better economic and general development conditions. On this understanding, Central Europe is the “semi-periphery” between the centre/core of the West and the periphery of the (South-)East. It follows that incorporation into a bigger group of East-Central European countries – particularly through the Three Seas Initiative approach that splits the EU into West and East – would delay the Central European countries' move towards and inclusion in the (economic) core. It may appear that nothing has changed concerning the dilemma that Central Europe faced before EU accession, i.e. the prospect that EU membership would likely lead to a weakening of regional identity. Back in 2002, Waisová stressed: “The Central European region can today be understood as a transitory region that may be incorporated into the core region represented here by the EU. The rate and speed of that incorporation will depend on the Central European region's actions, which must comply with the expectations and behaviour of the core itself (acceptance of the EU's laws and values, adoption of EU institutions). The Central European region's incorporation into the EU's core will most likely lead to the weakening of Central European regional identity and subsequently to the gradual downgrading and disintegration of Central European regional structures” (Waisová 2002: 66).

Given the V4's apparent revitalisation around the migration crisis and the growing number of Central European integration projects, it may seem that this assumption has not borne out. Certainly, one reason for this may be that some Central European governments have substantially reduced their efforts to integrate into the core region (Western Europe) or become part of a stronger and deeper EU framework. In other words, these Central European nations are

supporting slower options/arrangements based on the notion of a multi-speed EU or flirting with the idea of “another Europe.” Arguably, the debate about these issues is fundamentally at odds with the mission of Central European integration projects including the V4. The belief that developments and political priorities inside Hungary and Poland contravened Central Europe’s vital interest in overcoming its (semi-)peripheral position and joining the EU core, was one of the most important drivers of Czech, Slovak and Austrian cooperation in the Austerlitz Triangle. This cooperation aims to promote a “more positive” Central Europe outside of the V4. Czech diplomats have also revived a Czech–German strategic partnership project, which should offer an alternative to Central European cooperation.

It is, however, Slovakia that has been clearest about its preference for pro-European arrangements over regional ones. Even before learning the results of the 2017 Czech elections, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico made clear that his country would not risk exclusion from the emerging and/or potential EU core for the sake of the Visegrad or any broader Central European cooperation. He also warned that the Visegrad alliance could be a casualty of Slovakia’s position within the EU core: “For Slovakia, the Visegrad Four is not an alternative to the EU. For Slovakia, the V4 is not the place we imagine living in the future. Our place is in the EU” (Fico *pospíchá do jádra EU* 2017).

The success in the Czech elections of protest parties with a reserved or openly negative stance on the EU dashed any hopes of the re-liberalisation and re-Europeanisation of the V4 via the Austerlitz Triangle. In response, the Slovak prime minister’s position was even more pragmatic and resolute. Two days after the elections, he met with Slovak President Andrej Kiska and national parliament speaker Andrej Danko and released a joint communiqué confirming Slovakia’s pro-European and pro-Western allegiance based on a commitment to EU and NATO positions. Later, Prime Minister Fico presented this statement to the media, describing Slovakia variously as an “island” and a “pro-European island in Central Europe” (*Slovensko je proeurópsky ostrov* 2017). This was a loaded critique aimed directly at the V4 partners since the “island” metaphor has particular historical resonances in this region. Czechoslovakia’s interwar foreign minister and later president often used this metaphor to stress the democratic nature of his state compared with Hungary and Poland. Despite these developments, Fico’s actions during a February and March 2018 domestic crisis – including his allegations of foreign interference and a direct attack on George Soros – suggest the country’s position (pro-European pragmatism) may be as schizophrenic as the one of its Hungarian neighbour.

At the close of the first quarter of 2018, the Visegrad Group appears to be slightly unsettled and lacking in not just a strong regional identity but also a clear goal and *raison d’être*. As the group’s hegemonic power, Poland continues its efforts to create a broader framework for its regional command. This is, it

believes, the best way to counteract Europe's "West." Like Hungary, the country opposes the current course of European integration. Instead, it has relativised the rule of law and developed a conservative nationalist *democratura* that threatens to make it the pariah of the EU. In contrast, Slovakia and, after some doubts and deflections, the Czech Republic are exploring a more conciliatory approach to the EU's core though they too are ready to use the V4 to criticise EU policies, particularly on migration. In recent years, all of the V4 member states have explored the creation of parallel alliances and regional projects that could give them a platform if they decide to leave the V4 or – more likely – to take an "empty chair" approach within the group.

