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# ESSAY

## 30 YEARS OF VISEGRAD COOPERATION AND THE TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

Péter Rada

### ABSTRACT

*2021 is the Central European year as the Visegrad Cooperation celebrates and commemorates the 30th anniversary of its foundation. In case we would like to understand the political geometry in which the V4 countries need to navigate we need to understand the changes in the last 30 years, second, to analyze the trends than we are able to give predictions related to our regions multilateral relations in the Transatlantic world. The paper intends to highlight these trends and development of the Visegrad cooperation in the Transatlantic system.*

*Keywords: Visegrad cooperation, Transatlantic relations, Central European – US relations.*

## INTRODUCTION

2021 is the Central European year for Hungarian foreign policy because Hungary presides over the rotating presidency of the Visegrad Group (V4) beginning on July 1, 2021. Furthermore, 2021 is also a special year for the other V4 partners because the Visegrad Cooperation celebrates and commemorates the 30th anniversary of its foundation. The year offered Budapest the chance to continue working on enhancing cooperation in Central Europe, eliminating the remaining obstacles to joint regional initiatives and strengthening the Visegrad Spirit also in the Transatlantic Cooperation. This would help bolster our region's mutual interests within the Transatlantic decision making process and increase the security of Central Europe.

In case we would like to understand the political geometry in which the V4 countries need to navigate we need to apply the logic of foreign policy analysis: first, to understand the changes in the last 30 years, second, to analyze the trends than we are able to give predictions related to our regions multilateral relations in the Transatlantic world. The relations traditionally appear in at least three dimensions: the political, defense and economic spheres. It is beyond question that we must examine the role of Central European integration in this geometry and analyze how the specific Visegrad identity (spirit) can foster beyond regional cooperation the representation of V4's interest in the Transatlantic sphere, i.e. how the V4 countries can achieve their goals in our world's ever changing environment.

In the last three decades, that is since the foundation of the Visegrad Cooperation we have witnessed several significant changes in the international system. These cornerstones brought forth new ways of thinking about our world and new strategies. The V4 countries were affected by these changes and they needed to adapt to them. The first cornerstone was of course the process of system changes and the beginning of democratic transitions in Central Europe which of course correlated with the idea of institutionally bringing together the countries of our region . The second cornerstone were the simultaneous terrorist attacks against the United States in 2001 due

to which the world sole superpower woke up from a kind of strategic slumber and turned its attention to security issues again. The third cornerstone, the global financial and economic crisis of 2008 and 2009 called the attention (again) to the discrepancies in our celebrated liberal economic world. Most probably we can name 2014 and 2015 new cornerstones because of the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the mass illegal migration crisis in the later year. Unfortunately, the cycles got shorter and the year 2020 proved to be the beginning of a new era. The new era created new dilemmas: how can we fight the global pandemic whilst avoiding unmanageable consequences of economic regression. Let alone the fact that we will fight these challenges successfully the emergence of parallel traditional threats coming from the emergence of defiant powers are also on the table.

The cooperation of the Visegrad countries have been always significant in supporting resilience and the ability to adapt to the new realities after the changes in the world. Despite some diverging interests, Central Europeans have learnt that continuity in cooperation has real value. The V4 Presidency this year provides Hungary the tools needed to stress Hungary's priorities within our region, building on the achievements of previous presidencies and continuing to fine-tune ongoing processes and projects. This Central European year is also a unique opportunity for Hungary to improve the synergies between the goals of the V4 partners. The process has been facilitated by the numerous interlinked events within the V4 frameworks.

The Visegrad Spirit is at the heart of the V4 and it pervades the vision and goals of Hungary in 2021. It has its roots in the systematic and continued synchrony of mutual efforts, while also embodying the differentiated interests of the member states. Hungary will continue to emphasize that the V4 has become successful forum of cooperation precisely because the programs of the individual presidencies have traditionally been developed after a thorough planning process based on mutual agreement among members, where none of the priorities or program points of a presidency have been implemented against member state opposition.



During this Central European year Budapest will build on the region's common values of solidarity, creativity and respect for traditions. Hungary has a vision of a stronger Central Europe within the EU, stemming from regional cooperation based on continuity, stability, cohesion, sustainability, and last but not least, mutually prosperous economic development. Several interconnected strategic priorities for this Central European year have already clearly emerged.

However, the parallel challenges of the last decades made it clear that longer term planning also needs to be backed by the ability to adapt to the quickly changing realities. And there are new ones every year. The Covid-19 pandemic overwrote many plans and the EU was slow in reaction. Another one is less clearly seen but similarly a global problem yet and a direct challenge for our region: the Taliban captured entire Afghanistan which will reignite mass migration towards Europe. Our region unfortunately also was affected by the financial effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. However compared to the 2009 global financial crisis when the V4 countries needed to face a drawn-out financial and economic crisis, now it seems that the engine of economic development is rather in our region than in the traditional Western leading countries such as for instance in France. Enhanced cohesion within Central Europe, improved regional accessibility and the development of physical and human infrastructure are at the forefront of Hungary's and our region's response to the economic challenges in 2009, which made it possible that the V4 performed relatively better in 2020 and 2021. It is in the joint interest of Central European countries to cooperate in order to increase our region's competitiveness and cope with the pressures of global economic forces.

Central Europe as a whole is much more than just the sum of its individual countries. Effective cooperation puts our region on the global map and makes the V4 an important partner in Transatlantic cooperation. Hungary intends to utilize this and increase the economic importance of Central Europe by strengthening the synergies of economic activities within our region as well as with actors outside of Europe. It is more than evident that the Central European year is a unique opportunity for strengthening the Visegrad Spirit. And so in 2021, Hungary will continue to work on fostering synergies within the

V4 through enhanced regional cooperation, on maintaining a space for Central Europe on the “global map of importance.”

The new challenges in the last decades also made it more and more obvious that the international institutions created after the realities of the post-WW2 world are not able to respond effectively to the new threats. The Transatlantic cooperation needs to bear in mind this fact and to have a plan B. The real dilemma from the Transatlantic perspective is whether the “liberal” world order will be able to function without deep reforms. The dilemma brought heavy ideological and political debates to the surface also within the Transatlantic alliance and the label “liberal” gained negative connotation. Unfortunately, these debates are centered around questions such as the state of liberal democracy in countries within the Transatlantic alliance and they are not focused on the core question whether our alliance will be able to survive by maintaining the existing security architecture. Today the criticism is related to philosophical (sometimes outdated) principles. We need to accept that it will not worth much if we can call our world liberal when the pillars of our Transatlantic world disappear.

The Western world has experienced domestic political changes and these political trends show that the voters became more aware of the challenges in the “Twitterized” world. According to mainstream examinations of the changes in international politics of the last decades, we have to emphasize at least three conclusions. First, the societies are more active politically than ever and global problems reach easier the threshold of action in the eyes of the people. Second, even though the new technologies gave birth to global processes on which the influence of states is limited, the states are still the frames of politics. Third, the border between the international and domestic conditions for political development is invisible. 2020 and 2021 were beyond question unconventional years: The “Googleized”, “Twitterized”, or “Facebookized” international politics meant myriad of interconnected processes, the global political awakening of (everyday) people, and the emergence of new power centers (eg. tech companies and the Silicon Valley). The power of the media, the social networks have given new opportunities for politicians but also have

emerged as a very heavy burden, consequently no reliable answers were provided regarding the challenges of the post Covid world.

However, the trends in domestic politics began way before the pandemic. Many politicians and commentators were surprised and it raised eyebrows due to the political trends and changes in the United States coming to the surface during the 2016 presidential election campaigns. For those scholars who were not only bystanders the earlier similar developments in Europe it was not unexpected that the politicians who are detached from the everyday realities in the 2010s will fall and new (sometimes labeled as populist or extreme) style of politics would strengthen.

#### GENERAL TRENDS IN THE V4-TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

Since 1989 the Visegrad countries were exposed to the changes in international politics and they needed to react quickly to the incremental change in the security architecture (eg. the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia) and to the reemerged Russian influence. Yet the Western allies were not receptive to the concerns even after the Visegrad countries joined the NATO. The foremost expectation of the Alliance was unconditional integration of the “new members”. That is the integration meant full alignment. The conditions were designed by the EU in Europe and by the United States in the Transatlantic world.

Consequently, the foreign policy of the United States designated the development path for the Visegrad countries, thus the “numerology” of 30-20-15 is not only symbolic but the necessary checkpoints of the democratic transitions and transatlantic integration of the Visegrad countries. It was especially important that the transitions went on smoothly without violence and the process was at the same time democratic and integration in the Western value and interest system. Despite the existing criticism the transatlantic integration of Central

Europe had no alternative and it was successful. The Visegrad countries needed to find the healthy balance in the Western club that is the fine synergy between the American alliance and the more and more detailed conditionality of the EU accession. It was not the easiest task because the United States in the 2000s found its closest allies in the frames of the “coalition of the willing” in the “new members” of the club whilst many EU members raised eyebrows on the unilateral US foreign policy. The Visegrad countries wanted to prove that they are reliable allies of the United States and they supported Washington’s foreign policy moves but they did not want to alienate the EU right at the doorstep of full membership.

Eventually in the 2000s the Visegrad countries became full official members of the Transatlantic club but the newly arrived sometimes felt left behind and not being accepted by the old members. The feeling of being neglected or forgotten is a recurring phenomenon and it is not always unsubstantiated. The will of Western orientation and being close (member) to the EU and the NATO resulted in uncriticized adoption of institutions or rules and the Visegrad countries remained rather reactive to developments and challenges in Central Europe. It is in the Visegrad countries interest to be effective partner in the Transatlantic world but this effectiveness cannot be useful if the new ones cannot channel their own interests in the decision making process. The honest dialogue should be also important of the old members as the Transatlantic community will not be resilient if the voice of all members is not equal and there are second and third tier members in the community. Unfortunatel, this phenomenon is rather characteristic to the development of international politics in general. Due to the financial and economic difficulties the United States turned away from our region and pivoted to Asia, thus consequently new reflexes were born in the Visegrad-Transatlantic relations. It became more common that the governments of the Visegrad countries experienced harsh criticism coming from Washington and the United States intended to interfere in the domestic affairs of its allies.

We can lead scientific debates on the question whether the World became multipolar or remained lead by the United States but in practice Washington had the opportunity after the fall of the Soviet

Union to initiate changes in international relations without taking into consideration of the opinions and interests of any other players. It is still the vital concern of the United States to preserve the relative position in the international system and the power of influence.

We cannot state that the validity of the Western and European political value system has waned but the recent changes question how universal this Western value system is. The Fund for Peace think tank has published a yearly publication on the functioning of the states since 2005. The failed states index or the fragile states index shows yearly how well the countries performed each year. Of course the criteria system is Western and consequently the list shows how close these countries are to the liberal Western values. The last decade the number of underperforming states and state failure steadily grew, which poses the question whether the world became worse or the Western evaluation criteria is outdated and we should reform it, too, according to the realities. The most recent map shows that only the United States, Europe and in general the Western world was able to fulfil the expectations and fit in the Western criteria system. This could be flattering but it should rather call for caution. Today we tend to engage in philosophical debates on the real meaning of words such as liberal, democratic etc., but we need to accept that it does not matter at the end whether our system is liberal, or something else if it is not able to manage the new security threats and seizures to exist.

It has been a decade long question whether the United States is still able and willing to fulfill its role as the protector of the Western world and the values and it is a new related dilemma how the Biden administration is able to strengthen the American position as the leader of the "World of Democracies". The "America first" slogan and program did not appear only with Donald Trump. There was already strong need of withdrawal during Barack Obama's presidency and of more activity and share of the burdens by the allies. Few would argue that this is the beginning of a new multipolar world. This is for sure not true on the global scale but valid in different regions locally. China is a clear challenger but not strong enough militarily yet, Russia is on the other hand a real military power but the economy is weak and

small. Thus, the United States is clearly the most important and still the only real superpower even if it is more reluctant and more critical.

Donald Trump was often criticized that his foreign policy is unpredictable but it is not true. We can conclude that Washington became tired to be policeman of the World and is fed up with paying the protection of the Western world alone while maintaining the liberal institutions is rather a burden on the American foreign policy. It is understandable that Trump was not convinced that the United States should bear the costs of fighting international terrorism and defeating the Islamic State alone whilst the European allies are engaged in shoreless debates about identity and they are not able to come to a common agreement how to stop the immense flow of illegal migrants. Furthermore, it seems that Trump was also less patient asking the allies in vain to significantly increase their defense budget. There are positive developments in this sense but the road is still long. It is difficult to evaluate the Biden administration because of many reasons. First, due to the global pandemic Biden was not that active in the international sphere as it was expected. Second, the first year did not bring significant changes only probably in the less arrogant tone of American foreign policy.

Considering these developments we could witness new trends in international politics. The United States intends to decrease the number of all those activities which are costly and have become more and more reluctant to engage in solving new challenges alone. We can see this very clearly in case of Afghanistan in 2021. The American foreign policy clearly overstretched in the 2000s and became tired. Especially, after the 2003 invasion of Iraq Washington gained more criticism than approval. It could not be continued and already George W. Bush tried to find a way out; Obama's main goal was to engage the partners and leave the two battlefronts in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Trump has also looked for new solutions for the dilemma: how to remain in a world leadership position and decrease the burdens and costs on the United States at the same time. In this sense Trump did not begin a new politics rather the foreign policy reflects the American public opinion. And even more importantly Biden continued along this trend.

All the arguments above are valid despite the fact that still around 200 thousand American soldiers serve abroad and the United States is still present in all continents. It is also true even though the American troops did not leave Syria after defeating the (formal) Islamic State and killing the leader of the terrorist group. Dealing with the regional challengers Trump decided to engage them and have more intense conversation with them trying to solve bilateral conflicts with them, such as the trade balance and trade questions with China. Trump or Biden are not idealists and intending to have better relations with the competitors (words are not equal to deals as we see in case of Biden) serves pure American interests.

The trend reemerged in the 2010s that the international politics became remilitarized and the traditional power politics is a reality again. The military solutions are on the table and diplomacy, international law, or political solutions lost some importance (not much has changed under the Biden administration). At the same time the conflicts have also changed; the number of armed groups increased and the violent conflicts within the states are also more common. Whilst great power politics and competition is back in the game and even mid-size countries try to use the opportunity and navigate in the vague power relations (such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or even Belarus).

The above mentioned developments are even more serious because the EU struggles with the domestic problems and the dysfunctional institutions and the Transatlantic community is in general in an identity crisis. Having said that it is even more understandable the “American first” slogan, and that the United States relies more on the realist self-help. Economic trends shows that in the future the economic investments main target countries will be the United States and China and the EU’s share will decrease steadily. If the EU will not able to reform itself and get over the shoreless debates on the members domestic politics and party politics motivated criticism the future is rather dim. In the meantime China’s economy is still growing faster. China can only profit from a longer crisis period in the EU, let alone the fact that Russia always intended to create tension, the crisis of the Western world is also a comfortable development for Russia.

The trends in world politics and the events and processes which govern the international politics are unpredictable and besides the challenges in this dimension we should not forget that there are regionally conflicts which directly does not affect the future of the World, but they still mean a heavy burden for the international community.

Almost a year after the Biden administration took over in Washington it is not crystal clear yet what can we expect regarding the Transatlantic relations especially considering that during the election campaign only few words dealt with foreign policy and beyond many words not many deeds happened. What we still can predict after several meetings in 2021 that the Transatlantic relations will remain very important for the United States, and Washington will not forget that Europe is the most important ally. However, the balance will move towards Western Europe again and Germany's relation with the United States will develop from the all time low during Donald Trump. The United States' interest will be a united EU and will not tolerate differing voices from Central Europe as it will be regarded weakening the unity of the EU. Also Washington will need stronger economic ties to recover the economic fall due to Covid-19. Biden will not tolerate close ties with Russia, or China whilst he will expect more global level cooperation in the international organizations.

The NATO regained some momentum after the Russian invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine but the Alliance still lacks a clear mission and struggles to provide an unmistakable point of reference. Whilst there was a wide consensus in the Central European political elite that the political, economic and societal transition process needs to be designed according to the Western norms due to the unquestioned goal of the Euroatlantic integration. However, even after joining the NATO and the EU Central Europeans still cannot completely trust the Western European allies due to the different views on fundamental questions for instance within the EU, such as illegal migration, consequences of the Brexit, the future of the Eurozone. Furthermore, the Central Europeans have had some fears on a potential Western-Russian conciliation. In order to avoid to become too vulnerable to the Western interests and to balance the



Russian presence Central Europeans wanted to build as close relationship with the United States as it was possible. The Central European fears were not completely unsubstantiated which was proved for example by the North Stream agreement and the North Stream 2 project, the double standards regarding South Stream, or Nabucco, or when it came to the economic sanctions against Russia after the invasion of the Crimea. The Central Europeans have been more affected by the sanctions which has been mentioned several times for instance by the Hungarian government provoking only Western criticism while Germany, or France maintained close economic ties with Russia even in strategic sectors.

