Is There a Future for Security Cooperation between the Visegrad Four and Ukraine?

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Abstract

Current relations between Ukraine and Visegrad Four states in the security domain are in stagnation. Even if existing obstacles are removed, there is no clear vision of possible cooperation topics and joint projects to be implemented. Cooperation within NATO and EU frameworks are perceived as the most potential, including Ukraine joining PESCO projects, building resilience, cyber security, joint air defence, special forces training, and security experts cooperation. In all these spheres, Ukraine's experience can be an added value, so building an equal players' partnership rather than developing donor-clientalism relations.

Analysis

For the last few years, security cooperation between Ukraine and the Visegrad Four – both as a union and on a bilateral level, has been in stagnation. The immediate reason usually named is a Hungarian political position of blocking cooperation due to the problem in Ukrainian-Hungarian bilateral relations. Less publicly discussed is a position of some top-rank officials in Slovakia and Czech Republic tending to consider potential closer relationship with Kyiv as a threat to their relations with Russia, so choosing to slow down active cooperation with Ukraine. However, analysing the current state and carrying out interviews[1] about the future perspectives with representatives of the Ministries of Defence and experts from respective countries, the general conclusion can be made that if a stumble

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block is taken away, the expected maximum is a return to business-as-usual, not a creation of the vision for new opportunities that current European security and cooperation trends can open.

While topics of joints exercises and trainings, bilateral financial and military support are quite well examined, few areas still need attention: revision of the current state of legal basis for bilateral and multilateral cooperation; new topics within NATO and the EU frameworks: a concept of resilience and its opportunities to increase V4+Ukraine cooperation.

CURRENT STANCE

Most of the cooperation within the last years has concentrated on a bilateral domain. The V4 often appears as a grouping of states where individual interests are stronger than common ones and the will to act jointly is quite limited[2]. While internal V4 cooperation has its ups and downs, where security sphere has its stable attention, so cooperation between Visegrad states and third countries, in particular with Ukraine, in terms of the security dialogue, is limited. Although in Baltics the V4 has managed to speak with a single voice and cooperate as a whole, no such unity is seen concerning the Eastern Partnership states.

Understanding difficulties in a multilateral format, Ukraine concentrated its efforts on the bilateral formats, which resulted in functional cooperation, joint exercises and meetings at the experts' level and a level of the Heads of the Staff. In 2019, important meetings were held between heads of the staff of Slovakia and Ukraine (8 October), and between V4 and Ukraine (16-17 May).

The **current legal basis for security cooperation** between Ukraine and the Visegrad Four is quite limited and outdated. Except for Poland, none of the other V4 states signed any agreements in the security sphere after 2011. Many of the agreements did not reach a stage of treaties, but were left at the stages of protocols and memorandums. Considering that most of them were signed even before the NATO membership of the V4, a substantial review is much needed.

The following spheres are covered by different levels of bilateral documents between Ukraine and individual states of V4: military education (Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland), air defence (Hungary, Slovakia), nuclear security (Hungary), natural disasters response and early warning (Hungary, Slovakia),

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[2] Agnieszka Legucka. "V4–Ukrainian Cooperation within the European Security". Ukraine, Central Europe and the Future of European Security. Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, 2015, p. 30

confidence-building measures (Hungary), military-technical cooperation (Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland), logistics (Slovakia), defence industry (Czech Republic, Poland), strategic air transportation (Czech Republic), military geography (Czech Republic), arms control (Poland), codification (Poland) and joint peace operations (Poland).

The last agreement with Hungary was signed in 2006 (on military-technical cooperation), with Slovakia in 2011 (on the creation of the coordination centre for logistics), with Czech Republic in 2013 (on quality control of the defence products during military-technical cooperation), and with Poland in 2017 (joint with Lithuania on changes to the agreement on a joint battalion).

Except of the trilateral agreements Ukraine-Lithuania-Poland signed in the last years defining establishment of the UKR-POL-LIT brigade, the most important agreement between Ukraine and Poland was signed in 2016 and ratified in 2018 – the General Agreement between the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and the Government of Poland on cooperation in defence sphere. 24 cooperation themes are defined within the defence sphere for cooperation between the states. Except for standard sets of cooperation in terms of planning, exchange of information, joint trainings and education, arms control and peace operations, important fields for future cooperation that also can be widened to the V4 level are: military infrastructure; military standardization and codification; developing and modernization of the military equipment; military public relations; PSYOP.