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# An East-West Divide in the European Union? The Visegrad Four States in Search of the Historical *Self* in National Discourses on European Integration

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**Abstract:** *This article explores whether a new east-west divide exists in the enlarged European Union by analysing national discourses on European integration in the Visegrad Four (V4) states. Two V4 foreign policy legacies form the basis of analysis: the “Return to Europe” discourse and the discourses around the reconstruction of the historical self. The article gives evidence that the V4 countries share sovereignty in external policies and thus have a distinct European orientation. V4 national-conservative governments hold sovereigntist positions, however, in policy areas that they consider falling exclusively within the realm of the member state. Comparison with Western European member states gives evidence that the post-1945 paradigm changes were more profound than those of post-1989 ones of Eastern Europe. This historic legacy can explain the more integrationist orientations in Western Europe. The article concludes that behaviour of the individual V4 state seems to be of greater importance for each member than collective V4 group action. Finally, the article gives an outlook on ways in which solidarity between the Western and Eastern halves of the EU can be exercised in an ideologically diverging Union.*

**Keywords:** *European integration, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Visegrad Group, constructivism*

## Introduction

The chapter asks whether behind discourses on European integration, which since the 2015 refugee crisis have entailed considerable disagreement between and within EU member states, we can observe a new east-west divide in the enlarged European Union, and whether, because of the importance of the Visegrad Four (V4) group in the EU's eastern half, this regional grouping can be considered to be at the helm of such a divide.

We observe that there is evidence of both similarities and differences between positions that run along a line of formerly old and formerly new member states. We observe also that positions within the putative two blocks differ considerably. Division within a perceived “block” challenges the concept of such a divide and the logical level of examination thus becomes the individual EU member state: wherever situated, big or small, greatly exposed to refugee and migration flows or less so, a Eurozone member or not, a net contributor or a net recipient, a member state subject to many infringement proceedings or few, and subject to the EU rule of law mechanism or not. Furthermore, the member state is an actor that, depending on the policy area, often behaves flexibly and pragmatically in everyday politics. This wide array of potential variables is most likely to present a very mixed outcome and would hardly give evidence of an east-west divide, but could, however, be an interesting starting point for a quantitative analysis based on data sets that can be operationalised.

In this contribution, a qualitative analysis will be provided that draws on some of these variables. The method will apply a social constructivist perspective to the relations between EU member states on the basis of discourse analysis and qualitative comparative analysis. The objective is to identify foreign policy identities, which are guided by norms and ideas, and to analyse foreign policy behaviour, which is addressed to a political *other*. These discourses between *self* and *other* construct and reconstruct identities (Wendt 1999; on discourse and the construction of *self* and *other* Diez 2004 and Hansen 2006). Behaviour moves in paths, over time creating a culture and traditions. Historic turning-points in East Central Europe, with sequences of foreign subjection and self-rule, produced a set of sometimes contradictory traditions, referred to as historical legacies (Wittenberg 2015). Could it be that historical legacies in Western Europe and Eastern Europe differ so greatly that they have the potential to divide the continent, more than twenty-five years after the fall of the iron curtain and nearly fifteen years into EU membership?