Even though the clear effort of the Central Europeans to remain close to the United States Washington has not always appreciated the “newest” allies and sacrificed them in case other strategic consideration were stronger such as the “reset” with Russia, or the pivot to Asia. Despite the Central European efforts and participation in most missions by the end of the day the criticism remained common mostly – except Poland – due to the low defense spending. It is on one hand not surprising because burden sharing has been a general debate within the NATO the last decades. The Trump administration was more pragmatic and paid more attention to Central and Eastern Europe. The ideologically dictated foreign policy seemed to disappear but probably only those allies can expect less criticism in the future which indeed make efforts to fulfill the American requests regarding defense spending, or are geostrategically very important and not too close to Russia politically.

## THE “NEW WORLD ORDER AND THE V4 IN THE TRANSATLANTIC POLITICAL GEOMETRY

The 30th anniversary of Visegrad Cooperation’s birth is also a good moment to think back on the last three decades. The V4 countries all went along the exhausting road of democratic transition and they built functioning market economies, they became members of both the

NATO and the EU. During these times there were of course set backs in the Transatlantic relations and also in the regional cooperation but it is very important to note that all dimensions – political, defense, economic – of Transatlantic relations have remained significantly important for the V4. However, even if 2021 seemed to be a Central European year of commemoration of successes we cannot neglect the presence of the menace of Covid-19 which became a primary concern in the world and to manage it the need for an even more systematic effort and cooperation is a must in our Transatlantic world. This is even more true when we look at the changing political geometry: not letting alone the fact that the fight against the global pandemic is a priority we could witness that “traditional problems” and finding solutions for them have slid into the background. These menaces however have never disappeared, the emergence of great power rivalry due to China and Russia is still on the table (or better to say they used the opportunity of the Covid-19 pandemic to strengthen their grip of power at least in their real or perceived sphere of influence), and on the other hand international terrorism, the illegal migration crisis, energy security, or cyber threats have not been managed in a reassuring way. This is exactly where the role of the Visegrad countries can gain weight. It is our common responsibility to keep also these questions in the agenda of Transatlantic decision making.

Until full membership, the foremost goal of the Visegrad countries was the successful and operative integration in the Western clubs. In spite of the fact that the process can be assessed as effective, the question has been unfortunately valid during the decades of membership why the new members cannot have equal voice in political debates and why the Western allies applied double standards vis-à-vis the Visegrad countries. The V4 has aimed at close relation and cooperation within the Transatlantic community and the goal was to build and maintain close ties with the United States. However, sometimes substantiated fears were present that the strategic considerations many times overshadow the importance of V4-US relations and despite Central European efforts the United States does not refrain from driving a wedge in the alliance. See for instance the Biden administrations demonstrative differentiation when the list of invited countries was planned related the “Democracy Summit”.

The picture would not be complete without looking at the permanent crises the EU needs to face today. The most severe problem is that the EU could not find its identity after the accession of the Central European members due to the fact that the unprecedentedly bigger and diverse community was not able to find common answers to the parallel challenges of the 2010s: the financial and economic problems in the EU and the Euro zone, the illegal migration crisis, military threat in the neighborhood etc. Designing the future of Europe must be based on wide acceptance of the reality that the for instance the Visegrad countries have different interests. It is true that the last decade started pessimistically with the global financial crisis and continued not promising either. The prospects will not less dim if the plans for the future cannot integrate all members and some feel left out. It is not enough the European Commission publishes white books, or the French president comes out with his own political vision our Germany designs the economic strategy. The consequences of the 2008-2009 economic crisis can still be felt and even if the Visegrad countries resilience is incomparably better today we can only hope that the EU is prepared for the new economic fall back. The litmus test is most probably the Covid-19 pandemic and the old and new members need to work assertively to both preserve common solution whilst channeling in the individual concerns to avoid miserable failure.

The Visegrad countries economy is in a better shape and they develop relatively quicker whilst with the Brexit our countries lost an important ally within the block. Germany will remain in the center for finding the way out because France despite serious ambitions is not able to outline a functioning political perspective alone.

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# ESSAY

## 30 YEARS OF VISEGRAD COOPERATION – THE POLISH PERSPECTIVE

Jakub Bornio

### ABSTRACT

*The collapse of the Soviet Union enabled a new opening in the foreign policy of recently established states and Moscow's former satellites, including Poland. The new geopolitical circumstances opened a window of opportunity for Poland's foreign and security policy which then decision-makers decided to use in their march toward Euro-Atlantic platforms of integration. Poland succeeded in its Euro-Atlantic integration as well as was operational within numerous regional platforms of cooperation such as the Weimar Triangle, Bucharest Nine, the most recently inaugurated Lublin Triangle and the most important from the perspective of this paper the Visegrád Group (V4).*

*Keywords: Visegrad cooperation, Poland, Central Europe.*

## INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union enabled a new opening in the foreign policy of recently established states and Moscow's former satellites, including Poland. The new geopolitical circumstances opened a window of opportunity for Poland's foreign and security policy which then decision-makers decided to use in their march toward Euro-Atlantic platforms of integration. The post-Solidarity parties that ruled the country shortly after the fall of Iron Curtin defined it quite clearly. On 26 April 1990, Krzysztof Skubiszewski (MFA from 1989 till 1993) stated in his expose that Poland "will co-create a system of European security [...] will cooperate for the cause of unity of our continent" as well as it will expand "links with European organizations and groupings", most importantly the European Communities<sup>1</sup>. Noteworthy, such policy was understood in terms of not only geopolitical but also civilizational reorientation<sup>2</sup>. Surprisingly, all the succeeding governments – including post-communist ones – consequentially tried to "escape" from the grey zone of security<sup>3</sup> and strived for membership in the NATO Alliance and the European Union<sup>4</sup>. This primal objective obviously determined other external dimensions of policy including "coexistence with mighty neighbours", Germany and Russia, as referred to as by Skubiszewski, and intensified cooperation within the region, "with special emphasis on integration in the Czechoslovakia-Poland-Hungary triangle"<sup>5</sup>. As a result, Poland succeeded in its Euro-Atlantic integration as well as was operational within numerous regional platforms of cooperation such as the Weimar Triangle<sup>6</sup>, Bucharest Nine<sup>7</sup>, the most recently inaugurated Lublin Triangle<sup>8</sup> and the most important from the perspective of this paper the Visegrád Group (V4). Noteworthy, such grouping is not a distinctive feature of Central and Eastern Europe since similar platforms of cooperation may be found in other European regions too<sup>9</sup>.

RESEARCH PROBLEM, METHODOLOGICAL  
APPROACH AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

This paper examines Poland's perspective on the V4 cooperation rather than focusing on the platform by itself. Therefore, readers will not find here a general prospect of functioning of the Group nor a description of its establishment, priorities, and institutional framework. Instead, the research problem was focused solely on motives of Poland's engagement in the platform, Warsaw's policy and strategy toward it – or sometimes lack of this strategy – as well as on the place of the platform in Polish “political psyche”, meaning visions and imaginations of both policy-makers and authors of relevant literature. Critical analysis of primary sources and literature as well as the interviews constitute the basis of the study. Due to the specificity of the research problem, the literature was limited to the one written by the Polish authors<sup>10</sup>. In order to “catch the mood of the moment”, the author referred mostly to the literature representative for a concrete phase of the platform's operation.

The structure of the paper reflects periods distinguished on the basis of twofold factors. Namely, the general condition of the platform and Poland's policy toward it. The latter being determined by internal preconditioning. Hence, the paper includes two sections Pre-accession and Post-accession, each of them having relevant subsections. Subsections are not proportional, since the V4 and Poland's engagement in it had not the same dynamic in each period. Three periods in the pre-accession phase have been distinguished. They are 1990-1992 with a high dynamic of political contacts and formal inauguration of the platform; 1993-1997 with the decline of the initiative; and 1998-2004 with its revival<sup>11</sup>. Bearing in mind changing role of the V4 in Poland's foreign policy and applying Adrian Chojan's approach<sup>12</sup>, three periods have been distinguished also in the post-accession phase. They are 2005-2007 relatively short period of Law and Justice (PiS) led coalition government; 2007-2015 with Civic Platform (PO)–Polish People's Party (PSL) coalition government; and 2015-2021 with another PiS government.

## PRE-ACCESSION

*Golden years 1990-1992*

States' international behaviours result from both objective and subjective determinants. The latter is caused by various factors including ideological factors, national myths, false perception of international structure and outer actors behaviours, as well as following stereotypes or historical clichés just to name a few of them. Regardless of the fact that they strongly limit the rationality of decision making and behaviours<sup>13</sup>, they might have both negative and positive consequences. Negative when they deteriorate international cooperation and positive when they lay the foundations for its development.

Undoubtedly, the historical experience have a great impact on politics in Central-Eastern Europe<sup>14</sup>. Poland's foreign policy too is not free of this burden<sup>15</sup>. Hence, Polish authors and politicians pay great attention to the historical bounds that had linked Czech, Hungarians, Poles, and Slovaks before they officially inaugurated and formalised their cooperation in 1991. In general, emphasising the "community of fate" of nations and states of Central-Eastern Europe that shall result in their integration<sup>16</sup> has a centuries-long tradition in Polish geopolitical thought<sup>17</sup> and obviously shape Poland's foreign policy. When it comes to the V4 cooperation, the Polish authors quite often invoke the historical event of XIV century<sup>18</sup> and even emphasise spiritual connections between four nations<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, special attention is being paid to the joint experience of communist oppression as well as a common anti-communist struggle. Andrzej Ananicz, the Polish diplomat and longstanding officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in years 1991-1994 and 1997-2001, noted that "Visegrad cooperation began long before it was proclaimed by the authorities of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia." "In Poland – Ananicz continues – as far back as the 1970s, thanks to the Committee for the Defence of Workers (KOR), the Independent Publishing House (NOWA), and other independent initiatives, we became familiar with the publications of Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian opposition figures. Democracy activists from our countries met each other despite repression from the communist authorities. We knew that regardless



of the borders that divided us, our views of reality were similar and our assessments of communism identical”<sup>20</sup>. Also, Zbigniew Janas, Member of the Polish Parliament (1989-2001) and member and co-founder of the Polish-Czechoslovak Solidarity and Polish-Hungarian Solidarity, underlines the importance of anti-communist resistance in further establishment of the V4. “If I had to say when the Visegrad Agreement began to take shape – Janas writes –, I would pick the moment in the 1970s, in the mountains, when the representatives of KOR (the Committee for the Defence of Workers) and Charter 77 began meeting with each other. Or afterwards [...] when the Hungarian opposition representative Tibor Páth came over from Hungary. He was the first herald of the impending Polish-Hungarian Solidarity, which was officially constituted later, in the 1980s. It was natural that as soon as the communist system collapsed in all our countries, we started to think of what to do to sustain the values we had nurtured in difficult times, to preserve the spirit of cooperation and solidarity”<sup>21</sup>. Regardless of the symbolic character, Zbigniew Janas resembles in his memories that contacts from the communist period enabled to initiate the first Havel-Wałęsa meeting in 1990 in the Giant Mountains, as well as resulted in the success of the very first meeting of V3 at the highest level in Bratislava in April 1990 and in Prague in June the same year<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, the “community of fate”, emphasised so strongly by Polish authors and politicians as a factor that predestines these countries to tighten ties, resulted also in practical outcomes.

Membership in NATO and the European Communities, later the EU, became the imperatives of Poland’s foreign policy. So it was for most of the former satellites of the Soviet Union. Hence, from this angle, for Poland, the regional platforms of cooperation had a supportive character. They were always supplementary toward greater strategic goals, which were related to Poland’s relations with the Soviet Union and with the Western Community. Nevertheless, Polish decision-makers, were always aware of the full coherence of policies of V4 countries in this matter. One might have claimed that Poland’s goals could not have been separated from the wider regional context. Certainly, that was the perception of Minister Skubiszewski who wrote that “if the countries of Central-Eastern Europe are free and

democratic, then their geopolitical position and especially the geostrategic importance of Poland could, and should, be turned into an asset that supports peace as fosters freedom. It is no coincidence that once Poland had secured a firm grasp of its internal and foreign policies in the middle of 1989, other countries in the region began to follow suit<sup>23</sup>. Hence, regional cooperation was often enlisted in Poland's priorities just after its strategic goals<sup>24</sup>.

Ryszard Zięba, in his article published in 1993, noted that the "new regionalism" that emerged in Central-Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 90s served for Poland as a catalyst in the European path of development and an attempt to break the Cold War cliché that divided Europe into two parts<sup>25</sup>. Before the strategic goal was achieved, some processes had had to be reversed on the ground. Mentioned here Andrzej Ananicz, paid great attention to the role that V4 played in the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and Comecon<sup>26</sup>. Regardless of the fact that the V4 was not *spiritus movens* of these structural changes, it provided decision makers with a sense of stability in negotiations which required "considerable intellectual effort and persistence"<sup>27</sup>. In the context of withdrawal of Soviet troops from three states, "we – Ananicz notes – consulted each other almost every week, mutually following the proposed treaty clauses"<sup>28</sup>.

It is a widespread opinion in Poland that Poland's relatively highest potential naturally predestines the state to become a leader of the grouping. It obviously had and has some limitations caused by distrust and concerns of other V4 states<sup>29</sup>. It happened that Krzysztof Skubiszewski, for instance, spoke on behalf of the whole grouping what caused some dissatisfaction of V4 partners<sup>30</sup>. Andrzej Olechowski, the officer in Ministry of Economic Cooperation with Abroad 1991-1992, responsible for the establishment of CEFTA<sup>31</sup>, economic advisor to President Lech Wałęsa and MFA in 1993-1995, admitted that Poland was fully aware of this fact, thus never had any ambitions to become a leader of the group per se, especially when it comes to the V4-EU relations. What is more, Olechowski claims that Poland deliberately did not present itself as a leader, even though it *de facto* was a key player in the region and grouping "warrant officer" when it comes to the relations with NATO<sup>32</sup>.

In the first phase of cooperation, Poland had naturally its expectations from the V4. It sought deeper, more advanced and institutionally developed relations. Polish academics generally perceive it as the most pro-Visegrad among V4 states<sup>33</sup>. Minister Skubiszewski regretted that summits in 1991 had declarative and non-concrete character<sup>34</sup>. It is worth mentioning that the Polish idea to institutionalise the platform was rejected too<sup>35</sup>. Poland was, however, determined to elevate the cooperation to a certain level, thus CEFTA was enthusiastically supported by the state authorities as well as appreciated in the literature. As Andrzej Olechowski noted, from the Polish perspective CEFTA was to become a “glue” that sticks politically motivated, thus unstable, grouping. Olechowski resembles that it was extremely hard to convince Vaclav Klaus, then Czechoslovak Minister of Finance, to this idea. The greatest achievement and Poland priority behind CEFTA – and the V4 as a whole – as perceived by Olechowski was to prevent the “integration race” that could emerge among V4 countries in its cooperation with the EU<sup>36</sup>. The situation was interpreted the same by President Wałęsa, who mentioned during the V4 meeting in Budapest in 1991 “that the signs of unhealthy rivalry and quarrels between the countries of the region saddened him”<sup>37</sup>. Maciej Perczyński, in his article published in 1993, presented three strategic expectations that economic cooperation among V4 states should have met in order to bolster their position in external economic relations<sup>38</sup>. He defined them as follows: increasing the influence as well as strengthening the joint bargaining position in the process of association with the EU; the revival of economic cooperation and the use of production capacities; and in-depth activities aimed at the harmonization of system transformations and standardization to the Community requirements<sup>39</sup>. Nevertheless, such ambitions were never turned into reality with the percentage share in total merchandise trade between V4 countries in 2019, at almost the same level as in 1995<sup>40</sup>. Nothing illustrates better the Polish approach to the V4 cooperation in its initial phase than the speech by Krzysztof Skubiszewski in the Senate (the Upper House of Polish Parliament) in 1992. “Cooperation within the Visegrad Triangle has become an important element of the present European structure. The international public opinion perceives the Triangle as a factor stabilizing the situation in our part of the continent and securing

democratic changes, protection of human rights and the establishment of a market economy. (...) Our cooperation has acquired a permanent character and serves the objective interests of the three countries. We need better coordination of joint activities in the international arena, including efforts to become members of the Communities (...) and, over time, membership of the North Atlantic Alliance. Preparations for full integration into the mainstream of European integration should be accompanied by a comprehensive development of ties and cooperation in various areas between the three countries and societies, including the implementation of the idea of a free trade area. Only this kind of concrete approach to building the European order will make us credible as reliable partners of the European community and will allow us to actively influence its future shape<sup>41</sup>. It will show that in this part of Europe, not only disintegration is possible, but also integration. We believe this is the way we should go. Our partners have so far shared this conviction. I think they will also share them if there are any changes in Czechoslovakia”<sup>42</sup>.