V4 Battle Group

The Visegrad EU Battle group has become the group's defence cooperation poster child.[3] In 2011, Ukraine was invited to join this group that expected to be operational in the first half of 2016. In December 2014, all V4 countries supported the Polish suggestion to establish the second V4 EU Battlegroup in 2019.[4] It was expected that Ukraine would join this, as well, as some experts considered that the possible participation of Ukraine, in light of the recent events, and NATO agreement to link the V4 EU BG certification exercise Common Challenge 2015 with NATO high visibility exercise Trident Juncture 2015, made this endeavour more visible.[5]

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[3] Agnieszka Legucka. "V4–Ukrainian Cooperation within the European Security". Ukraine, Central Europe and the Future of European Security. Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, 2015, p. 46

[4] Aleksandra Romanowska. V4 countries towards Russian aggression against Ukraine. Warsaw Institute Foundation. 24 September 2018. https://warsawinstitute.org/v4-countries-towards-russian-aggression-ukraine/

[5] Agnieszka Legucka. "V4–Ukrainian Cooperation within the European Security". Ukraine, Central Europe and the Future of European Security. Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, 2015, p. 46

Despite the fact that in 2016, the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine joined the Technical Agreement between Defence Ministries of the Visegrad Group[6], according to which Ukraine takes part in CTG EU V4, it did not result in practical implementation of Ukraine joining V4 Battle Group activities in 2019. Next conjunction is planned for 2023 and Ukraine has a chance to be involved, but as was stated in different interviews, V4 expects Ukraine to ask for such a participation, and V4 can decide what capabilities needed. Though in the very beginning of the V4 battle group development Ukraine had an open invitation to join, for the last years, the idea of primary V4 forces to be used and such Ukrainian capabilities that none of the V4 countries possess have more and more entered the scene.

Hungarian bloc and political hesitations

Unfortunately, it is impossible to ignore the factor of the Hungarian blocking of all joint initiatives with Ukraine both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. Blocking of the high-level meetings within NATO are well known and already had strong reactions from the other partners within the Alliance, however, the same process is not well described within the V4.

The interviews with V4 officials demonstrated that they are less eager to express publicly on such difficulties, comparing to the US reaction, but at the same time, admit that within the last few years all initiatives to work closer with Ukraine, including V4 battle group, have had strong opposition from Budapest.

Despite the fact that Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Viktor Muzhenko participated in the meeting of Visegrad Group 'V4+Ukraine' at the level of chiefs of defence held in Budapest on June 27, 2018, it was commented that the level of his participation was very limited comparing to the previous level of interaction. Along with briefing V4 partners about the current security situation and reform process, the parties also spoke about eventual cooperation in the format of V4+Ukraine within framework of NATO and EU, including joint exercise and training. [7] However, the question remained whether these talks can lead to concrete plans or to be limited to meetings participation.

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[6] Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. "Ministry of Defence of Ukraine joins Technical Agreement between Defence Ministries of Visegrad Group", 07 June 2016, https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/249092490

[7] General Muzhenko participates in Visegrad Group 'V4+Ukraine' meeting. PA Office of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. 27 June 2018. http://www.mil.gov.ua/en/news/2018/06/27/general-muzhenko-participates-in-visegrad-group-'v4ukraine-meeting/

The problem remains that not only is Hungary blocking any form of cooperation, but some political forces within other V4 countries are also hesitant to improve cooperation with Ukraine. During the interviews, respondents named, in particular, the political situation in Slovakia and regular postponing of the bilateral meetings in the security sphere.

The tactics of postponing, hesitating and not giving reply have become regular, especially in the spheres of possible defence procurements (both for Ukraine and for the V4 to purchase Ukrainian products), high-level meetings, or using Ukrainian real-war experience.

Here, it is visible that the V4 countries would prefer to cooperate, for example, with Germany, despite higher prices, or less practical experience. Also, the recent initiatives include enhanced cooperation between V4+ the United Kingdom or the start of the political dialogue with France and Germany, cyber and defence meetings in the V4+Korea format. At the same time, Ukraine is absent from the Czech Presidency priorities for 2019-2020.