### East Central Europe: two legacies since 1989

With the two basic concepts to be laid out below, we follow Elsa Tulmets' book *East Central European Foreign Policy Identity in Perspective* (Tulmets 2014). Here

she observes two legacies. The first is the “Return to Europe” line of thought, which emerged in both Eastern and Western Europe. The continued illegitimacy of the socialist one-party states, the role of revolts and the legitimacy of the dissidence movements led to an enthusiastic “Return to Europe” by the new democratically elected governments of East Central European (ECE) states. The new political *self* embraced the promotion of democracy, human rights, security and a market economy. This led in 1990 and 1991 (and for the peacefully separated Czech Republic and Slovakia again in 1993) to membership in the Council of Europe, in 1999 to NATO (Slovakia in 2004) and in 2004 to the European Union. Full-fledged membership in these three institutions and the OECD signify the culmination of the Visegrad states’ “Return to Europe” and the West. The institutions stand for a return to a political order legitimised through democracy and the rule of law, a liberal economic and social order with the belief in prosperity through market economy and modernisation, and a return to a security order through a continued Atlanticist orientation (Tulmets 2014: 60-62). This “Return to Europe” was questioned by a small minority of ultranationalists on the right and an even smaller minority of old school communists on the left. Sovereigntist tendencies were overwhelmingly overridden by integrationists.

The second concept in Elsa Tulmets’ book is the definition and reconstruction of the historical *self* in ECE states. At the time of EU accession, Hungarian political scientist László J. Kiss highlighted this second concept when in 2004, he wrote:

The all too frequently repeated cliché ‘return to Europe’ means more than advancing towards West European and Atlantic institutions; it also means the return to ‘old’ neighbourhoods and interrelated problems, i.e. history itself. For [...] the region the regime change comprised the simultaneous re-conquest of their history [...]. (Kiss 2004: 66)

In this concept, the weight of a nation’s history is an important factor in the definition of its identity. All of the countries in ECE have experienced a problematic relationship between their sense of *state* and their sense of *nation*. In their own ways, all have historically struggled with both self-rule and the dominating influence of foreign powers in the region. Despite a Western, and to a lesser extent regional orientation in all major political camps, the European dividing line ran between a more universalistic liberal approach to formulating identity on behalf of the moderate left and an ethno-cultural approach to formulating identity by the national-conservative right.

## A new experience since 2004: sharing sovereignty in EU policies

Tulmets' text continues to analyse in detail contributions of ECE states to the EU foreign policies towards the eastern and south-eastern neighbourhoods, namely participation in the Eastern Partnership and EU enlargement policies (Tulmets 2014: 147-184). Since 2004, a "Europeanisation" of the foreign policies of the Visegrad states has taken place in this respect, and the text rightfully labels this as a "turn" (Tulmets 2014: 151) in ECE foreign policy behaviour. A case study of mine on Visegrad Four relations towards Bosnia confirms this integrationist behaviour (Walsch 2015). The new ECE identity of being a successful transformer, and subsequently achieving full membership to the EU, is used to serve as an example in these eastern and south-eastern regions that are being encouraged to develop along the same path. Domestic divisions and diverging political identities in Visegrad countries have, overall, little or no impact in these multilateral formats.

Tulmets also observes a "foreign policy consistency through the presidencies of the Visegrad Group and of the EU Council" (Tulmets: 185-219, citation 185). Such presidencies require a high degree of co-ordination and co-operation with the respective partners. Congruent with many EU member states that had held EU Council presidencies before, V4 states led the European Union with a dual strategy. On the one hand they fulfilled the role of being a 'first among equals' and an 'honest broker.' On the other hand, each ECE country that presided over the EU engaged in the thematic or geographical priorities most in line with its own foreign policy identity. The Hungarian presidency, for example, could successfully finalise the accession negotiations with the then candidate state of Croatia in the first half of 2011.

There is a different picture when it comes to internal European or – to use the term of the respective Council formation – 'General' affairs. National-conservative right wing parties react vehemently at the first perceived threat to national sovereignty, when the *self* that they have constructed domestically is encroached upon through European politics, as in rule of law issues or asylum policies. When analysing Visegrad Four co-operation in earlier contributions of mine, I distinguished an "internal" from an "external" dimension (Walsch 2014: 30-35). In accordance with Tulmets' findings above, I found overwhelming evidence that co-operation is by and large successful as long as a third party is concerned. Regardless, the Visegrad Four shy away from agendas that may limit each other's sovereignty in a wide array of policy areas of domestic relevance (ibid). V4 partners do not want to touch each other's sovereignty, however they occasionally will in the bilateral format. The short-term domestic gain of non-involvement seems to outscore a potential win-win-situation of deeper co-operation. At the EU level, the behaviour of V4 governments with nationalist and thus sovereigntist inclinations unfold along the same pattern.