### *Visegrád in decline 1993-1997*

Obviously, Poland did not react enthusiastically to the V4’s decline. Andrzej Olechowski states in his 1994 expose that “we assess the weakening of the Visegrád group - regional cooperation for the exchange of views and possibly their joint expression - as unfavourable. It stimulates the search for other relationships in Central Europe. This does not suit us, as we cannot find a better definition than the Visegrád group. Let me remind you that it groups our countries not only because they are neighbours, but because they are leaders of political and economic reforms among post-communist countries and are unequivocally in favour of integration with the European Union and NATO. We are looking for projects that could revive cooperation in the group”<sup>43</sup>. Minister Olechowski’s successor Władysław Bartoszewski, MFA in 1995, also expressed his dissatisfaction with the poor state of relations within the V4. In his expose, he concluded that “Regardless of our efforts, political

cooperation within the Visegrad Group did not reach the dynamics and level we expected". On that occasion, MFA admired CEFTA's enlargement over Slovakia and stated that Poland's contribution to the initiative strengthen the state's position in the EU accession<sup>44</sup>. However, unlike Olechowski, Bartoszewski did not announce any attempts at the initiative's revitalisation. That was the first signal that Poland's approach toward the initiative had tempered. As a result, Dariusz Rosati, MFA in 1995-1997, did not mention the V4 and contributing countries in his initial Expose at all<sup>45</sup>. The V4 was completely "whipped out" also from the exposes of succeeding PMs. Waldemar Pawlak, Józef Oleksy, and Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz completely ignored the initiative in their inaugurating speeches<sup>46</sup>.

It is commonly believed in Poland that V4's decline was caused by scepticism in other V4 countries. Zięba made an assessment that despite political consultations and security issues Czechoslovakia and Hungary did not intend to cooperate in the spheres of economy, culture and people to people contacts. Even if they declared it – Zięba continues – they did this only because pushed by the West. On this occasion, he referred to Vaclav Klaus' statement, from 1991 when Klaus yet served as the Minister of Finance, that Czechoslovakia was not willing to cooperate with Poland and Hungary because it would have delayed Czechoslovakia's return to Europe<sup>47</sup>. The Polish authors place almost whole responsibility for V4's decline on Poland's regional partners, especially Czech and Slovakia<sup>48</sup>. The same was concluded in the special report published by Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2013<sup>49</sup>. Also Minister Olechowski, then MFA and Aleksander Kwaśniewski (President of the Republic of Poland in 1995-2005) were of the same opinion emphasising Vaclav Klaus' – then PM – personal prejudices or even animosities as well as Vladimír Mečiar's – then PM of Slovakia – policy as key factors in V4's decline<sup>50</sup>. In Poland, relatively great attention is being paid to the fact that V4 failed in achieving one of its primary goals, namely coordination of integration process with the Euro-Atlantic structures. As noted by Anna Czyż, the fact that every state formally applied for Membership in the EU on a different dates became symbolic exemplification of this failure<sup>51</sup>.

In the period of V4's decline, the Polish efforts were focused almost solely on cooperation on the basis of CEFTA. Minister Olechowski admitted that the priority was to tighten economic ties among V4 countries in order to guaranty calm relations and to avoid "affrays". It is due to the fact that the latter could have hindered V4 rapprochement with NATO and the UE, Olechowski believes<sup>52</sup>. Indisputably, the Polish authorities were thinking of wider strategic priorities even in the period of V4's limited cooperation. Andrzej Ananicz, who resembles some minor symbolic issues and disputes over the customs union summarised that V4 cooperation after the division of Czechoslovakia "did not cease, but it decreased in intensity and became more focused on economic issues (...). It was also a time to think again about what could be done and what was worth doing together in politics"<sup>53</sup>. Dariusz Rosati's, Poland's MFA in 1995-1997, approach toward CEFTA seems to prove Poland's tempered enthusiasm toward the initiative that occurred in the next years. Unlike Olechowski, Minister Rosati perceived the initiative only as a doorstep to the Single European Market<sup>54</sup>.

Surprisingly, Poland was not determined to revitalise the platform at the highest political level. Olechowski concluded that there were no "great needs"<sup>55</sup>, each state was focused on "its job", and the ministries were in constant contact and kind of matey cooperation. It seems that until 1998, Warsaw followed the pattern of its partners. Dariusz Rosati, Poland's MFA in 1995-1997, confessed that V4 cooperation was not his primal objective. He rather focused on Poland's membership in NATO and EU, which "consumed 90% of the time" that his cabinet spent on foreign policy<sup>56</sup>. Surprisingly bearing in mind that that rapprochement with the European Communities was one of the priorities of V4. Regardless of the fact that Minister Rosati resembles numerous meetings with V4 partners (or rather Czech and Hungarian partners on various levels), he also shares the opinion of Minister Olechowski that his counterparts were not frank in their intentions. Namely, both Czech and Hungary tried to present themselves as well-developed and prepared for European integration, unlike Poland that was lagging behind. Hence they wanted to distance themselves from the V4 initiative and join the Communities sooner<sup>57</sup>. In this sense, V4 failed in achieving its other goal which was to prevent contributing

parties from the “integration race” – as seen from the Polish perspective.

*Visegrád revived 1998-2004*

Similar to the V4’s decline, the Polish authors identified the reasons behind Visegrád’s revival outside Poland. It does not mean that they completely ignore the proactive and cooperative attitude of Polish decision-makers like Jerzy Buzek, PM in 1997-2001, or Bronisław Geremek, MFA in 1997-2000<sup>58</sup>. It rather means that they emphasise Poland’s constant readiness for cooperation and simultaneous divergent approach of its partners<sup>59</sup>. Especially, internal political changes in Czech and Slovakia are portrayed as real “game changers” for V4<sup>60</sup>.

Renewed enthusiasm of V4 partners was largely supported by the government in Poland and its main figures. In his expose, PM Jerzy Buzek emphasised his appreciation of CEFTA and announced plans to enlarge this initiative<sup>61</sup>. That was the first time when Poland declared quite openly that it intends to engage V4 in bringing non-allied states closer to the Euro-Atlantic organisations. Quite a revolutionary approach, bearing in mind that Poland was not yet a member of NATO nor the EU. That had been also a far-sighted vision which was later adopted into Poland’s agenda. Indeed, Warsaw consequently supports further enlargements of both NATO and the EU and uses various platforms of regional cooperation, including V4<sup>62</sup>, to pursue its goal. In this context, Warsaw’s eyes turned firstly into Bratislava. PM Buzek’s hopes, about Slovakia being a “natural partner” with coherent to Czech, Hungary, and Poland “goals and aspirations, as well as the manner of their implementation”, which was expressed in his expose already in 1997, were shared by his counterparts. One year later, during the meeting in Budapest, PMs of Czech, Hungary and Poland called Slovakia to “retake its seat” in V4<sup>63</sup>. In 1999, Bronisław Geremek, while introducing priorities for Poland’s foreign policy, stated openly that “an important task of the group was to actively promote Slovakia's candidacy for membership in NATO”<sup>64</sup>. In the next

years, V4 summits were the perfect occasion to declare support for mainly NATO enlargements. For instance, in 2001, V4 expressed its full support for the Baltic States accession to the Alliance and simultaneously recommended rapid acceptance of Slovakia and Slovenia – as noted by Jerzy Buzek<sup>65</sup>.

The platform's attractiveness of that time was also noticed and appreciated by Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs which in 2013 concluded that the group had "the image of a strong regional centre of political cooperation" which "resulted in requests from third countries for inclusion in the V4. The group was then an attractive club whose membership ennobled and facilitated effective politics. Lithuania, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia were mentioned among the potential new members". Regardless of the fact that the V4 was never enlarged, the newly established V4+ format was undoubtedly desirable from the Polish perspective.

Poland's approach toward the V4 was always specific. Even in the "revival" period, the Polish authorities were aware of internal tensions within group thus made efforts to avoid any turbulences. Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, MFA in 2001-2005, resembled the situation from 2002 in which Poland had had to initiate the mediation process between Hungary and Czech as well as between Hungary and Slovakia, that according to him disrupted V4 cooperation<sup>66</sup>. On another occasion, Minister Cimoszewicz stated that "Despite the disputes and manifestations of disloyalty that we witness within the Visegrád Group, it remains an important direction of our policy in the Central European region"<sup>67</sup>. Unchangeably, Poland was determined to keep the group vital. Yet still, the platform lacked the "beyond-political" substance that could have teamed up contributing countries. Poland was invariably committed to providing the grouping with it. President Kwaśniewski envisioned that it could be done also via more soft measures including cooperation between societies, universities people of culture, as well as tourism<sup>68</sup>.

The last phase of the pre-accession period let the contributing parties provide it with the necessary impetus and elevate the level of cooperation also institutionally. A few years after Poland's initial proposals, the grouping was equipped with institutionalised



structures, namely the Visegrad Found, as well as the rotational presidency, fixed schedule of the summits at the highest political level, and cooperation on the parliamentary level.

In 2004, with the so-called EU Eastern Enlargement, the V4 has fulfilled its statutory task. It obviously caused the rise of numerous opinions that the platform shall be dissolved<sup>69</sup>, which, however, suddenly did not happen. Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz shortly after Poland's accession to the EU stated that "after Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary were admitted to the EU and NATO, many politicians claim that now each country can go its own way. This, however, raises the risk of the decomposition of Central Europe. Therefore, the issue of the region's identity should be seen [...] in terms of a strategic challenge"<sup>70</sup>. Aleksander Kwaśniewski admitted that immediately after joining the EU, Vaclav Klaus proposed dissolution of the V4, since according to him the platform fulfilled its tasks. President Kwasniewski, however, was determined to keep the initiative functional. He argued that the platform might be used in future as an "insurance policy" in case of any problems, including security ones<sup>71</sup>.

## POST-ACCESSION

### *Law and Justice led government 2005-2007*

Even before PiS seized power in 2005, it had become clear that a new formula and new priorities for the V4 cooperation had to be defined. Bearing in mind the institutional framework and specificity of decision-making process within the EU, the V4 almost immediately was identified in Poland as a platform that would contribute to the political bargaining within the EU. Already in January 2004, Minister Cimoszewicz emphasized that "We attach great importance to cooperation with the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary in striving for common interests within the Union"<sup>72</sup>. President Kwaśniewski admitted that he thought of the V4 cooperation as of factor that would "help to build position of contributing countries

within the EU” but importantly not against the EU<sup>73</sup>. Being aware of Czech, Hungary, and Slovakia consciousness about Poland’s role within the group in the post-accession period, Polish decision-makers emphasized very strongly “the common interests” and Poland’s resignation from the “leadership” ambitions<sup>74</sup>. Adam Daniel Rotfeld, MFA in 2005 (shortly before the alternation of power), while referring to the V4 in his Expose, stated that “our partners could see that Poland does not perceive the region as a base for its political ambitions on the EU forum. We also do not pretend to be regional leader. We set ourselves other goals: we want to use the prestige and position in the European and transatlantic family to pursue the interests of the region”<sup>75</sup>. President Kwasniewski evaluated that such stance was effective since his partners had never made him feel that they were afraid of Poland’s domination<sup>76</sup>. Regardless of that, the perspective of V4 instrumentalisation by Poland appeared under the PiS led government – or at least it was interpreted like this by Polish authors and sometimes in other states of the platform. The opinion on the instrumental character of the V4, which unveils the Polish perception of what the Group should be, was also shared in the aforementioned report by the Polish MFA. The report concluded that “it also quickly turned out that maintaining an organized form of regional cooperation would be an effective tool in the fight for one's own interests and place on the European arena”.

Plenty of Polish analysis on the V4 in the EU included calculations of the division of the votes within the Council of the EU, especially when the voting weights system was still operational<sup>77</sup>. Some of them compared the sum of votes of V4 with those of different configurations of countries. It clearly shows that from the Polish perspective V4 was a kind of intra-EU counterbalance, especially to the German-French tandem. Obviously, this would sometimes require a larger than V4 coalition of states, thus the V4+ format appeared to be an attractive form of cooperation. For example V4+ Lithuania, V4+ Austria, V4+ Benelux<sup>78</sup> or even V4+ non-EU states like Ukraine. The latter was one of Poland’s priorities, so was the V4’s engagement in the EU and Poland’s eastern policy. Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, Poland’s PM in 2005-2006, emphasized it openly stating that “the Visegrad Group has already played an important role in supporting the Orange Revolution

in Ukraine. It is our moral obligation, as well as in the interest of the European security to support democratic change in Belarus and to strengthen the pro-European orientation of the internal and foreign policies of Ukraine and Moldova”<sup>79</sup>. Surprisingly, the PiS-led government did not back the idea of the group’s enlargement - as declared by Stefan Meller<sup>80</sup>, MFA in 2005-2006. Anna Fotyga, MFA in 2006-2007, underlined it very strongly during her expose, stating that “We are in favor of preserving the integrity of the group, remaining open to proposals for its cooperation with other countries”<sup>81</sup>.

As noted by Adrian Chojan, PiS was particularly interested in strengthening the cooperation within the V4, because it assumed that the grouping will naturally help to lobby for the Polish interests and elevate the effectiveness of Poland’s foreign policy in general<sup>82</sup>. Tightening ties among V4 countries was identified as one of Poland’s priorities by the most prominent decision-makers of that time, including Lech Kaczyński, president in 2005-2010<sup>83</sup>. Due to its relatively biggest potential, Poland under the PiS-led government, had a natural ambition to become the regional leader as well as a key player behind the process of European integration – even if not declared it openly. Opinions that Poland is predestined to “represent Central Europe’s views”, “mobilise states of the region” or initiate the process of building of regional, perhaps anti-German alliance were widespread in PiS “back office”<sup>84</sup>. This, however, did not always result in an effective policy within the V4<sup>85</sup>. As noted by Artur Adamczyk “It was this "greatness" of Poland that gradually aroused concern and even reluctance of the other three to the Polish government's initiatives. Both Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia began to fear that Poland would impose its will on them under the "guise" of coalition consultations. Hence, they started to be very distrustful of cooperation with Poland, stressing that their national interests might be divergent”<sup>86</sup>. These factors made “only” ad hoc coalitions possible, in the fields where all V4 countries interests were coherent. It was visible for example in terms of the intra-EU negotiations on the future shape of the Cohesion Policy.

The PiS led government had the vision to equip the initiative with a concrete infrastructural substance, an added value that would

integrate the engaged states not only politically but also economically. The same way previous governments were thinking of CEFTA. It is worth mentioning PiS continuous efforts in this matter since this idea was revitalized after 2015 when this political fraction resized the power in Poland, as well as started to materialize under the umbrella of another regional initiative supported by PiS, namely the Three Seas Initiative<sup>87</sup>. In 2006, Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz wrote “we need political will, time, and financial aid to redress the civilization differences that separate us from the older members of the European Union. This gap will have to be bridged if we want to provide the European Union with a real and consistent material foundation, not just a rhetorical one. (...) From the perspective of Warsaw and our government, the development of transport infrastructure, especially the most neglected North-South axis, should become the economic link between Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. We intend to build a freeway soon along the eastern border of Poland, Slovakia and Hungary to connect the Baltic States with the Balkans and Turkey. We would also like to complete unfinished highways and in the future build a highway connecting Gdańsk with the Czech and German road networks. These new transport routes will generate new jobs, improve cargo circulation, and create better investment conditions”<sup>88</sup>. Due to the coalition turbulences in Poland and the imminent collapse of the government, these projects, which obviously require long-run planning, had to be postponed.

The several years post-accession period was a time when V4 had to adapt to the new political environment in which it found itself. Difficulties in finding a common ground in terms of foreign policy at the EU level unveiled that V4 might be useful but at the same time, it is not always is an effective instrument of Poland’s foreign policy, since national often contradictory interests cannot always be reconciled. On one hand, it was extremely hard for V4 to join efforts in some policies (for example institutional framework of the EU, or position on Russian energy policy) on the other hand certain dimensions of cooperation were identified too (for example EU Budget or Cohesion Policy). One may state, that Poland’s minimum necessary for the V4 in that period was to maintain “the Visegrad Group as a regional forum for dialogue on European issues, in line with the spirit and practice of the

European Union” – as it was declared in the priorities of the Polish presidency for 2004/2005<sup>89</sup>, and as it was achieved.