Political considerations and internal political competitions, where pro-Russian politicians or nationalistic sentiments are gaining their influence in V4 states, also have had a negative effect on the multilateral and bilateral cooperation between V4 and Ukraine. As for now, all planned activities and meetings in defence sphere within the V4 for 2019-2020 Czech Presidency are expected to materialize only in V4 format[8]. The previous Slovak Presidency included Ukraine in the transport section, Eastern Partnership Cooperation, EU Association Agreements and NATO cooperation.

COOPERATION WITHIN NATO

Since 2014, NATO has been implementing seven **Trust Funds** in Ukraine. At the Wales Summit in 2014, Allies decided to launch substantially new programmes to enhance NATO's assistance to capability development and sustainable capacity building in Ukraine's security and defence sector. Six Trust Funds were set up, making use of a mechanism, which allows individual Allies and partner countries to provide financial support for concrete projects on a voluntary basis.[9] In addition, NATO Trust Fund Project - Destruction of Small Arms and Light Weapons has also been prolonged for Phase 2.

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[8] Calendar For The Czech Presidency Of The Visegrad Group 2019/2020. "V 4 Reasonable Europe". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic. 30 August 2019. https://www.mzv.cz/file/3626456/Calendar__CZ_V4_PRES_30_08_2019.pdf
[9] Relations with Ukraine. 01 Jul. 2019. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37750.htm

Out of the seven Trust Funds, Visegrad states participate in five and are leading nations in two. None of the Trust Funds has all four countries as its contributors.

- Trust Fund on Command, Control, Communications and Computers (C4) – delivered in 2016. Poland participated as a contributor.
- Trust Fund on Logistics and Standardization. Czech Republic and Poland lead the project.
- Trust Fund on Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and Countering Improvised Explosive Devices (C-IED). Slovakia leads the project.
- Trust Fund on Cyber Defence. Hungary participates as a contributor.
- Trust Fund on Medical Rehabilitation. Hungary and Slovakia participate as contributors.
- Trust Fund on Military Career Transition. None of V4 states participates.
- NATO Trust Fund Project - Phase 2 - Destruction of Small Arms and Light Weapons. None of V4 states participates.

While the Czech Presidency of the V4 does not announce any dialogues with Ukraine in a NATO format, the previous Slovak Presidency program highlighted Ukraine – "The Slovak Presidency will continue to help and support Ukraine and other important NATO Partner Countries in Europe in the form of handing over experience and support in the implementation of security sector reforms. The Slovak Republic, as a leading country of the NATO-Ukraine Trust Fund in the field of the liquidation of unexploded ordnance and the fight against improvised devices, will strive to make use of the V4 format to share experience and acquire support from partners"[10].

Still among the V4 countries, we have Poland who is a strong supporter of the future NATO integration of Ukraine, and Hungary, who does not oppose the membership perspective, but is eager to use closer cooperation with the Alliance in a manipulative way, blocking meetings at the highest level. Such political behaviour undermines trust, which is needed for any security and defence dialogue and can have long term consequences not only for bilateral cooperation, but also to influence multilateral formats with Visegrad Four.

Resilience

Building resilience according to the NATO principles is one of the progressive options for future cooperation between the Visegrad states and Ukraine. Here we can speak about both joint projects

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[10] Dynamic Visegrad for Europe. The Slovak Presidency Programme 2018-2019. Ministry of Defence of Slovak Republic. 2018. http://www.mod.gov.sk/programme-of-the-slovak-presidency-of-the-v4/

and sharing experience of best practises, as this sphere was named as an important one to project stability to the NATO neighbourhood.