More than twenty-five years after the fall of the iron curtain, and after twelve years of full membership in the most powerful alliance on the continent, it is striking that even with new shared sovereignty for ECE states, EU national-conservative parties have done little or nothing to erase or at least alter the overarching narrative of victimhood at the hands of some bigger outside force. “Brussels” is sold as “not us”: the powerful *other* that regularly interferes in “our” domestic affairs. This narrative of defending the *own* small nation from the big *other* has become a consistent theme in the region and fits well into the narrative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tragedies of Central Europe, along with such tragedies as the expansion of Nazi Berlin and of communist Moscow. In reality, decision-making has changed completely since 2004. Today Brussels is Budapest, Brussels is Warsaw, etc. Communist Moscow and Nazi Berlin were not. What is *self* and what is *other* have changed in the everyday practice of EU governance, but the narrative that a bigger power from outside threatens “us” is cultivated anew and conveniently feeds into a seemingly uninterrupted storyline of victimhood and self-defence.

### **Paradigm changes: what is different in the west of the EU?**

In searching for differences between former Western and former Eastern Europe, two arguments should be brought forward. The first is that the disasters of fascist rule and World War II functioned in Western Europe as a catharsis and led to profound redefinitions of *self* and *other*. This transformation left behind the legacy of aggressive nationalisms. In post-war Europe, six Christian Democrat governments (not national-conservative ones) decided to form the European Communities (Judt 2005). Post-1968, the West German centre-left government initiated a new *Ostpolitik* of co-operation with communist Europe, a move that was not renounced by subsequent centre-right governments. 1989-90 was seen as a historic turning point in the advancement of European unity by all major political camps across western European countries. These policies prove that both major political camps could leave behind earlier historic legacies of division and ideological orthodoxy for the sake of new opportunities for co-operation and eventual integration (on Germany see Ash 1993). In Eastern Europe, 1989 cannot be seen as a catharsis. It was simply liberation. The chance to critically reflect on past identities, which had been incorporated into building the present one, was rarely undertaken. Rather recourse to legacies of the pro-communist times, the interwar period, can be observed within the political right. Hungary, for example, under the national-conservative government of Viktor Orbán, cultivated anew the “tragedy” of the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920, which had been a dominant storyline of Horthy’s interwar Hungary. In contrast, post-1949 West German and post-1990 German elites have not initiated a political discourse on the Treaty of Versailles.

Second, the war legacy gave birth to a profound paradigm shift in continental Western European political culture: from confrontation to consensus-orientation. Even today, after more than seventy – or in the Iberian case forty – years of democratic practice, we do not see a fundamental divide over European integration in the catch-all centre-right and centre-left parties. This is a remarkable achievement, and decision-making culture in European institutions reflects this consensus approach. It should be noted that, in the eyes of the socialist and social democratic parties, the European Community was initially a rather suspicious western capitalist undertaking, and still there was willingness from both sides to co-operate. In Eastern Europe, the round-table negotiations of the 1989 revolutions, as well as the peaceful divorce of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, gave proof of elite consensus orientation; likewise, few ECE government coalitions have crossed the sovereigntist-integrationist trench post-1990. The abovementioned practice of sharing sovereignty and contributing to joint decisions based on consensus orientation in EU institutions can also already count as a newly acquired tradition. However, the older socialist legacy of superficial one-party dictated consensus-making and pre-war legacies of confrontation presaged the hard divisions that would arise on European issues between the two camps. Confrontationists – usually *Kulturkampf*-type politicians – reject proposals that are not their own. This consequently leads to a boycott of joint processes and decisions in domestic politics. On the European level, the failure to reach a compromise is then well exploited by sovereigntists for short-term domestic gains. A well-known strategy to this end is the inventing of an enemy along the scheme of a negative *other* that helps to reinforce a separated *self*. Also, it seems that confrontation – or veto-playing – is not helpful at the European level. What does prove effective, however, are the domestic traditions of consensus orientation in continental Western Europe. For example, Scandinavian countries have often experienced minority governments, which rely on compromises with non-government parties in order to reach majorities in parliament (Gallagher – Laver – Mair 2005: 388–391 and 395–397). In many countries, work in parliamentary committees also requires compromise between government and opposition (ibid, 64-66). This legacy of openness proves helpful when it comes to co-shaping issues and finding majorities in various EU Council of Ministers configurations.