*PO-PSL's turn westward 2007-2015*

The long-run cadencies of governments usually enable states to stabilize their foreign policies. Especially when followed by personal stabilization at the highest political level. That was the case of 2007-2015 period, in which Poland's foreign policy was run almost entirely by two figures, Donald Tusk, PM in 2007-2014, and Radosław Sikorski, MFA in 2007-2014<sup>90</sup>. It is commonly and unrightfully believed that in that period, Poland's engagement in V4 declined, and simultaneously, the Weimar Triangle had gained more importance<sup>91</sup>. Nonetheless, a brief review of the most important events from this period, shows that V4 summits at the various political level had relatively high dynamic<sup>92</sup>. So was the Polish contribution to them. Minister Sikorski, referred to these allegations already in 2010 during the debate on the Priorities of Poland's foreign policy. On that occasion, in quite emotional words he claimed that “The Visegrad Group is something that is now working more intensively and more realistically than ever in its history”<sup>93</sup>. One shall also notice that both PM Tusk and Minister Sikorski declared in their exposes that the V4 would be a priority dimension of their foreign policy<sup>94</sup>.

Such inequitable perception of Poland's Visegrad policy under PO-PSL was caused by the fact that Minister Sikorski almost completely inverted the logic behind Poland's engagement in the initiative. Unlike PiS, which wanted to instrumentalise the platform, use it as a counterbalance, and become effective EU playmaker thanks to the position in the V4, Sikorski wanted to be an effective playmaker in the region thanks to the strong position in the EU. According to his logic, the latter could be achieved only with acceptance and via good relations with Berlin and Paris. That is how Sikorski explained this approach in his book published in 2018. “I faced a dilemma as to what would be a more sensible strategy for Poland: to seek participation in the leadership of Europe alongside and with Germany's consent, or to

organize coalitions of other member states to counterbalance Germany's growing influence? The question to which the answer has practical consequences, also in our policy towards other countries. (...) If we are a candidate for leadership, our initiatives for cooperation in Central Europe should be formulated within the EU and in favor of maximizing the influence of the region, and not against someone's alleged hegemony. If we want the current members of the club's management board to recognize us as a valuable candidate for the group which holds power, then we must be predictable and responsible for the entire institution, and not only strive for our own small interests. I believed that Poland's ambition should not be to lead the second league but to enter the first. I believed that, with a reasonable policy, we have a chance to permanently enter the group of six EU countries, without which no important decision is made. And under certain circumstances, for example after Brexit, which I was already afraid of at the time, Poland may climb to the summits that we could only dream of in the past. Due to the political weakening of Spain and Italy as a result of the financial crisis and the then inability of France to carry out economic reforms and the self-elimination of Great Britain, Poland could aspire - as a representative of Central Europe - to create the Paris-Berlin-Warsaw axis as a new engine for the whole Europe. (...) Instead of a hard counterbalancing of Germany, the building influence in our region so that the region would like us to become its representative, and the European directorate would recognize the usefulness of such a role for Poland”<sup>95</sup>.

In this period, the V4 continued to be an instrument of Poland's eastern policy. The Polish decision-makers made great efforts to win the support of their Visegrad counterpart for the cause of EU Eastern Partnership and Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU. Simultaneously, Hungary was working on a similar project aimed at bringing the Balkan states closer to the EU<sup>96</sup>. Hence, the Visegrad partners were backing each other on the basis of reciprocity. Especially the V4+ format became vital and contributed to the enlarged regional cooperation. In this context, in 2011, PMs of the V4 declared that they “intend to facilitate the process of enlarging the area of stability and democracy in the EU neighborhood and actively contribute towards the implementation of European and Euro-

Atlantic ambitions of the countries of Eastern Partnership and continue to support the Western Balkans countries in their EU and NATO integration”<sup>97</sup>. In 2012, Minister Sikorski declared in his expose continuous efforts to invite regional partners to the V4+ format<sup>98</sup>. In the same year, in one of the interviews, he even confessed that he was in favor of expanding the Group. However, there was no unanimity on this among the founding members<sup>99</sup>.

The relations with Russia were always a focal point for Poland. Hence, the V4 was often used as a platform of consultation of policies toward this country. In reaction to the August war in Georgia, Poland effectively convinced its regional partners to take a critical stand on Russia’s activities<sup>100</sup>. The same was repeated in 2014 when V4 criticized Russia for its aggression against Ukraine<sup>101</sup>. However, working out a common position on Russia was not always easy. Grzegorz Schetyna, MFA in 2014-2015, declared openly that divergence of approaches toward Russia and particular economic interests are the greatest threats to the coherence of the V4<sup>102</sup>. It is worth noting, in the context of Russia, the V4 had to face the challenge caused by the energy crisis in 2009, which to some extent stimulated the V4 cooperation in this matter<sup>103</sup>. In 2012, Poland enlisted the establishment of the regional gas market as one of the priorities of its presidency in V4<sup>104</sup>. Minister Sikorski, explained that his government was thinking also about integrating gas networks<sup>105</sup>. However, despite its declarative character it is hard to argue that the V4 cooperation in the energy sector was successful. It is worth mentioning how divergent V4 countries are in this context, with Slovakia gaining profits from the Russian gas transit and Hungary’s ambiguous policy toward Russia, also in the energy sector.

It is clear that PO-PSL government was aware of the infrastructural weakness of V4 cooperation that resulted in limits of regional contact in various fields. Thus, “Poland has also clearly defined the most important challenge for the V4 in the coming years (...) and defined a precise goal, ie the creation of vertical communication routes in order to be able to take full advantage of our geopolitical location and the cooperation potential of Central and Northern Europe” – as noted in the report from Poland’s presidency in 2012/2013. Nevertheless, such

ambitious infrastructural projects remained just in the sphere of declarations of this government.

Surprisingly, the V4 intensified its military cooperation with the decision on forming the V4 EU Battlegroup, which so far was twice on stand-by in 2016 and 2019. That was also a perfect occasion to strengthen ties with V4 partners. In 2016 Ukrainian Armed Forces joined the V4 Battlegroup while in 2019 the unit was enhanced by Croatian troops. On the basis of the military links, Poland also intended to sell Slovakia the Rosomak APC (armored personnel carriers) in its Scipio version prepared especially for the purpose of the Slovakian contract<sup>106</sup>. In July 2015 PM Ewa Kopacz and her Slovakian counterpart Robert Fico signed the letter of intent but finally after the alternation of power in Poland the contract was not realized.

PO-PSL turn westward in the context of Poland's engagement in the V4 cannot be easily assessed. On one hand, Poland's primal focus on the Weimar Triangle did not diminish political cooperation within the V4 – quite contrary the intensity of political meetings was quite high – on the other, there was no major, splendid successes of V4 cooperation in this period<sup>107</sup>. The new initiative that emerged in the region in 2015, namely the Slavkov Triangle, was interpreted in Poland as an exemplification of Prague and Bratislava's disappointment from Warsaw's new approach<sup>108</sup>. What is more, the group went through a deep crisis in 2015 as a result of the migration pressure in Europe. During the Council of the European Union summit, Poland unexpectedly withdrew from the previous intra-V4 arrangements to reject the quota and relocation system of migrants. That decision caused a harsh reaction from its V4 partners, who announced that the grouping is de facto dysfunctional<sup>109</sup>.

#### *PiS led government and its vision of V4 2015-2021*

After seizing the power, PiS led government almost immediately broke up with the decision of its predecessors on the migration quota and relocation of migrants, which let the V4 get back on track. This



decision constituted a signal of deeper structural changes in Poland's foreign policy that occurred in the following years. The core assumption of PiS foreign policy was the revitalization of the Polish security dilemma of the country that is sandwiched between Germany and Russia<sup>110</sup>. The set of regional alliances along the strategic partnership with the USA became the solution to this trap. Hence, regional cooperation became a focal point of PiS's foreign policy. That included V4 intensified cooperation (in fact this grouping replaced the Weimar Triangle), the Three Seas initiative that became a PiS flagship project, and President Andrzej Duda's continued efforts to develop the so-called Bucharest Nine Format.

Witold Waszczykowski, MFA in 2015-2018, paid in his expose enormous attention to the objective of regional cooperation and Poland's unique role in the region that result from "the country's special location in Europe". According to Waszczykowski Poland is predestined to bring the north and south of Europe "closer to each other, to create a new regional identity within the European Union"<sup>111</sup>. By doing so, Minister Waszczykowski, revitalized the concept of Poland's leadership in the region, which as noted might cause some difficulties<sup>112</sup>. Also, Beata Szydło, PM in 2015-2017, during her expose was openly speaking on behalf of the whole region, which Poland – according to her – "will strive to empower"<sup>113</sup>. Even though, the PiS is often accused of blindly ignoring some internal differences within the V4, Minister Waszczykowski admitted openly that the grouping is extremely incoherent in various dimensions. They include disproportion of capabilities, different geopolitical situation, divergent political ambitions and policies toward major issues and states. These are the main reasons – according to Minister Waszczykowski – why countries do not conduct agreeable politics in all fields<sup>114</sup>. The reasoning behind the great importance of the V4 in Poland's foreign policy is twofold. Firstly, it meets the internal demands of the Polish society in which anti-German resentment is still widespread or might be easily activated with a simultaneous more positive attitude toward V4 nationalities<sup>115</sup>. One shall add also a specific sense of messianism and longing for the "lost empire", wide acceptance of the anti-migration policy associated with the V4, and myths of specific relations between Poland and some of the V4 partners. Secondly, it

might help to fulfill the foreign policy agenda – as envisioned by PiS. It remains questionable, however, whether other V4 countries are ready to follow and support Poland in its priorities. Minister Waszczykowski wished the group to conduct coherent policy within the EU, but he is also fully aware that it is impossible<sup>116</sup>. The divergence of approaches is visible in the context of various issues. Czech and Slovakia fail to share Poland's imagination of Germany as a hostile country<sup>117</sup>. Minister Waszczykowski stated that he is fully aware of the fact that for the Czech Republic the cooperation with Germany is an imperative, thus Prague would never stand against Berlin<sup>118</sup>. Hungary's policy toward Russia remains ambiguous. Not all of the V4 countries are in favor of US engagement in the region, and not all of them want to follow Washington in its anti-Chinese policy. Poland's failed attempt to convince the V4 partners to reject the candidacy of Donald Tusk during the European Council Presidential election was also a reputational defeat.

It seems that PiS counts for V4 support in its disputes with the EU. The fact that the party is ideologically correlated with the Fidesz-led is not without significance, even though Czech and Slovakia do not share the Polish-Hungarian vision of the EU's future development. This factor is crucial especially in the context of Budapest and Warsaw's disputes with the European Union and their alleged support which prevent the application of the preventive and sanctioning mechanisms of Article 7 TEU. According to Anna Czyż, however, these disputes rather disunites the V4 than strengthen its coherence<sup>119</sup>.

Despite the aforementioned issues, one should enlist several other sectors of Poland's interests in the V4. Unquestionably, the migration and Warsaw's continuous objection to the "refugee welcome" policy remains one of them. Another one is Poland's determination to convince its V4 partners to support the idea of further militarization of the so-called NATO's Eastern flank. In this context, PiS continued the idea of the V4 EU Battlegroup which had been initiated by the preceding government. Like many governments before, the PiS government is too aware of the fact that the region lacks infrastructural connections, which could stimulate the cooperation and elevate it to "hard" above-political level<sup>120</sup>. The V4 is an important

instrument on that matter, even though many activities were transferred into the Three Seas Initiative level. Minister Waszczykowski has even claimed that his political fraction look wider than through the prism of V4 cooperation<sup>121</sup>. What is more, Poland remains “open to dialogue and consultation with other partners from outside the Visegrad Group” under the umbrella of the V4+ format – as expressed in the report on the Polish presidency of the Visegrad Group<sup>122</sup>. Noteworthy, the V4 is still a platform that enables forming the ad-hoc coalitions within the EU<sup>123</sup>.

## SUMMARY

Since its establishment in 1991, the Visegrád Group was a reference point for almost every Polish government. For Poland, the platform and its functioning were never the goal per se but rather was an instrument complementary to the wider political objectives. In the very first years of its functioning, these were accession to NATO and the EU respectively. When that was achieved, the V4 evolved into an instrument that might potentially let Poland pursue its interests within the EU and regionally. In the post-accession period, two visions on the V4's role in the Polish foreign policy were dominant. Interestingly both of them were inseparably connected to the non-V4 state, namely Germany, and dependent on the role that Poland assigned to this country. The natural predisposition of Poland to become the leader of the region, which results from relatively the biggest potential, was not always enthusiastically welcomed by Czech, Hungarians, and Slovaks. Thus some of the Polish governments tried to self-limit themselves. The history of the grouping shows that the internal tensions were an inseparable components of its trajectory. Hence, the V4 was never as coherent as most of the Polish governments wished it to be. One of the greatest structural weaknesses of this platform that was identified by the Polish decision-makers in different periods was the lack of material substance that was able to tighten the links between four countries. This resulted in the fact that so far the V4 cooperation and its shape depended on the

whim of political elites in each of contributing states. This factor needs to be changed if the Visegrád Group is to become more than the ad hoc player.

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K. Skubiszewski, Sejm statement by Minister for Foreign Affairs of the RP, Krzysztof Skubiszewski (Warsaw, 26 April 1990), Translated version source: [https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/statement\\_by\\_krzysztof\\_skubiszewski\\_on\\_polish\\_foreign\\_policy\\_warsaw\\_26\\_april\\_1990-en-6a0b3b70-0545-43ce-be95-59e1c0cd825c.html](https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/statement_by_krzysztof_skubiszewski_on_polish_foreign_policy_warsaw_26_april_1990-en-6a0b3b70-0545-43ce-be95-59e1c0cd825c.html)

<sup>2</sup> Or rather civilizational comeback.

<sup>3</sup> Diplomatic relations started already in 1991, even before the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Zając J. (2016) 'Go West': Poland's Security Policy in Transition. In: Poland's Security Policy. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59500-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59500-3_2); Zięba R. (2011) Twenty Years of Poland's Euro-Atlantic Foreign Policy. International Studies, Interdisciplinary political and cultural journal, Vol. 13, No. 1/2011 33–47, DOI: 10.2478/v10223-011-0004-2

<sup>5</sup> K. Skubiszewski, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> German-French-Polish grouping. See more K-O. Lang, D. Schwarzer, *Consolidating the Weimar Triangle. European Policy Functions of German-Polish-French Co-operation*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comments 30, October 2011, source: [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2011C30\\_lng\\_swd\\_ks.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2011C30_lng_swd_ks.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> S. Gerasymchuk, *Bucharest Nine: Looking for Cooperation on NATO's Eastern Flank?*, Ukrainian Prism/ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, October 2019, source: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueeros/ukraine/15574.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> J. Bornio, *Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine Inaugurate 'Lublin Triangle'*, The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 115, source: <https://jamestown.org/program/lithuania-poland-and-ukraine-inaugurate-lublin-triangle/>

<sup>9</sup> The Benelux and the Nordic-Baltic Eight just to name two of them.

<sup>10</sup> Just to underline the Polish perspective. Apologise non-Polish speakers for this methodological approach.

<sup>11</sup> Such periodization is well founded in the literature by both Polish and Foreign authors. See M. Dangerfield, *The Visegrád Group in the Expanded European Union: From Preaccession to Postaccession Cooperation*, East European Politics and Societies, Vol. 22, No. 3, pages 630–667, 2008; P. Bajda (ed.), *Raport polskiego przewodnictwa w grupie Wyszehradzkiej lipiec 2012-czerwiec 2013*, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 2013, source: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=238>; A. Czyż, *Grupa Wyszehradzka – 20 lat współpracy*, „Athenaeum. Polskie Studia Politologiczne”, (Vol. 42 (2014), p. 7-23.

<sup>12</sup> A. Chojan, *Grupa Wyszehradzka w polityce zagranicznej Polski – między współpracą a rywalizacją*, Biuletyn Analiz i Opinii ZE ISP PAN, Nr 04/2016 (25).

<sup>13</sup> R. Zięba, *Polityka zagraniczna Polski w strefie euroatlantycznej*, Warsaw 2013, p.24.