Resilience combines both civil preparedness and military capacity, which are considered essential to NATO's collective security and defence[11]. Members can strengthen resilience through the development of home defence and niche skills, such as cyber defence or medical support combining civilian, economic, commercial and military factors.[12] NATO has agreed on seven baseline requirements for national resilience against which member states can measure their level of preparedness. Some of them refer to the political and institutional spheres, some are directly or in an auxiliary way touch upon military and defence spheres. Here to be named:

• Ability to deal effectively with uncontrolled movement of people, and to de-conflict these movements from NATO's military deployments;

• Resilient food and water resources: ensuring these supplies are safe from disruption or sabotage;

• Ability to deal with mass casualties: ensuring that civilian health systems can cope and that sufficient medical supplies are stocked and secure;

• Resilient civil communications systems: ensuring that telecommunications and cyber networks function even under crisis conditions, with sufficient back-up capacity; and

• Resilient transport systems: ensuring that NATO forces can move across Alliance territory rapidly and that civilian services can rely on transportation networks, even in a crisis.[13]

While resilience is not entered the lexicon of defence institutions of the V4 countries, we do not see it as a priority for their meetings and joint plans, Ukraine has started actively to cooperate with NATO in this issue. Considering the less political or conflict-oriented approach this resilience concept demonstrates, as well as the fact that it can cover not only ministries of defence cooperation, this topic has a high potential for multilateral consideration.

EDA AND PESCO CHANCES FOR A NEW FORMAT OF COOPERATION

In 2015, the European Defence Agency and Ukraine signed the Administrative Arrangement, enabling Ukraine's potential participation in EDA's military-technological projects and programmes. At that

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[11] Resilience and Article 3. NATO. 25 Jun. 2018. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm
[12] Resilience and Article 3. NATO. 25 Jun. 2018. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm
[13] Resilience and Article 3. NATO. 25 June 2018. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm

time, cooperative areas were initially identified as standardisation, training, logistics and Single European Sky[14].In the end of 2018, a new impetus was given to this dialogue, after EDA's Chief Executive Jorge Domecq visited Kyiv, and discussed the possibility to widen EU-Ukraine cooperation in spheres of cyber security, demining, Ukraine's participation in CSDP operations and PESCO projects[15]. The new Ukrainian government confirmed it in in Brussels in October 2019. [16] Still, this cooperation and a dialogue is far beyond its potential.

The establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) within the European Union in December 2017 is expected to raise cooperation on defence among the participating Member States to a new level. However, as any new initiative, it is still in need of adjustments and testing. An initial list of 17 projects to be developed under PESCO was adopted by the Council on 6 March 2018. The Council adopted a second batch of 17 additional projects on 19 November 2018[17].

- Poland participates in 8 projects.
- Slovakia participates in 6 projects and is a coordinator in one - Indirect Fire Support Capability (Euroartillery).
- Czech Republic participates in 8 projects and is a coordinator in one - Electronic Warfare Capability And Interoperability Programme For Future Joint Intelligence, Surveillance And Reconnaissance Cooperation.
- Hungary participates in 7 projects.

From 34 current projects, none is a V4 cooperation project. All four Visegrad states participate only in one PESCO project on Military Mobility, together with other 24 states. Yet two projects – on Logistic Hubs and on Unmanned ground systems – have three member-states participating.

[14] European Defence Afency. "EDA and Ukraine sign administrative arrangement", 07 December, 2015, https://www.eda.europa.eu/info-hub/press-centre/latest-news/2015/12/07/eda-and-ukraine-sign-administrative-arrangement

[15] Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, "Європейське оборонне агентство зацікавлене у розширенні співпраці з Україною", 23 November 2018, https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/yevropejske-oboronne-agentstvo-zacikavlene-u-rozshirenni-spivpraci-z-ukrayinoyu

[16] Mission of Ukraine to the European Union. "Ukraine's Defence Minister visited European Defence Agency for talks with Chief Executive Jorge Domecq", 26 October 2019, https://ukraine-eu.mfa.gov.ua/en/press-center/news/75563-ministr-oboroni-ukrajini-zustrivsya-z-vikonavchim-direktorom-jevropejsykogo-oboronnogo-agentstva-khorkhe-domekom

[17] About PESCO. The European Union. https://pesco.europa.eu

The third wave of projects will be approved in autumn 2019 after which a one-year break is expected to rationalize countries' participation, to better concentrate resources and priorities. Here there is a chance for better coordination between the four countries. Hungary was in favour of V4 projects, proposing this to its partners (in particular training and simulation centre), but Slovakia and Czech Republic are still hesitating.