## In search of solidarity

Solidarity between Western and Eastern Europe has been relentlessly under attack since the outbreak of the refugee crisis. Quarrels over this issue and V4 unity on it have become, in Zsuzsánna Végh's words, a “dubious trademark” of Visegrad Four co-operation (Végh 2017). The laurels of “top democracy transition achievers” (Kořan 2017) can be revoked from Hungary and Poland,

now borne only by other ECE countries. The laurels should also be returned to Spain, for example, whose functioning democracy has so far been able to deal with a severe and prolonged economic crisis, and to a lesser extent with the challenges of an independence struggle in the autonomous region Catalonia.

French president Macron's warning that the EU is not a "self-service supermarket", along with Commission President Juncker's statement of solidarity being a two-way avenue, casts a dark shadow over today's Kaczyńskis and Orbáns. Then there are also the innumerable criticisms from the centre-left, among them those from acting and former prime ministers of Western European EU countries. Such cumulated criticism tipped off the Visegrad Four prime ministers, and recent V4 statements on the refugee issue have dropped the term "solidarity" like a hot potato (The Visegrad Group 2017). There is also evidence that some hard-line positions were removed from official V4 statements in response to Czech and Slovak pressure (Dostál 2017; Cabada 2018). One could label this divided constellation V2+2. However, whenever disagreement flares among Visegrad partners, it is consequently sold as flexibility. To be sure, V4 is alive in a number of policy areas, but is currently in crisis over the refugee issue, that same issue that united the four countries in 2015, at the time when the different reactions vis-à-vis Russia's aggression against Ukraine held the Four hostage in a previous crisis... (for a good discussion on V4 and Russia and Ukraine see Kucharczyk and Mesežnikov 2015). Considerable V4 disagreement over both the Ukraine and the refugee issues show that consensus among the four partners is limited to the extent that it becomes difficult to recognize a common position.

On a more abstract level, it is important to explore the definitions of solidarity within the EU. At the heart of the EU solidarity debate is the mainstream conviction that one type of solidarity, for example cohesion funding, does not go without the other, in this case burden-sharing in the refugee issue. Focusing just on the issues of the refugee crisis, the mainstream conviction is that solidarity encompasses both an external and an internal dimension. This means that common EU (Schengen) external border protection goes hand in hand with the establishment of a common European asylum policy, the corresponding internal dimension. The governments of the V4 states nevertheless insist on a separation of the two dimensions and advocate more flexible approaches. V4 supports common policies on border protection and fighting root causes of migration, but ferociously reject any common European approach to asylum and migration policies.

This is seen by Western European countries as a cherry-picking, a-la-carte-type solidarity at the discretion of the single EU member state. Negotiations over the EU-budget 2021-27 will bring this debate to its inevitable climax. The EU budget will shrink due to the exit of the net-contributor Great Britain. More importantly, the wealthy EU states of Western and Northern Europe will be cast

into a stronger position as the remaining net-contributors to the EU budget. It is possible that these countries will take the opportunity to limit budgets for future EU cohesion funding, due to a perceived lack of solidarity on behalf of the V4 and other ECE states. The southern EU states of Italy, Greece, and Spain, who are all heavily exposed to refugee and migration flows, are not particularly keen to further endow their stubborn Eastern cousins, when rather EU solidarity is needed in tackling this paramount and Europe-wide issue. Despite a rift within the EU between ‘North’ and ‘South’ on how to move forward regarding governance of the Euro, southern EU states can presently count on the solidarity of their northern partners. Thus, it is the V4 states that are rather isolated in this matter.