<sup>14</sup> G. Mink, L. Neumayer (ed.), *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> R. Zięba, *Polityka zagraniczna (...) op cit.*, p. 25, S. Bieleń, *Deficyt realizmu w polskiej polityce zagranicznej*, *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, nr. 3-4 (t.38) 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Sometimes with a special role of Poland.

<sup>17</sup> See eg. O. Halecki, *The Historical Role of Central-Eastern Europe*, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 1944;232(1):9-18; R. Juchnowski, *Miejsce geopolityki w polskiej myśli politycznej XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa 2018.

<sup>18</sup> See eg. R. Kowalski (ed.), *Od Zjazdu w Wyszehradzie do Grupy Wyszehradzkiej: kilkadziesiąt lat współpracy środkowoeuropejskiej : praca zbiorowa*, Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne 2017; S. Gawlas, *The 1335 Meeting of Kings in Visegrad*, in: *The Visegrad Group: A Central European Constellation*, A. Jagodziński (ed.), International Visegrad Fund, Bratislava 2006.

<sup>19</sup> W. Biliński, *Central Europe's Mutual Saints*, in: *The Visegrad Group: A Central European Constellation*,

A. Jagodziński (ed.), International Visegrad Fund, Bratislava 2006

<sup>20</sup> A. Ananicz, *From the Anti-Communist Underground to NATO and the EU*, in: *The Visegrad Group: A Central European Constellation*, A. Jagodziński (ed.), International Visegrad Fund, Bratislava 2006

<sup>21</sup> Z. Janas, *How I Started Visegrad in Mroziewicz's Kitchen?*, in: *The Visegrad Group: A Central European Constellation*, A. Jagodziński (ed.), International Visegrad Fund, Bratislava 2006.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> K. Skubiszewski *Change versus Stability in Europe: A Polish View*, *The World Today* Vol. 46, No. 8/9 (Aug. - Sep., 1990), pp. 148-151.

<sup>24</sup> Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Poland's PM in 1989-1991, was very restrained when it comes to Poland's foreign policy priorities while presenting his government in 12 September 1989. The Soviet Union was the main point of reference of his speech. Nevertheless, soon after describing his vision on how to settle the complicated relations with the Soviet Union, he called for the development of relations within the region. See: Oświadczenie Prezesa rady ministrów w sprawie proponowanego składu i programu prac Rządu, 7 posiedzenie Sejmu w dniu 12 września 1989, p. 20; Mazowiecki convinced his initial scepticism 15 years later in: T. Mazowiecki, *The Mutual Return to Europe*, in: *The Visegrad Group: A Central European Constellation*, A. Jagodziński (ed.), International Visegrad Fund, Bratislava 2006; Krzysztof Skubiszewski described this approach in the following words: „*A significant supplement to the dualism: Europe - mighty neighbours is our policy of new regional links (...). Here we are interested in the new future link, with special emphasis on integration in the Czech-Slovakia-Poland-Hungary triangle.*” In: K. Skubiszewski, *Sejm statement (op cit.)*.

<sup>25</sup> Zięba enlisted Visegrad, Baltic, and Heksagonale Group (later known as Central European Initiative) as exemplifications of the “new regionalism”. R. Zięba, *“Nony regionalism” w Europie a Polska*, *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 1993, nr 1-2, s. 25

<sup>26</sup> A. Ananicz, *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> M. Gniazdowski, *Polska polityka w Grupie Wyszehradzkiej: paradoksy skali*, *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* 2012, nr 2 (64), p. 46-47.

- <sup>30</sup> A. Bieńczyk-Missala, *Polityka regionalna jako dziedzictwo Krzysztofa Skubiszewskiego*, in: A. Bieńczyk-Missala, R. Kuźniar, *Dziedzictwo Krzysztofa Skubiszewskiego w polityce zagranicznej RP*, Warszawa 2020, p. 174.
- <sup>31</sup> Central European free trade Agreement
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Andrzej Olechowski, 17 November 2021.
- <sup>33</sup> See e.g. A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Doświadczenia i perspektywy*, Katowice 2018 p. 80-88.
- <sup>34</sup> A. Bieńczyk-Missala, *Polityka regionalna... op cit.*, p. 170
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170-171.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview with Andrzej Olechowski, 17 November 2021.
- <sup>37</sup> Tomasz Grabiński, *The Summit in the Frosty Ruins: The Background of the 1991 Visegrad Meeting*, in: *The Visegrad Group: A Central European Constellation*, A. Jagodziński (ed.), International Visegrad Fund, Bratislava 2006.
- <sup>38</sup> It is justified to claim that his article was representative to the Polish perception of the economic cooperation of the V4 of that time.
- <sup>39</sup> M. Perczyński, *Współpraca grupy Wyszehradzkiej a integracja europejska. Rola rynku krajów Grupy Wyszehradzkiej w rozwoju ich zewnętrznych stosunków gospodarczych*, *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 1993, nr 2, p. 67-68.
- <sup>40</sup> Ł. Ambroziak, et. al, *Grupa Wyszehradzka – 30 lat transformacji, integracji i rozwoju*, Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny, Warszawa 2021, p. 19.
- <sup>41</sup> In this part of the speech Minister Skubiszewski unveiled Poland's ambitions to shape future integration processes within the Communities. Perhaps via V4?
- <sup>42</sup> Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Krzysztof Skubiszewski in Senate, 25 June 1992, source: <http://ww2.senat.pl/k2/dok/sten/016/16spr1.pdf>
- <sup>43</sup> Minister Andrzej Olechowski's Expose, 12 May 1994, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata2.nsf>
- <sup>44</sup> Minister Władysław Bartoszewski's Expose, 24 May 1995, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata2.nsf/63fe8ac1a9a1ac48c125746d0030d0f8/884e9392eb68bd89c12574eb003150f9?OpenDocument>
- <sup>45</sup> Minister Dariusz Rosati's Expose, 9 May 1996, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata2.nsf/63fe8ac1a9a1ac48c125746d0030d0f8/bd761e405e289b64c12574ef003b5621?OpenDocument>.
- <sup>46</sup> Only Waldemar Pawlak mentioned occasionally the grouping by stating that his government will strive for the success of regional initiatives, including V4. See all PM speeches in <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata2.nsf/mowcaWWW?OpenView&Start=1&Count=999&Collapse=206#206>
- <sup>47</sup> R. Zięba, *Nowy regionalizm... (op cit)*, p. 30.
- <sup>48</sup> See the article by Anna Czyż who makes several references to the other authors. A. Czyż, *Grupa Wyszehradzka – 20 lat współpracy*, „Athenaeum. Polskie Studia Politologiczne”, (Vol. 42 (2014)), p. 15-17.
- <sup>49</sup> P. Bajda (ed.), *Raport polskiego przewodnictwa... op cit*, p. 9.
- <sup>50</sup> Interview with Andrzej Olechowski, 17 November 2021; Interview with Aleksander Kwaśniewski, 16 Dec 2021.
- <sup>51</sup> A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Doświadczenia i perspektywy*, Katowice 2018 p. 91.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>53</sup> A. Ananicz, *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> The interview with Dariusz Rosati, 2 Dec 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Indeed, top common priorities which were Warsaw Pact dissolution and withdrawal of the Soviet troops from the states had been already achieved, while the EU and NATO preferred format of bilateral negotiations.

<sup>56</sup> The interview with Dariusz Rosati, 2 Dec 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Doświadczenia i perspektywy*, Katowice 2018 p. 92.

<sup>59</sup> Regardless of the fact that in the last years of “decline period” Poland did not try to provide the initiative with necessary impetus.

<sup>60</sup> See e.g. A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna... op cit.*, p. 91-92; A. Czyż, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 19; A. Chojan, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 3; P. Bajda (ed.), *Raport polskiego przewodnictwa... op cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> PM Jerzy Buzek's Expose, 10 Nov 1997, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata3.nsf/63fe8ac1a9a1ac48c125746d0030d0f8/a50f5bf4c1a99521c1257490004b6c29?OpenDocument>

<sup>62</sup> Inviting the Ukrainian Armed Forces to join the V4 EU Battlegroup that was on standby in the first half of 2016 is a perfect example.

<sup>63</sup> A. Czyż, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 19

<sup>64</sup> Bronisław Geremek Speech in the Sejm, 8 Apr 1999, source: <http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata3.nsf/main/48BD8E19>

<sup>65</sup> Money.pl, *Koniec szczytu państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej*, 25 Aug 2001, source: <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/wiadomosci/artykul/s;koniec;szczytu;p;anstw;grupy;wyszehradzkiej,43,0,49451.html>

<sup>66</sup> W. Cimoszewicz, Speech in the Sejm, 22 Jan 2003, source: <http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata4.nsf/main/7363564F>

<sup>67</sup> W. Cimoszewicz, *Speech on Poland's foreign policy priorities*, 13 Mar 2002, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata4.nsf/63fe8ac1a9a1ac48c125746d0030d0f8/fc68847fd592fd4bc1257472003c2de6?OpenDocument>

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Aleksander Kwaśniewski, 16 Dec 2021.

<sup>69</sup> A. Chojan, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 3; P. Bajda (ed.), *Raport polskiego przewodnictwa... op cit.*, p. 10

<sup>70</sup> W. Cimoszewicz, *Polska w zamęcie świata*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 12.06.2004, p. 9, in: A. Czyż, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Aleksander Kwaśniewski, 16 Dec 2021. President Kwaśniewski mentioned issues with Russia that he anticipated, and claimed that he for sure persuaded Hungarian and Slovak partners. At the same time he was uncertain when it comes to Vaclav Klaus.

<sup>72</sup> W. Cimoszewicz, *Speech on Poland's foreign policy priorities*, 21 Jan 2004, source: <http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata4.nsf/main/4A199911>

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Aleksander Kwaśniewski, 16 Dec 2021

<sup>74</sup> Factor noticed also by previous governments as confessed by Andrzej Olechowski in the interview. Aleksander Kwasniewski expressed the same opinion in the interview.

<sup>75</sup> Expose by Adam Rotfeld, 21 Jan 2005, source: <http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata4.nsf/main/53CA9313>

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Aleksander Kwaśniewski, 16 Dec 2021.

<sup>77</sup> See e.g. A. Chojan, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 4; E. Kuzelewska, A.R. Bartnicki, *Grupa Wyszehradzka – nowe wyzwania bezpieczeństwa i perspektywy współpracy*, Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej, nr 11/2017, p. 106-107; J. Sepiół, *The turn of the regions, or new life for the Visegrad group*, in: A. Jagodziński (ed.),



*Publication on the Occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Visegrad Group*, Bratislava 2006.

<sup>78</sup> See the whole set of meeting in various configurations in 2005, in: Visegrad Group, Selected events in 2005, source: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2005/events-in-2005>

<sup>79</sup> K. Marcinkiewicz, *The Visegrad Declaration. 15 years later*, p. 19, in: A. Jagodziński (ed.), *Publication on the Occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Visegrad Group*, Bratislava 2006.

<sup>80</sup> See: S. Dębski, J. Dołęga, Polska polityka zagraniczna w 2005 r., *Rocznik Strategiczny 2005/2006*, p. 377.

<sup>81</sup> Anna Fotyga's Expose, 11 May 2007, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata5.nsf/4502edaa6c2fbb77c125745f0037938f/301fdb47f14d1be6c1257466003fd848?OpenDocument>

<sup>82</sup> A. Chojan, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 3-4.

<sup>83</sup> J. Gajewski, *Polityka regionalna Polski*, *Rocznik Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej*, 2006, p. 167-168.

<sup>84</sup> M. Gniazdowski, *Polityka Polski w Grupie Wyszehradzkiej*, *Rocznik Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej* 2008, p. 166-167.

<sup>85</sup> M. Gniazdowski, *Op cit.*

<sup>86</sup> A. Adamczyk, *Współpraca państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej na forum Unii Europejskiej – doświadczenia i wyzwania*, *Studia Europejskie*, 4/2015, p. 74.

<sup>87</sup> A. Tatarenko, Ł. Lewkowicz (ed.), *The Three Seas Initiative in the International Perspective*, Lublin 2019

<sup>88</sup> K. Marcinkiewicz, *The Visegrad Declaration... op cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>89</sup> J. Gajewski, *Op cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>90</sup> It is, however, necessary to mention, that until 2010 Lech Kaczyński, PiS representative, occupied the presidential office. It also provided him with ability to engage in Poland's foreign policy.

<sup>91</sup> See e.g. A. Chojan, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 7-9.

<sup>92</sup> Videgrad Group, Calendar of selected events, source: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>

<sup>93</sup> Radosław Sikorski speech in the Sejm, 8 Apr 2010, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata6.nsf/f7d22bd4c1700a9ec125738c003df43c/f3b5b21140cbfccfc1257700002c32ed?OpenDocument>

<sup>94</sup> Donald Tusk's Expose, 23 Nov 2007, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata6.nsf/f7d22bd4c1700a9ec125738c003df43c/c2f0913296a12fedc12573ad0041f851?OpenDocument> ;

Radosław Sikorski's Expose, 7 May 2008, source: <https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata6.nsf/f7d22bd4c1700a9ec125738c003df43c/daba09e1f796d398c1257443002dc4f9?OpenDocument> ;

Radosław Sikorski's Expose, 29 Mar 2012, source: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm7.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=11&dzien=2&wyp=121&view=4>

<sup>95</sup> R. Sikorski, *Polska może być lepsza*, Warszawa 2018, p. 199.

<sup>96</sup> A. Czyż, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>97</sup> The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group, Bratislava, 15 Feb 2011.

<sup>98</sup> Radosław Sikorski's Expose, 29 Mar 2012.

- <sup>99</sup> I. Janke, *V4 czyli znak jakości (An interview with Radosław Sikorski)*, RP.pl, 1 Jul 2012, source: <https://www.rp.pl/publicystyka/art6046371-v4-czyli-znak-jakosci>
- <sup>100</sup> A. Adamczyk, *Współpraca państw Grupy...*, op cit. p. 77.
- <sup>101</sup> J. Bornio, *Bezpieczeństwo narodowe Polski w kontekście kryzysu ukraińskiego. Wymiar polityczno-militarny*, Difin 2019, p. 168.
- <sup>102</sup> M. Habowski, *Polska w Grupie Wyszehradzkiej (2011-2017)*, Dyplomacja i bezpieczeństwo, Nr 1(5) 2017/2018, p. 46.
- <sup>103</sup> A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna... op cit.*, p. 104-105.
- <sup>104</sup> P. Bajda (ed.), *Raport polskiego przewodnictwa... op cit.*, p. 13.
- <sup>105</sup> I. Janke, *V4 czyli... op cit.*
- <sup>106</sup> Defence24.pl, *Scipio – Slovak Variant Of The Rosomak APC*, 26 Jun 2015, source: <https://www.defence24.com/scipio-slovak-variant-of-the-rosomak-apc>
- <sup>107</sup> One shall emphasise, however, importance of V4 consultations on the European Union climate and energy package and adopted in 2008 and joint efforts in the 2014-2020 EU Budget negotiations.
- <sup>108</sup> A. Chojan, *Grupa Wyszehradzka... op cit.*, p. 8; D. Kalan, *The Slavkov Triangle: A Rival to the Visegrad Group?*, PISM Bulletin, No. 19 (751), 16 February 2015.
- <sup>109</sup> A. Adamczyk, *Współpraca państw Grupy...*, op cit. p. 84.
- <sup>110</sup> Despite the fact that Germany is one of the most important (economically) partners for Poland, bilateral relations after 2015 cooled. The level of the bilateral meetings has been lowered down. Cooperation within the Weimar Triangle has been almost completely suspended. What is more, PiS has been using historical arguments in its relations with Germany (the case of German-Nazi camps or the World War II reparations). Other conflictual issues in relations with Germany included migration policy, the Nord Stream 2, German restrained policy when it comes to the militarisation of NATO's Eastern Flank.
- <sup>111</sup> Witold Waszczykowski's expose, 29 Jan 2016, source: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=10&dzien=2&wyp=2&view=4>
- <sup>112</sup> Minister Waszczykowski is, however, fully aware that Poland's partners in the V4 "do not take Poland's leadership easy". Thus Poland cannot be "the hegemon" of the group – Waszczykowski declared. In: Interview with Witold Waszczykowski 7 Dec 2021.
- <sup>113</sup> Beata Szydło expose, 16 Nov 2015, source: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=1&dzien=4&wyp=1&view=4>
- <sup>114</sup> Interview with Witold Waszczykowski 7 Dec 2021.
- <sup>115</sup> See: Komunikat z badań CBOS, *Stosunek do innych narodów*, nr 31/2020. Waszczykowski stated openly that he is aware of German attempts to become Hegemon of Central Europe, this view is not, however, shared by V4 partners. In: Interview with Witold Waszczykowski 7 Dec 2021.
- <sup>116</sup> Interview with Witold Waszczykowski 7 Dec 2021.
- <sup>117</sup> It is visible especially in the context of the Three Seas Initiative. The engaged countries emphasised by numerous occasions that the project is not against other EU Member States nor it is the alternative for the European Union.
- <sup>118</sup> Interview with Witold Waszczykowski 7 Dec 2021.