Thus, inclusion of Ukraine to joint PESCO projects with the V4, despite the high potential of this topic, faces two problems. One is described above – low coordination between the V4 countries themselves. The second problem is more complicated at the current stage, but in the near future has a chance to be clarified, so Ukraine should be ready for the moment. The PESCO mechanism considers a possibility for the non-EU member states to join the projects. However, it is still unclear on which conditions. Two groups exist among the EU member-states – those who propose more flexibility and those who insist on stricter conditions to participate. Hungary, while being strict in another forms, prefers more flexible positions for PESCO; this opens a window of opportunity for Ukraine, which is already interested at least in seven PESCO projects.

IS THERE A WAY FORWARD?

While European and Euro-Atlantic integration were among the top reasons for creating the Visegrad Four, with time passing this hasn't transformed to the intention to support partner states with their EU and NATO aspirations, or joint activities within these organizations, despite the principles included in the Declaration of the prime ministers of the V4 states in 2004.[18]

The Visegrad Four and Ukraine need to find a new lease of life and to develop tailored-made cooperation projects in the defence and security sphere that will not be limited to bilateral cooperation only. EU and NATO transformation policies, as well as the Ukrainian strategic choice to join both organizations, the EU Association Agreement and increased cooperation with NATO open a window of opportunities for the revision of approaches, setting priorities and defining joint goals.

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[18] Declaration of prime ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union," 12 May 2004. http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1.

In addition to the already existed cooperation within the NATO Trust Funds, military training and education, regular meetings of the military and support for Ukrainian wounded soldiers, there are several **possible spheres for cooperation** to revive V4+Ukraine format. Among them:

1. To review a current legal base for cooperation between Ukraine and the Visegrad Four, both bilateral and multilateral agreements, so to update them according to the latest changes in strategic approaches of all countries, the Ukrainian goal to join NATO and to transform its security sector. To consider new challenges and possible spheres of cooperation such as cyber security, resilience building, rapid responses, possible future cooperation within PESCO, PSYOP, etc. Except for the bilateral agreements, a possibility to sign new defence cooperation agreements in the V4+Ukraine format should be well thought-out.

2. To consider a joint V4+Ukraine high level meeting on resilience that will include representatives of the respective Ministries of Defence, Ministers of Infrastructure and Transport, Ministries of Interior, Security Services and respective Emergency Departments.

3. To study the possibility to conduct joint stress tests on critical infrastructure in border regions, consequences of accidents, which can have a trans-border effect or may need a trans-border response for better and quicker reply.

4. Cyber security sphere needs a closer attention within the V4+Ukraine format. While the V4 started to have respective initial meetings with South Korea, Ukrainian experience can be of better use, especially considering latest positive developments within the NATO Cyber Trust Fund for Ukraine, and the vast experience gained during the last 5 years of constant attacks on Ukraine's critical infrastructure, the election system, governmental institutions and business networks.

5. Air defence is another potential sphere for cooperation. Slovakia already has an air defence cross-border cooperation with the Czech Republic, and is working with Hungary and Poland to spread the initiative for the V4 level. Considering geographic particularities and airport locations, it would be of added value to include Ukraine in such a dialogue, for better use of resources and capabilities.

6. As V4 countries are developing or only launching their special forces, Ukrainian experience can be of vital interest. For 5 years since the start of the war in Donbas, Ukraine has been predominantly receiving training instructors and it is already confirmed at the international level that real

experience received by Ukrainian officers in the field is of extreme interest for its international partners. In such circumstances, the V4 states should utilize the opportunity of close relations with Ukraine and invite Ukrainian instructors to conduct trainings.

7. Possibilities for intelligence services cooperation, even the military intelligences remain extremely low. The main reason is a low level of trust, and attempts of the Russian Federation to penetrate security and defence services of the Visegrad states. However, this also opens a door for increased cooperation between the V4 states and with Ukraine, as methods used and narratives promoted by Moscow are very similar, so joint response and coordination can have a better preventive effect.

8. Cooperation within the PESCO mechanism should be seriously considered for the next round of projects proposals. As soon as principles of the third states involvement are defined, Ukraine and the V4 can organize joint working groups for discussion of the spheres of possible interest for joint projects elaboration.

9. The expert community of the Visegrad states and Ukraine should be better included in the process of possible security priorities and defence challenges, as well as resilience building discussions both on an independent level. Also, with the expertise they possess, they should participate in official meetings, as well..