A final important point of the solidarity debate regards European Union Treaty obligations and the “rules-based” order, lying at the heart of the whole European integration framework. It can be illustrated by the impact of the Justice and Home Affairs Council Decision of 22 September 2015, which had prescribed the compulsory distribution of a small number of refugees with granted asylum status from Italy and Greece to all other EU member states (Council of the European Union 2015). The Council Decision did not pass unanimously, but rather with a qualified majority. Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Romania voted against it; Finland abstained. (The then pro-European Polish government voted in favour. A new Czech government, in place since December 2017, announced that it would maintain the position of its predecessor.) This compulsory relocation scheme dictated that 1294 refugees be relocated to Hungary, 5082 to Poland, 802 to Slovakia and 1591 to the Czech Republic (*ibid*). Slovakia and Hungary appealed against the Council Decision at the European Court of Justice, but lost their case. The Court ruled that the decision had been made in accordance with the Treaties of the European Union, and consequently EU member states are obliged to implement the Council Decision (Court of Justice of the European Union 2017). Currently three governments – those of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic – further insist on non-implementation. In many European capitals, this continued stubbornness is interpreted as a violation of the rules-based order with which every member must comply. Continued non-compliance can quickly bring into question the sense of the whole edifice of co-operation and solidarity. Seen through the lens of future EU cohesion funding, net-contributors have leverage over those members who violate the rule of law, and can impose much stricter conditions concerning the use of future cohesion budgets. In the worst-case scenario, net-contributors may consider stopping cohesion funding for members that violate the rule of law principle and setting up new schemes for those members and initiatives that comply with common rules and regulations. As the conclusions will demonstrate, the worst-case scenario could even have this happening in bi- and multilateral agreements outside European Union structures.

## Conclusions: any alternatives?

Despite the advantages and disadvantages of regional co-operation, it is the individual member state that will be appraised by Brussels. Two issues against a number of member states – all of which are situated in the ECE region – are currently at the forefront. First, the rule of law mechanism (which is related, but still different from judgements of the European Court of Justice on specific cases or proceedings) is in force for Poland and Hungary. After years of intensive consultation, the European Commission decided to activate Article 7 of the Treaty of the European Union against Poland in December 2017 due to non-compliance with this mechanism (European Commission 2017). This could eventually lead to the loss of EU voting rights for the country. Second, the aforementioned dispute and Council infringement proceedings over the compulsory relocation of the assigned number of refugees is in place for Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, supported by the European Court of Justice ruling from September 2017. This presents evidence that Visegrad states, apart from making occasional gestures towards each other that cost nothing, act and react individually. Slovakia, for example, is concerned in neither the first nor in the second issue.

The alternative to this situation is something that the Visegrad Four tried to prevent at the celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the European Union in Rome: differentiated integration. Closer co-operation of those willing to co-operate more closely sounded, in Visegrad parlance, like a cold shoulder of arrogant Western Europe against their marginalised Eastern relatives. Whether this was another act of self-victimization is a matter of opinion. A watered-down version with the wording that all members “will act together, at different paces and intensity where necessary [...] in line with the treaties” was eventually agreed upon by all EU partners in the Rome Declaration of March 2017 (European Union 2017). Further signs point to closer co-operation in a number of policy areas as envisaged and initiated by France and Germany. The door is open to all and treaty changes may happen eventually. Visegrad can and will reform in a number of policy areas, but refrain from others. All V4 countries will participate, for example, in the newly founded “Permanent Structured Cooperation” in defence and security issues. The alternatives for governments outside the mainstream are rather simple: either co-shape an agenda with like-minded partners or veto an initiative. The power of the veto-players is yet limited. A number of agreements that deal with the handling of the euro crises of the 2010s indicate that in case disagreement overrides a reform process, member states can resort to bi- and multilateral agreements outside Union structures. Such arrangements will always play in the hands of those who conclude them. With that in mind, self-exclusion is something that governments in the region should seek to avoid.

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