<sup>119</sup> A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna... op cit.*, p. 219-220.

<sup>120</sup> Stance expressed also by Minister Waszczykowski in the interview.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Witold Waszczykowski 7 Dec 2021.

<sup>122</sup> Report on the Polish presidency of the Visegrad Group, 1 July 2016 – 30 June 2017, source:

<https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=361>; Minister

Waszczykowski envisions even “merge” of the Three Seas Initiative with some countries of the Eastern Partnership (Moldova, Ukraine). In: Interview with Witold Waszczykowski 7 Dec 2021.

<sup>123</sup> The case of Posting of the Workers’ Directive, see: *ibid.*

# ESSAY

## 30 YEARS OF VISEGRAD: FROM 'BACK TO EUROPE' TO THE FIGHT FOR A DIFFERENT EUROPE

Ladislav Cabada<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*The Visegrad Group has become a visible but predominantly negatively perceived protagonist over the last decade. This paper observes the transformation of V4 into the form of a populist regional group including the embeddedness of the group in the network of European national-populist and nativist forces. Using the concept of culture wars, it presents the basic positions of two clear-cut groups both within the V4 and in the wider European context. It rejects the Manichaeian conception of 'good' and 'evil' established by these two groups and emphasizes the need for consensus using the basic premise of classical liberalism, i.e. the right to have a different opinion.*

*Keywords: Visegrad cooperation, European Union, conflict of values, populism.*

## INTRODUCTION

February 2021 saw the anniversary of 30 years from the signing of the Visegrad Declaration. There have been a number of crises concerning bilateral discords within the group, with the individual positions of some prime ministers and governments limiting the cooperation to a minimum. There have also been rather significant value disagreements particularly in the last decade, including an attempt to establish an alternative Central European partnership with a different ideological basis on the platform of the Slavkov Triangle (cf. Cabada 2018). In spite of this fact, the current Visegrad Group (hereafter V4) can be viewed as a relatively vivacious structure with a very ambitious self-presentation. V4 is currently (self-)presented in various media and political contexts and narratives from an exceptionally wide range of perspectives – one time demonised, another time perceived as the *advocatus diaboli* or the protector of ‘normality’.

It is apparent that the images and narratives of Visegrad frequently prevail over other significant aspects of the cooperation, i.e. the success of the group and its members. This success involves particularly the accession to NATO and the EU, which demonstrates sufficient socialization based on western standards (Walsch 2018). This success is an old one, however, and is relativized by the fact that apart from the ‘champions’ of Central Europe, which is how the countries of the Group perceived themselves already in the Declaration, many more candidates acceded in 2004 and over the following years. What may be considered a success is the significant economic progress of the V4 countries. Poland is currently the seventh biggest economy in the EU, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia have also experienced clear economic success. What may also be perceived as success is the fact that for many countries of Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Western Balkans region, V4 has become a symbol of successful Europeanization while at the same time maintaining the status as the greatest promoter of further extension of the EU. This is particularly where one can observe the most positive aspect of the frequently specific European politics of the Orban government. The V4+ format is proving to be functional when

pursuing interests at the European level, as illustrated for example with the repeated establishment of the group of “Friends of Cohesion” when discussing the multi-annual financial frameworks of the EU. V4 is also visible within the the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy, not only in relation to efforts aimed at stopping the migration waves at the EU borders, which is frequently presented by V4 politicians in a very unfortunate way, but also e.g. in the form of the V4 EU Battlegroup or the significant contribution to the fight against cybernetic and other hybrid threats (cf. Cabada, Waisová et al. 2018).

The above-mentioned examples of success, as well as many others, are relativized, however, by the problematic behaviour of key actors at the national, Visegrad, and European levels. Paradoxically, even the governments of V4 countries frequently do not present their success in the EU, but instead focus primarily on criticism of EU institutions, using a significantly populist narrative along the lines of “we are the good Central Europeans” versus “the hegemonic EU”. It also needs to be noted, however, that after 2015 many key protagonists on the European level, not only politicians but significantly and frequently also the media, created an image of V4 based on its demonization and presenting the national-conservative populists J. Kaczyński and V. Orbán as the sociotype of the Central European politician. This kind of presentation of “the new Europe” is misleading and fails to acknowledge numerous cases of success not only of the V4, but also of other countries of the post-communist area in relation to the development of democracy, the contribution to a common European defence, joining the Euro area, etc. (Cabada 2019). As is the case with the national level, one can observe a strong and not always reasoned polarization even at the European level.

The aim of this paper is to specifically point out that all kinds of black-and-white classifications into ‘the bad Visegrad’ and ‘the good ones’ at the European level, or ‘the radical-right-wing populists’ and ‘the pro-European liberals’ at the national level are a cliché. The right wing, in relation to the radicalization, nativization, and anti-liberal positions of a significant (and increasing) part of its members, fails to acknowledge the Europe-wide scale of the problem. The opposition powers standing against national populists overestimate their ‘liberal’

nature<sup>2</sup> and ignore the negatives, including strong populism resembling the populism for which the majority of current V4 leaders are criticized. My goal is to point out the problematic nature of this black-and-white perspective, which is labelled by many as a 'culture war', especially regarding the fact that it is one of the key sources of a strong and deepening polarization and therefore also the weakening of the pro-democratic liberal mainstream.

### THE DEVELOPING IMAGE OF V4: FROM A STAR PUPIL TO AN UNWANTED CHILD

In the first fifteen years following the fall of Communism, the group of Central European countries (apart from the V4, literary sources commonly classify Slovenia in this group as well) were labelled as 'star pupils'. This image was strengthened thanks to their relatively stable economies, the absence of greater internal or bilateral conflicts, institutional adaptation, and the overall formal democratization including relatively strong rule of law. The disruption to this 'harmony' by Meciarism in Slovakia was minimized after 1998, and in 1997, the Central European countries were accompanied in the so-called Luxembourg group by Estonia, the most successful transition country of the Baltic Region. As pointed out by Lovec, Kočí and Šabič (2021: 2), this image changed as the result of an (alleged) failure to adapt to western standards, and the V4 received a new label as 'the problematic children of Europe'. The fundamental reasons for such a rejection are considered to be specifically their rejection of relocation mechanisms and the fact that Poland and Hungary have been facing an EU investigation for alleged infringements of the rule of law (Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty).

The V4 is perceived by external critics as an internally consolidated and integrated organization whose member countries have uniform attitudes, i.e. they may be perceived as homogenous units (like-units). Such a perception is, however, very far from the reality. As already demonstrated in numerous studies, the V4 is a highly inconstant and

fluid regional group based on the interaction of sovereign states and purely inter-governmental cooperation. Put in a different way, from the hundreds of particular political topics tackled by them, the governments of the V4 countries sometimes find ones where their positions correspond significantly with one other. Traditionally, there is strong agreement in support of further extension of the EU. The V4 countries have also had similar attitudes in terms of energy security and after 2015 in relation to the issues of migration into the EU and the so-called relocation quotas. There are nevertheless many topics where their attitudes differ and in some areas, there is even a rivalry between them, for instance when competing for foreign investments. Slovakia is a member of the Euro area, while the other V4 members are not. The political parties of J. Kaczyński, V. Orbán, A. Babiš, and R. Fico, governing the respective countries at the same time, belong to four different fractions in the European Parliament. Presenting the V4 as a fully coherent group would therefore be misleading and in fact populist, even more due to the fact that the critics of ‘the evil V4’ often also point out the positive deviations from negative regional trends, such as the Slovak presidents Kiska and Čaputová or the mayors of the capital cities (see below).

One-sided criticism of the V4 therefore obscures the other side of the picture – the long-term institutional crisis within the EU (Ágh 2019). In the context of the deep sense of insecurity impacting the entire EU and actually all its member states, the ‘core’ of the EU decided to strengthen integration and a common identity. More substantial opposition of such a measure was used and often also misused by western mainstream media and politicians in order to criticize new member states for their alleged failure to adapt to the European environment and values – in other words as a failure to achieve (full) socialization. Compliance with the strengthening of political and identity-related integration was therefore perceived as a new condition for the club membership which supplemented the previous conditions labelled as the Copenhagen criteria. A number of new member states rejected partly or fully this policy of “post-accession conditionality”, and particularly the one-sided criticism of their own opposing attitude and the overall stigmatization of the ‘newcomers from the East’ (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021).



It was naturally possible to notice gradually stronger critical voices even in a number of countries of EU-15, although there is a difference in the strength of the criticising protagonists at the national level. Even some of the countries of 'Old Europe' have seen such protagonists becoming members of governments, although they frequently represent minority partners (Italy, Austria), or have faced a *cordon sanitaire* (re)established against them in the political and especially the media environment. In contrast, in the V4 and the wider CEE, critics of the strengthening of transnationalism in the EU have gained control over cabinets and other institutions and have built their own ones emphasizing the primacy of national politics and national interest in order to face the EU narratives. They criticize the EU, primarily the European Commission (EC), as exceedingly activist and call for its 're-bureaucratization' and its subordination to the Council of the EU using the classic populist repertory, presenting themselves as defenders of the nation and the Visegrad/Central European people from the hegemony and oppression from the Brussels elites. Central European populists led by V. Orbán present the 'people of the V4' as a protagonist that is traditionally and permanently oppressed, but within the symbolic politics present themselves as the greatest fighters for protection of alleged Christian values against the (ultra)liberal developments taking place in 'the Old Europe' and against migration (Cabada 2021).

The response to the criticism of one-sided and non-alternative politics, linked to the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty on part of the European mainstream, was often rather insensitive. The entirely legitimate demand for preservation of the intergovernmental paradigm including the veto right for each member state was perceived in the case of new member states as old-fashioned and illustrating a low political culture. This is perhaps why one can observe in some V4 countries a greater sympathy for the motives of British politicians and the public behind Brexit. The stigmatization of CEE was affected, among other things, by a long-term geo-political and geo-cultural perception based on the stereotype of 'the Europe in-between', understood as 'the outer circle' of Western Europe / the EU, a (semi-)periphery and a source of (potential) instability. Europeanization and socialization paradigms were therefore

perceived as a tool for prevention of a return or a movement towards violence (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021: 4).

The migration crisis was a turning point in the perception of Central Europe and the development of its hetero-stereotype on the part of the EU-15. The rejection of relocation mechanisms and other steps of (some) Central-European governments was perceived as a clear failure of Europeanization mechanisms. As pointed out by Lovec, Kočí and Šabič (2021: 11), the following years saw intensive publication of scientific literature dealing with institutional failure and the increase in nationalism in Central Europe. The media and political stigmatization were thus complemented with the scientific framework and Central Europe, primarily the V4, became ‘the big bad wolf’ and has been presented as a coherent group of Eastern countries permanently blocking EU policies (Walsch 2018). Numerous ‘counter-union’ statements of Central European politicians, some having a clear populist basis but many of them being rather well reasoned (the issue of double standards, the absence of discussion, and generally the absence of alternatives in the area of public policies), may even be seen from the perspective of “the counter-stigmatisation strategy” (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021: 12).

From the vantage point of certain critical or constructivist theories, the development of V4 and (some of) its member states towards de-democratization, the disruption of the principle of the rule of law, and anti-liberalism are a manifestation of a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a result of the systematically established image of the V4 as a problematic subject, it has actually become a problematic subject. This means, among other things, that within the V4, positions deviating from the ‘common’ voice are marginalised (typically numerous statements or reservations of Slovak dissidents are ignored or presented as irrelevant). In contrast, from the outside their strength and importance are often overestimated. As demonstrated by Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi (2021), the V4 has been transformed under the ideological leadership of the anti-liberal ‘counter-revolutionaries’ V. Orbán and J. Kaczyński and the opportunists A. Babiš, M. Zeman or R. Fico (cf. Hesová 2021: 130–131) into a populism-driven format. The above-mentioned protagonists

prefer intergovernmental concepts emphasizing the autonomy of member states and the high interaction rate (Söderbaum – Spandler – Pacciardi 2021: 14).

The populism-framed regionalism is based on three key institutional preferences: the principle of personalised governance (*leader-driven format*), political symbolism, and *à la carte* cooperation. Apart from that, its typical feature is an effort at distancing from the international liberal order and the protagonists who are presented as its representatives (Söderbaum – Spandler – Pacciardi 2021: 3). Within the *à la carte* cooperation, populists focus on selected international topics with the aim of domestic mobilization and symbolic protection of the nation's integrity (a typical recent example is the issue of migration) (ibid.: 16).

In relation to this, one may observe that (not only) Visegrad populist leaders undertake targeted attacks on liberalism as such, on institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and within the EU particularly on the EC, as well as on certain leaders who (allegedly) represent ILO including their own dominance in this unfair regime (for instance Germany, represented by Chancellor A. Merkel). It is in particular V. Orbán who is presented by his proponents as a strong leader having to face allegations of populism and anti-democratic practices from western hypocrites, since he is a true challenger of the EU's neo-colonial influence (Furedi 2017).

The outlined development of V4 as a populist regional organization with V. Orbán as the obvious leader, benefiting from the ideological accord with the one-generation-older J. Kaczyński and from pragmatic counter-union cooperation with certain Czech and Slovak politicians who act as somewhat passive supporters of these two ideologists. This has naturally resulted in a situation where the entire V4 has become the populist 'challenger' of the EU's institutions, primarily the EC. The leaders of Fidesz and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość view themselves as the leaders of the European 'counter-revolution', which they clearly demonstrated already in 2016 at the meeting in Krynica (Cabada 2021: 297). They have become the most prominent Central European politicians using the new stream of anti-globalism and nativism which is globally connected to D. Trump, J. Bolsonaro and F. Duterte. This

stream is characterised by strong anti-liberalism and an emphasis on moral and symbolic politics going as far as a culture war.

The culture war is fought primarily over social norms, national values and historical symbols (Hesová 2021: 131). According to Hesová, culture wars in Central Europe have been taking place on three main planes: as a war over the past or collective memory, a war over identity, and a war over morality. As concerns the conflict over the past, revisionism in relation to both the Communist period of history (the Czech Republic) and to older periods, primarily the inter-war period, or in the case of Slovakia and Hungary (as well as Slovenia, Croatia, or the Baltics) the period of World War II can be observed. Identity conflicts are focused around the definition of a nation and Europeanism through so-called Christian values. In the case of national populists and nativists, the lack of the necessary liberalism regarding respect towards every individual's freedoms and rights can be observed. Moral politics is focused around the topics of gender, the so-called traditional family, abortions, etc. All such disputes deepen the gap between the two ideological groups and become primarily a tool in the struggle over cultural hegemony (Hesová 2021) and eventually also political hegemony.

It is also apparent that the above-described culture wars and their topics extend beyond the V4 and CCE and create a framework for a Europe-wide or even global conflict between two conceptions moving further away from each other. Clear evidence of the overlap and penetration of national-conservative populism from the V4 and CEE into the European level is the cooperation of V. Orbán and M. Salvini and other western right-wing populists before the 2019 elections into the European Parliament and also after these elections in the Parliament. The newest and apparently very ambitious project of the uniting nativist and anti-liberal (formally) Christian streams in Europe is the *Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe* presented at the beginning of July 2021. The first place on the list of 16 signatories belongs to J. Kaczyński, while V. Orbán is listed fourth. Their parties are accompanied on this list by for example, the Italian far-right formations League and Brothers of Italy, the National Rally led by M. Le Pen, the Dutch Flemish Interest, and the Austrian

Freedom Party. The Declaration is the essence of the so-called culture counter-revolution and the struggle for “Christian” Europe. The liberal ideological framework of integration and all the efforts for a ‘European’ approach are perceived here as a violation of the principle of coexistence of free states. Among other things, according to the signatories the EU “is increasingly becoming a tool of radical forces that intend to bring about a cultural and religious shift in Europe focused on the establishment of a European super-state, the destruction or abandonment of European traditions, and the transformation of basic social institutions and moral principles”. The main authorship of the declaration is attributed to J. Kaczyński, who is supposed to be the host of the ‘follow-up’ program conference in September 2021. The reasoning and narrative show a substantial influence of V. Orbán (*mal* 2021).

As suggested in the previous analysis (Cabada 2018), one of the alternatives to the national-populist form of the V4 might be Central-European cooperation within a different format, for instance the Slavkov Triangle, which would be less ideology-driven and more focused on particular public policies. Another alternative might be a withdrawal from the V4, either in the form of full withdrawal or the empty chair policy. In the last five years, Slovakia has been closest to such a solution and has actually been using it in certain cases. The most substantial option for the change in the V4 development would be the weakening of the ideological and populist profile of the V4, i.e. a change in the governments of some of the countries.

In this respect, it is important to mention the alternative format which is most visible from the marketing perspective – the cooperation between the mayors of the V4 capital cities. The alliance of the mayors G. Karácsony, R. Trzaskowski, M. Vallo, and Z. Hřib is presented as a pragmatic alliance defending the interests of the cities in the context of national and European policies. At the same time, however, it also emphasizes the fight against non-liberal governments (Matišák 2021; Zichová 2020), or “nationalist and populist regimes choking the local democracy” as stated by **G. Karácsony** in December 2019 upon the establishment of the Pact of Free Cities. It should be noted that all mayors of the V4 capitals may be perceived as progressivists:

particularly R. Trzaskowski and G. Karácsony represented or have represented key challengers of the present governments in their respective countries. At the same time, it is important to remind ourselves that the programmes and narratives of these protagonists frequently include rather radical attitudes, as well as populism and strong elements of post-modern political marketing (Matišák 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to briefly point out that some of the new EU member states and their representatives legitimately oppose certain proposals for changes regarding political preferences, the institutional framework, and the division of competences within the EU machinery. The legitimate opposition of a one-way strategy rejecting any compromise applied by the European Commission and a significant part of the political and media environment within EU-15 clearly cannot serve as an excuse for non-compliance with the democratic principles on the part of some of the CEE countries (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021: 3). On the other hand, it is impossible to overlook the fact that particularly this role of a strong opponent has raised the profile of the V4. A major challenge that could ideally result in cooperation among politicians of the V4 member states, regardless of their ideological profile, is to transform the present rather negative coalition potential in the EU and fulfil the ambition of making the V4 the “second engine of integration”. In other words, the V4 needs to overcome the situation wherein it is primarily the veto-player or a destructor and should, in contrast, try to enforce as many of its own proposals as possible in the context of wide coalitions. In order, however, to accomplish such a goal, it needs to seek much more consensus. This is a challenge for the entire EU and ‘the West’ in a more general context. The political mainstream has been disrupted, and within the populist politics, not only right-wing populists but also left-wing progressivists are moving towards radical and in some cases even extreme positions. These ideologically antagonist streams are unified, however, in their opposition to respect for the right to a different opinion. At the same time, they do not view politics as a competition over various conceptions and seeking of consensus, but rather from the Manicheist point of view, i.e. as a fight for hegemony

and a game with the zero sum. A return to liberal roots, including the right to a different opinion without ostracism or even penalisation, therefore remains a common challenge for all pro-democratic streams not only within the V4.

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<sup>2</sup> One could mention one illustrative example: the Hungarian formation Jobbik, manifesting strong Fascist and anti-Semitic tendencies, presently creating an alliance with other anti-Orban powers, which is considered by some observers almost a fighter for democracy in Hungary.



# POLICY BRIEF

## HOW EU DEFENCE POLICY INFLUENCES CENTRAL EUROPE: CHALLENGES OF PESCO FOR VISEGRAD GROUP

Jaroslav Ušiak – Dominika Bačová<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*The development of the security environment in the international field, specifically within the European Union, has been subject to several significant changes in recent years and has to face the challenges and threats that come with the development of society and the global (not only security) environment. As a relevant actor, the European Union is increasingly making its efforts in the field of security as well, and for this reason, it has brought about a project called Permanent Structured Cooperation, which has been operational since December 2017.*

*Keywords: PESCO, EU, Visegrad Group.*

## INTRODUCTION

The development of the security environment in the international field, specifically within the European Union, has been subject to several significant changes in recent years and has to face the challenges and threats that come with the development of society and the global (not only security) environment.

As a relevant actor, the European Union is increasingly making its efforts in the field of security as well, and for this reason, it has brought about a project called Permanent Structured Cooperation, which has been operational since December 2017.

Creating an inclusive Permanent Structured Cooperation (in abbreviation PESCO) project, which 25 EU member states joined in 2017, means small and mid-size member states playing an important role in the success of PESCO initiatives. In general, regional cooperation mechanisms can be useful in helping map the direction of some training and modernisation projects in order to streamline intergovernmental processes. Central European countries, who stand to benefit from the modernisation of their armed forces, are therefore an interesting case study in understanding the role that regional cooperation frameworks can play in advancing EU defence ambitions.

The Visegrad Group, which is now an inclusive part of the Euro-Atlantic area, has long sought to develop its partnerships abroad, including through international cooperation such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation. For this reason, the present study focuses on the position of the Visegrad Group countries in the PESCO project. We will look both at the participation of individual V4 countries - Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary in PESCO in general, but also, through the prism of individual documents, at the specific fulfilment of obligations arising from participation in this cooperation - whether we are talking about general obligations or obligations arising from participation in individual projects of which the V4 countries are part.

An important perspective of the study is to define the challenges arising from the participation of the Visegrad Group countries in

PESCO through the evaluation of activities and contributions. At the same time, it is crucial to underline the importance of their involvement in a modern initiative of the European Union with a view to the future and a look at the opportunities that such cooperation brings for the V4 countries.

## BUILDING EUROPEAN SECURITY

By the end of World War II, the world existed in a security vacuum without any security guarantees. The peace and individual demands of the countries or the recovery steps after the war have yet to be formed, but Western European countries were already beginning to feel the need for security guarantees. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) also considered steps for future security and defence measures. As M. Holubová states in her book, "the post-war period was characterized by profound structural changes also in the balance of power between traditional Western democracies and the emergence of a socialist system" (Holubova, 2012, p.114). The dynamics of the development of relations and individual attitudes of the winning countries in this period showed quite quickly the future direction of the international environment. As was clear, the peace talks in Yalta and Potsdam did not prevent the alliance from being split, and previous allies became two antagonist blocs. This incompatible spectrum of views ultimately led to the division of Europe by the so-called Iron Curtain (after 1948). However, if we look at the previous events between 1945 and 1948, the action of the United States and the United Kingdom was inherently uniform, and the individual steps were mutually respected. The USSR, on the other hand, led by Stalin at the time, showed signs of deviating from common declarations and objectives. There was a split between capitalism and communism, which was also declared in individual speeches of statesmen "If Stalin, in his February speech, indirectly identified capitalism with war, Churchill made a reference to appeasement in March that Western powers should not give way to him as they once did in the case of Hitler." (Petruš, 2000, p. 13) It was this fact that underlined the whole situation at the time and the need for a security guarantee. It was the ambition of the US and other countries to associate themselves under

NATO's leadership that appeared to be the most rational step to protect against undesirable influences, at that time the openly labelled USSR influence. However, an important fact was that the Alliance enrolled members in its ranks regardless of their "war" past, meaning that "NATO as an institutional community brought together winners and losers from World War II". (Eichler, 2009, p.59)

Based on the mutual consensus of the Western Bloc countries, the founding treaty of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was signed on April 4, 1949, to associate countries based on democratic foundations at the same time protecting against the influence of the USSR and the ideology of communism.

The North Atlantic Alliance is an organization that forms the essential part of a stable security environment in Europe and the entire transatlantic environment based on developing democratic institutions and a commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. It also relies on the United Nations Charter for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Article 1 of the founding Washington Treaty states that any international dispute must be resolved by actors "so as not to jeopardize international peace, security, and justice and refrain from threats in their international relations. Force or use of force in any way incompatible with the objectives of the United Nations" will be considered a breach of the treaty as the Alliance and its treaty are in accordance with the UN Charter (NATO, 2001, p. 563).

On the other hand, the European Union was created as a "project" focused primarily on the economic aspects of cooperation. Today, it covers a wide range of areas, including security and defence. At present, the EU operates in several civilian missions and combat operations in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and has a relatively broad institutional framework for cooperation. This area of cooperation was recognised more than two decades after its inception and began to attract media attention, mainly as a result of current developments in the security situation at home and abroad and as a result of the new threats facing the European Twenty-seven.

The origins of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) date back to 1993 when the Maastricht Treaty entered into force. This

policy provides the framework for the implementation of all activities, whether more closely or more broadly related to security and defence. It created the three-pillar structure of the European Union, with the second pillar covering foreign policy and military affairs. (Pitelová, Bencová, 2010) This pillar covered all aspects of Member States' foreign and security policy, including the defence policy, which required Member States to align their nationwide policies with the EU position and allowed countries to allocate funds to develop a new foreign policy instrument - Joint Action (European Parliament, 2020). In 1997, with the adoption of the Amsterdam Treaty, a new instrument was added to the CFSP—the EU High Representative post for the CFSP, which also became the EU Secretary-General position and symbolised the EU's "name and face" towards partners.

Although the EU had the tools at its disposal to deepen foreign policy cooperation, it did not exploit their potential. It was not until the crisis in Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Lendvai, Parcell, 1991, p. 251-261) and the inability or unwillingness to stop the bloodshed in their immediate neighbourhood without NATO assistance that European leaders began to start a real debate on the EU's capabilities. At the bilateral Franco-British summit in Saint-Malo in 1998, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac agreed that “Europe needs strengthened armed forces that can react rapidly to the new risks and are supported by a strong and competitive European defence industry and technology” (Rutten, 2001, p. 9). The word “autonomous” appeared in the declaration in the following paragraph: “To this end, the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so when responding to international crises”.

The European Council was an institution that approved a strategic and legislative framework for its functioning and whose meetings made it possible to establish decision-making, approval mechanisms, and new instruments for the implementation of security and foreign policy.

The relatively ambitious steps taken by the European Union to build mechanisms and military or civilian capabilities gradually diminished in intensity, and security and defence issues subtly receded in favour

of economic issues until the events in Ukraine in 2013, which fundamentally redefined the security map of Europe.

The current dynamics of European development reflect the general foreign policy interests defined by the magnificent visions for the structuring of Europe. As we have said before, one of the characteristics of the "new security agenda" is that it is not just about "non-military security"; there is also a part of the military sector. Most of NATO's defence policies and missions are currently not driven by an existential interest in their security but occur as a foreign policy with military assets, either as a country-centred policy or as a response to the securitization of humanitarian aid or human rights issues and principles.

The complex constellation of institutions has been transferred from the Cold War period, and there is no reason to expect an easy rationalisation into a "more logical" harmonious relationship, such as current coexistence and partial cooperation between NATO, the OSCE, and the EU. In particular, EU-NATO cooperation will be a central element of the future institutional set-up in Europe.

#### TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP SECURITY INITIATIVES—WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

As we have seen, European security has been shaped by many geopolitical and power changes both in the European region and in the world. According to A. Bjurner, "security is currently being established at all levels, ranging from the pan-European dimension to the local security environment" (Bjurner, 2015). Security is being promoted at the central government level by local authorities and by a wide range of non-governmental actors. The impetus for this comprehensive security-building is, therefore, both a top-down and bottom-up process. All activities towards the formation of security can be divided into "levels", depending on the direction in which they arise. Based on

this, we divide the security initiatives into two: those that emerge from top to bottom and those that are created from bottom to top.

*Top-down security initiatives*

K. G. Logan associates top-down security initiatives as taken by the governments of the states, defining them as a set of goals developed at the top of the governance structure. He states that this model of initiatives is characterized by four key elements or dimensions (Logan, 2014):

1. High-level format directives (framework, plans, etc.)
2. Controlled structure/role based on a set of processes/procedures
3. Communication structure
4. Hierarchical decision-making structure

To better understand the top-down model within security initiatives, we apply these basic features to the recently launched European Union initiative—Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a collection of projects on the security, defence, and development agenda for 25 member states (out of 27 EU member states)

1. Framework, plans, etc. – PESCO is both a permanent framework for closer cooperation and a structured process to gradually deepen defence cooperation within the Union framework. It will be a driver for integration in the field of defence. Each participating Member State provides a plan for the national contributions and efforts they have agreed to make (Permanent Structured Cooperation..., 2019).

These national implementation plans are subject to regular assessment. Thus, PESCO as a security and defence initiative represents a comprehensive package of projects submitted by

individual Member States, while the management of these projects is entrusted to specific countries. Within each project and set activities, several other countries are involved. While achieving the set goals, such groups of states are obliged to inform the headboard about the progress and the steps taken by each in the form of annual reports.

2. Controlled structure/role-based from processes—as mentioned above, PESCO is based on defence projects run by member states. However, PESCO has a two-layer structure (What is PESCO?, online), where the task of the top level, managed by the Secretariat, is based on preserving coherence and aims. On the project level, participating states create a management procedure for each project, and here, members probably want to maintain tighter control. The project level is the level in which the states themselves are responsible within the individual groups of projects—whether as a participant or a leading country—according to the possibilities and capabilities of the armed forces of the country.

3. Communication structure - Concerning the setting of powers within the functioning of PESCO, the communication structure is primarily based on annual reports of individual participating countries informing the Council about the course and results of the set objectives within specific projects.

4. Decision-making structure - The decision to participate was made voluntarily by each participating Member State, and decision-making will remain in the hands of the participating Member States in the Council. This is without prejudice to the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain EU member states. The Council, therefore, has the main decision-making power at the (so-called) Council level, which handles the overall policy direction and decision-making, including the assessment on whether participating Member States are fulfilling their commitments. Legal acts are adopted by unanimity (except decisions regarding the suspension of membership and entry of new members, which are taken by qualified majority). Only PESCO members can take part in the vote.

As can be seen from the above points, PESCO fulfils the essence of the top-down initiative, both due to the basic fact that it is an initiative of



states and their decision to participate, but also due to the fulfilment of four key characteristics: framework, structure, decision-making and a determining method of communication. However, we believe that this cooperation will need to be further deepened to strengthen the various key points, especially because of the relatively short time frame since the initiative was launched.

### *Bottom-up security initiatives*

On the other hand, analysts and researchers are also working on a second model of security initiatives in security research known as the bottom-up security initiative. According to M. Kaldor, I. Rangelow, and S. Selchow (2018), the bottom-up principle recognizes that external actors can only play an “enabling“ role in delivering security a supporting the (re)construction of authority if needed. This approach may provide a guide for external actors on what strategies are most likely to be effective as well as feedback and evaluation for ongoing missions.

In this case, it is relatively easy to find a suitable example for a bottom-up model, as we can say that it is a type of security support activity. We can take, for example, the European Defence Agency. According to the official website of the European Defence Agency, (Fostering defence cooperation, online) “one of the Agency’s aims is to foster defence cooperation among the European Member States”.

Thus, EDA is at the service of its members and supports them in commonly agreed priority areas through dedicated cooperative projects. As the EDA defines itself as a supporting body, its tasks and roles and in the international security field are clear —support and help as needed by individual member states of the European Union.

Position of Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

Since the very beginning of the V4, efforts to develop and strengthen regional cooperation in the military and defence context have been in the heart of the group. As Š. Kolmašová stated, “their general perception of security threats and strategic culture prevents deeper integration into a security community” (Kolmašová, 2019, pp. 225-248). V4 has been a platform for political consultations on security and defence related topics with the focus on stimulating cooperation in various areas of common interest such as joint capabilities’ development, interoperability of the V4 Armed Forces (education, training, and exercises) and defence industry.

The highest priority in the past was to focus on joint European integration and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to NATO and the willingness to accelerate the Slovak integration led to more effective consultations on defence and security issues among the V4 countries. When Slovakia became a member of NATO in 2004 and all the V4 countries joined the European Union in the same year, the intensity of the V4 cooperation in the area of defence decreased.

V4 defence cooperation has taken a new direction in recent years when cooperation was extended from the coordination of positions to other areas. These areas included several projects that started with the intention of improving the viability of the V4. Therefore, substantial cooperation in the defence area can be achieved. Some initiatives have been partially implemented and have the potential to contribute to improving defence cooperation from a long-term perspective.

One possible way to improve cooperation is to establish a V4 institutional framework that would also contribute to better recognition of the region as a whole and improve the position of the region within Europe. With the establishment of the so-called Senior Body in 2014, the first precondition for such a framework has been established. Its objective is to coordinate various working groups, joint positions, and projects. This helped to better coordinate the positions of V4 countries within NATO and the EU. Despite its positive role, the Senior Body is largely considered engaging in duplicate work, competing with V4 political director meetings (Krupa, 2019).

One of the biggest flagships of V4 cooperation was the establishment of V4 EU BG “Battlegroup” (operational in 2016). The V4 decided to keep the Battlegroup as a permanent unit after its operationalisation, as it was deemed to be mutually beneficial (Maksak, 2019). The V4 also agreed to prepare this permanent operationalisation in the second half of 2019 (European security & Defence, 2019). The V4 EU BG is one of the main drivers for improving interoperability and joint defence development of the four Central European countries and is also highly valued by the EU and NATO. With the accession of Croatia to the second V4 EU BG in 2019 and its preparedness for potential participation of other allies and partner countries in the region, the V4 members already started discussions about the next operationalization of the Battlegroup expected in 2023 (The Czech V4 Presidency priorities..., online).

An important precondition for continuous cooperation is the establishment of V4 Joint Logistic Support Group Headquarters that could be considered a milestone. The Memorandum of Understanding signed in Budapest in 2018 (V4 ministers sign MoU..., 2018) expects the group to achieve low operational readiness in 2020 and full operational readiness in 2023. If the JLSG headquarters will be concluded as planned, it will provide important support to joint military exercises, logistics for the V4 Battlegroup, and might also, in some cases, coordinate defence procurement.

The development of common protection of the V4 airspace through Cross-Border operations could be another successful project as well. Slovakia and the Czech Republic finalized a Cross-Border agreement in 2018. However, this project was undermined by Slovakia after the government released statements against air policing cooperating with the Czech Republic and Poland. Slovakia also made other arguments against the presence of NATO troops in Slovakia. Poland and Hungary also provided legal barriers that unnecessarily prolonged the finalization of the agreement (Krupa, 2019).

Major progress has been achieved in the area of joint V4 exercises supported by NATO and the US through the European Deterrence Initiative and conducted on a qualitatively higher level thanks to the attitudes of all the Armed Forces General Staffs. The decision was

made to conduct one large military exercise and multiple special-purpose exercises per year. It adopted the decision to conduct one grand scale military exercise and multiple special-purpose exercises per year. Regular participation of US troops and other allies also provides higher value to the quality of the exercises.

With the changes regarding the security environment in and around Europe stemming from the assertive behaviour and hybrid warfare by Russia, coupled with the issues of migration, terrorism, and failed states, the V4 countries should put more effort into closer cooperation in the area of security and defence. Unfortunately, the types of threats to each Central European country are beginning to differ. Thanks to NATO and the EU, the V4 countries are participating in projects that help overcome these differences, but so far none of the V4 countries was able to put forward a project that would bring the V4 countries closer together in areas of interoperability, concrete defence planning, and acquisitions. Therefore, more effort should be put forward in finding common ground towards addressing new threats jointly with the allies in NATO and the EU.

The V4 institutionalized framework, having already been established, tested in practice, and recognized in NATO and EU as a stable structure of sub-regional cooperation, was realised by the Central Europeans to be instrumental to their initiatives and could even bring them quick, tangible (or at least visible politically and publicly sellable) results (Ušiak, 2018, pp. 39-56). As L. Cabada stated, “the V4 group remains the most significant format for Central and East-Central European regional cooperation today” (Cabada, Waisová, 2018, pp. 275).

This led to a dramatic increase in contacts both on the political and technical/ operational level (Madej, 2013). “Motives of V4 states for cooperation on defence issues are directly linked to their perception of the security environment and current and future threats and challenges to their security” (Madej, 2013, pp. 7-8). He also stated when it comes to security cooperation, “for participants, it is valuable primarily as a tool for political consultations (as roughly equal partners, it should be stressed) and formulating a common position on security issues debated within NATO and EU/CSDP”. (Madej, 2013,

p. 9). That helps to increase their impact in these structures and maximize chances of satisfying their national interests, much greater than when they act alone or through other multilateral arrangements. What could be the impact of V4 defence cooperation evolving in such directions on the development of European (through NATO and/or EU/CSDP) capabilities? In a predictable future, V4 would not constitute the most valuable “island of cooperation” either within NATO or the EU. Its input to overall European efforts would most likely be of secondary importance and linked rather to maintaining or improving the currently possessed capabilities than developing new ones. Nevertheless, it will still constitute a non-negligible element of the smart defence.

Out of the current list of 46 PESCO projects, Slovakia is currently involved in nine PESCO projects, of which Slovakia is the lead country in one, a member of the project team in five, and an observer in three of the projects. The following table provides an overview of the projects in which the Slovak Republic is involved, with the specific titles as well as an indication of Slovakia's position in the projects.

The other Visegrad Group countries, namely Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, have also been full members of PESCO since its establishment in 2017. It is interesting to follow their development also in the context of cooperation or the setting of individual projects. As is well known, the projects themselves are divided into groups according to their focus, whether we are talking, for example, about the cyber focus, or the navy or the air force.

However, the fact remains that all V4 countries are actively participating in PESCO projects and thus fulfilling their membership obligations. Hungary, according to the latest data, is involved in 10 projects, Poland likewise participates in 10 projects and the Czech Republic is not far behind with its activity in 9 projects.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE V4 COUNTRIES ARISING FROM PARTICIPATION IN THE PERMANENT STRUCTURED COOPERATION

The Permanent structured cooperation is thus a modern defence initiative of the European Union with its roots in the Lisbon Treaty, a four-year model of European security that envisages the comprehensive development and improvement of the capabilities of the armed forces in a wide range of fields - navy, air force, ground troops, cybernetics and training and development. In this context, however, an important question arises with a significant impact on the V4 countries - Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. What are the challenges of Permanent Structured Cooperation?

Based on the facts analysed in the previous sections, we have identified a number of key challenges that naturally arise from the participation of the Visegrad Group countries in the Permanent Structured Cooperation since 2017.

a) Interoperability of forces - Interoperability as a driving element of cooperation is also prominent in the Permanent Structured Cooperation, which is built on cooperation between states. The level of cooperation between states is an indicator of the success of the activities set up, as it is clear that states that cooperate closely are able to work together more effectively and link knowledge and capabilities in order to meet the set objectives. PESCO can improve the interoperability of its defence capabilities with other forces of the European Union Member States. In particular, as stated also in the Joint Commitments, the Member States of the Permanent Structured Cooperation commit themselves within the framework of interoperability of forces to "agree on common assessment and validation criteria for the EU Battlegroups in accordance with NATO standards, while maintaining national certification; agree on common technical and operational standards for the armed forces, recognising the need to ensure interoperability with NATO; optimise multinational structures". (Ministry of Defence, 2021) The above

commitments imply the need to align the force components of each country and their common practices for effective and successful action in the international environment. Thus, the V4 countries must follow, for the success of cooperation with other countries within PESCO, the set trends of cooperation, technological requirements together with financial or personnel requirements in order to respond flexibly to the state of the international environment through this cooperation and participation in it.

b) Development of defence capabilities - the second significant challenge, which we consider important, is the development of the defence capabilities of the individual V4 states, but also of the V4 as a whole, also in connection with the first point - interoperability. The development of such capabilities is, of course, in the interest of all participating states, but the activity for achieving optimal capabilities and their expansion is primarily in the hands of individual states, not including the V4 countries. By agreeing to participate in PESCO, Visegrad has, among other things, committed itself to "increasing the number of joint and 'collaborative' projects on strategic defence capabilities; playing a substantial role in the development of capabilities within the EU, including to ensure the availability of the necessary capabilities to achieve the level of ambition in Europe; committing to consider the sharing of existing capabilities to optimise available resources and improve their overall effectiveness." (Ministry of Defence, 2021) These commitments, with their emphasis on defence capabilities, are just some of those to be pursued. Thus, these commitments oblige us to engage in joint projects and activities that facilitate joint cooperation and thus mutual enrichment and development of defence capabilities, as each country, and naturally, has largely different standards of forces and armed forces. In order to fulfil (also interoperability - previous point) the development of defence forces, it is necessary for the Visegrad Group to actively participate in the available activities in the security environment in order to increase its defence capabilities, to progress in development and thus, reciprocally, to contribute again to the European system.

c) Availability and deployment of forces - it is widely known that both the Czech and the Slovak Republic, as a small state with a limited

number/size of armed forces, have equally limited capacities in terms of deployability of the armed forces. This is mainly due to the number of members of the Armed Forces, but also to the technological and material background of the Armed Forces. As in the case of the countries' participation in the North Atlantic Alliance, the Visegrad Group must be prepared to provide their resources - personnel, technological or material - for the purposes of international crisis management and, of course, for the purpose of ensuring the defence and protection of the European environment within the framework of the activities set out in the PESCU. As the commitments all Central European states must be able and ready to respond to the need to create "units capable of strategic deployment to realise the EU's level of ambition alongside the potential deployment of an EU Battle Group; to simplify and unify cross-border military transport in Europe to enable the rapid deployment of military equipment and personnel. " (Ministry of Defence, 2021). From the above, it is clear that the armed forces must be prepared to respond to the need of the international environment, or the need of the European Union and the fulfillment of its objectives, but at the same time, all activities must be made towards making not only the deployment of the forces, but also their movement across the European continent easier and thus work on creating a system or regulations to facilitate the cross-border mobility of troops for the effective fulfillment of their objectives. At the same time, as the commitments say, the V4 is obliged to contribute to the European Defence Force and to participate in exercises, while at the same time being prepared to respond to emerging concepts for the deployability of such combat units in international crisis management missions.

d) Financing and meeting commitments - the financing commitment is a long-standing problem for the V4 countries, outside Poland, if we look for example at its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and its meeting the 2% threshold for defence spending. The requirement to continuously increase the defence budget is also part of the commitments in the case of the Permanent Structured Cooperation and forms a large part of the common commitments universally applicable to all participating Member States. As the individual analyses and state documents show, the V4 countries are



making efforts and indeed continuously increasing the funds spent on the common defence mechanisms of the European Union. As commitments themselves, they call for ensuring "regular increases in defence budgets in real terms in order to achieve the agreed objectives; increasing the share of expenditure allocated to defence research and technology with the aim of approaching 2% of total defence expenditure". (Ministry of Defence, 2021). Thus, in the case of the commitments of the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the V4 states are obliged to differentiate defence spending not only on armaments or on personnel capabilities, but they must equally be able to allocate resources to defence research, innovation and technology. The factor of funding and therefore of meeting commitments always represents the biggest challenge for the V4 and therefore it will need to be all the more proactive in meeting these kinds of commitments, which is also called for in another of the commitments, which states that "Participating Member States will pursue an ambitious approach to the joint financing of CSDP military operations and missions." (Ministerstvo obrany SR, 2021).

e) Activity of the Visegrad Group countries in the framework of participation in the Permanent Structured Cooperation - Successful inclusion in the PESCO is conditional on participation in the outlined activities in the form of projects in the package of (currently) 47 projects, of course, beyond the fulfillment of the generally applicable commitments. One of them (of the commitments) directly refers to the activity of states when it requires "to participate in at least one PESCO project that develops or delivers capabilities identified by member states as strategically relevant." (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, 2021) All V4 countries, in our opinion, based on the assessment of the activities elaborated in the previous sections of the paper, has been an active member since the very beginning of its inclusion in the Permanent Structured Cooperation. V4 countries are involved in a number of projects, either as a member or an observer, which again underlines the level of activity of the V4 in this cooperation. It will be important in the future to continue with the set trend, to take particular care of the continuous fulfilment of the set objectives within the framework of individual projects, but it will be necessary to continue to develop positive activity towards other project

participations and thus contribute not only to the building of Europe's security environment, but also to the building and improvement of our own armed forces. At the same time, the Visegrad Group should in the future also take an equally active approach in the matter of newly emerging initiatives or projects that are foreseen in order to ensure the continuity of the Permanent Structured Cooperation and the further development of capabilities within the framework of defence.

f) Cooperation in the international environment - participation in transnational security initiatives provides opportunities for close and long-term cooperation with other countries in the international field. Cooperation with other member states represents not only a challenge for the V4 but also a strong motivation to develop and advance its capabilities and defence capabilities. The level of cooperation, as mentioned above, determines the success of any given activity and ultimately the initiative itself. PESCO itself also calls for close cooperation between countries and invites them to develop new initiatives and collaborations in order to deepen their contacts with each other and thus improve the readiness and capabilities of the European Union's common forces. By cooperating with countries, the V4 can gain many benefits - new irreplaceable knowledge and expertise from the background of the forces of larger states (e.g. France or Germany), the possibility to engage in larger projects with more states, expanding the network of contacts and so on. The expansion of knowledge, skills and contacts can have a direct impact on the creation of new collaborations, new projects that will re-enrich the experience of the Armed Forces and thus contribute to increasing their expertise and readiness to address emerging risks and threats in the international environment alongside other relevant actors.

g) International prestige and credibility - hand in hand with all the previous points and their fulfilment goes the V4's position on the international stage - as individual states, but also as a regional entity. The way in which it approaches and will approach the implementation of its activities and commitments will have an impact on the way in which the Visegrad Group will be perceived internationally, in the eyes of the other actors of the European Union's Permanent Structured Cooperation. Depending on the reliability of the V4 in

fulfilling the conditions of membership, the potential of its future contracts and cooperation with other states will also evolve, as it is natural that states enter into cooperation with those states that can be relied upon and will be present with the certainty of fulfilling the required prerequisites. V4 participation in the Permanent Structured Cooperation is generally assessed positively so far, especially because of Visegrad Group's activity both in commitments and in the management of its own project, which significantly increases the credibility of Visegrad in the international arena and thus puts them in the position of a relevant and reliable actor in the security environment of the European Union. It is necessary to be aware of the challenge arising from the positive image of the V4 countries among other actors in the international environment - the higher the credibility, the greater the number of opportunities for the Visegrad Group, which ultimately brings increasing opportunities for the development of the armed forces, their capabilities and cooperation for them. At the same time, an important factor in the positive perception of all countries are also the potential for inward investment gains, which can positively affect not only the defence and security sphere of the Visegrad Group.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above commitments and the Visegrad Group's approach to them, also through the possibility to look at the partial results over the years, we can confirm that the V4 is actively and continuously approaching the fulfilment of the individual obligations resulting from the membership in the Permanent Structured Cooperation initiative and thus giving a signal to the other partners of its relevance and reliability. In fulfilling the conditions, the Visegrad Group is pursuing two lines. The first is the fulfilment of universally applicable commitments, within which it is important to increase the defence budget, which is currently being worked on, including according to the available national implementation documents; at the same time, this package of commitments also refers quite broadly to the building of both individual and common defence capabilities. Among the commitments we also find a reminder of the obligation to participate in at least one PESCO project. This brings us

to the second line of fulfilment of the conditions of membership, and that is the direct participation of the Visegrad Group in the Permanent Structured Cooperation projects. As we have mentioned in the previous sections of this paper, the V4 is currently actively involved in a number of projects - it is a member of the project team, it is an observer in several of them, and the Visegrad countries are also the lead countries of their own project.

It should be noted, however, that this is not only the Visegrad Group's response outwards, to other member states, but PESCO also - vice-versa - has an impact on the V4 and its defence capabilities and capacities. In this way, by imposing individual obligations, the V4 becomes more profiled and professionalised in individual aspects of security and defence and thus increases its own defence potential also for national needs, as knowledge of international standards could, in the event of a potential threat to a state, help to resolve the situation quickly and direct the situation towards eliminating the threat. However, on the basis of the set commitments and obligations within the PESCO membership, it is possible to notice its professional profiling, the profiling of the V4 Group Armed Forces. Since the V4 Group, if we look at the individual states separately, has differently sized and differently focused armed forces. It is therefore natural, given the size of the armed forces, that the scope for individual activities will not be as broad as it is for countries with larger armed forces. However, the positive side is that the V4 Group is also increasing its value in the international arena by such partnerships, while strengthening its capabilities and knowledge at the same time. An important fact in this connection, however, is that the armed forces have long excelled in specialised fields of security. This aspect has been confirmed over the years by the deployment of V4 forces in international crisis management operations to fulfil specialised objectives and tasks with a narrow profile.

An aspect of PESCO that can act as both a challenge and a rather strong motivation is primarily the potential to develop knowledge in an international environment in cooperation with other EU countries. The added value of such cooperation lies mainly in the alignment of training, knowledge and capabilities of individual Member States,

irrespective of their size or geographical affinity. Permanent structured cooperation, including with the involvement of the Visegrad Group countries, aims to create a comprehensive cooperation based on interoperable, compatible and competitive joint forces that effectively advance development, research with increasing defence spending, while at the same time, emphasis is placed on meeting the objectives of the projects launched. The projects aim to create space for new experiences in practice to be built upon in emerging projects so as to maintain both continuity and the deepest possible cooperation in the fields concerned to achieve quality European defence preparedness.

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