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Visegrad group's solidarity in 2004–2014: tested by Ukrainian crisis

The Visegrad Four made good progress from its creation in 1991 until 2014. The V4 countries achieved high standards in the field of human rights and democratic development, allowing them to join NATO and the EU. No less an important achievement of the group was the fact that it managed not only to create effective mechanisms for the exchange of experience, sharing of good practices and lessons learned but also to invent a sort of separate regional identity, distinguishing the group from the long line of countries expressing “European choice” as their priority. This success is even more impressive if the different sizes, numbers of inhabitants and international ambitions of the Visegrad countries are taken into account. In fact, it is a success story that is no less important than that of the Baltic states. However, the Baltic States were given much support by Scandinavian/Nordic countries whereas the Visegrad countries had to rely on themselves foremost and to a lesser extent on the United States – primarily regarding NATO-related issues.

During the period under investigation, the group had two high points – the first was in 1999 when three of the states became NATO members (which was symbolic enough since the country whose capital was used to name the Warsaw Pact became part of North-Atlantic community) and the second was in 2004 when Slovakia joined the Alliance and all four countries gained EU membership.

However, alongside the successes 2004 brought the Visegrad group, it was also a year of great challenge. The group achieved its initial goals and Visegrad leaders had to decide whether there was any added value to continuing the joint efforts and cooperation or whether it was time to join new allies and dissolve the Visegrad group. The second option was more viable given that for the 22 years of its existence the group's level of institutionalization has remained rather low. The V4 has not established a secretariat or other interstate body and the only V4 institution is the International Visegrad Fund.

However, the argument in favor of preserving the V4 format emerged because that very year the EU had also been rethinking its mission and foreign policy priorities. The deficit of understanding over its mission, particularly in the field of foreign policy, was caused by the fact that European Union members had for some time seen “enlargement” as a sort of

substitute for foreign policy. Following the last wave of enlargement when the EU's absorption capacities were almost exhausted, Brussels started elaborating a new kind of foreign policy which was less oriented at further enlargement and more at establishing relations with neighboring countries. In simple terms, the EU's objectives in external relations can broadly be divided into:

1. promoting democracy and human rights based on either realist top-down or idealist bottom-up approaches; and
2. pursuing soft security values based on a realist understanding of international relations.¹

By following these objectives, the EU was investing its political and economic resources into creating two belts around the European Union – a security belt and a democracy belt. To achieve these, the EU launched new programs which were supposed to enhance the promotion of democracy in neighboring countries and also establish effective governance based on European values. The governance model focused on the democratization potential of trans-governmental functional cooperation in individual policy areas. In this perspective, technical cooperation meant the EU had the option of promoting democratization indirectly, through the “back door” of joint problem-solving.² This suggested option was targeted at the EU's closest neighbors and formalized in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004. It was offered to 16 of the EU's closest neighbors – Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine.

Located at the margins of the EU, the Visegrad countries traditionally had close relations with neighboring Ukraine and Belarus and a direct, if not essential, interest in a secure and democratic neighborhood. Thus they certainly had the chance to define the group's new mission, thereby becoming an influential actor in shaping EU Eastern Neighborhood Policy. This approach lent the group additional weight within the EU as interested stakeholders. Moreover, it also provided Visegrad countries with access to additional tools of influences, like EU funds directed at different cross-border programs and administered from Visegrad countries. One outcome of this situation was that the Visegrad countries adopted the Kroměříž

¹ G. Bosse, “Challenges for EU governance through neighbourhood policy and Eastern Partnership: the values/security nexus in EU-Belarus relations,” *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. XV, No. 2, 2009, pp. 215–27.

² T. Freyburg, S. Lavenex, F. Schimmelfennig, T. Skripka and A. Wetzel, “EU promotion of democratic governance in the neighbourhood,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. XVI, No. 6, 2009, pp. 916–34.

Declaration, which defined the group's newly invented objective: "to assist countries aspiring for EU membership by sharing and transmitting their knowledge and experience."³ To some extent, this priority overshadowed other Visegrad country initiatives, like Hungary's initiatives to bring Austria and Slovenia into the club of Visegrad states or Czech attempts to become one of the key stakeholders in steering EU policy on Cuba.

However, the trickiest thing about this objective and the entire EU approach to the neighborhood was the fact that the European strategies were elaborated in a spirit of sustainable development and good governance but did not take into account the fact that neighboring countries, particularly on its eastern borders, were saddled with the burden of the Soviet legacy along with Moscow's strong beliefs that the countries of the former Soviet Union belong within the sphere of Russian exclusive interests. Moreover, Moscow tended to think far less in terms of democratic development and soft security and more in terms of post-Cold war syndromes and tough geopolitical competition and rivalry with the United States and the EU. Consequently, the implementation of the newly designed EU objectives came up against obstacles of a post-Cold War nature, while the soft security approaches were undermined by hard power challenges, and the democratic governments in the EU faced Russian and Belorussian autocratic regimes.

It was in fact the Orange revolution of 2004 in Ukraine that became one of the most visible indicators of the competition. Briefly, the revolution was caused by mass fraud in the presidential elections, followed by peaceful protests in Kiev. The protestors supported the pro-Western opposition candidate, Victor Yushchenko, whereas Russia backed Victor Yanukovich.

It seems that neither the EU nor the Visegrad group were ready for such developments in their neighboring country. On the one hand, the Visegrad group was naturally interested in the Ukrainians' pro-European choice because that would secure the aforementioned security and stability belt and what's more would provide a hypothetical opportunity for further enlargement, which would have moved European borders further to the east, buffering the Visegrad countries from the risky border area. However, on the other hand, both V4 and the EU were aware that the enlargement and stabilization processes would be very costly if

³ "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," May 12, 2004. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1> (accessed on July 6, 2014).

applied to such a big country as Ukraine and even more costly if they had to take into account the fact that they might lead to tensions with Russia and that Russia was investing lots of resources to keep Ukraine under control.

Given these dramatic circumstances, the end of 2004 was the first maturity test of the V4. Not only did they have to define their common position but they also had to balance Brussels, Moscow and own their national interests, which were both economic (in terms of economic cooperation with Russia as key supplier of hydro-carbonates) and geopolitical in nature (rooted in understanding the potential security challenges relating to proximity to the unstable and potentially dangerous Russian sphere of interests). This was one of the first tests to see if the V4 could elaborate a common foreign policy position and apply a joint approach to the crisis in its neighboring country. Although the countries of the Visegrad club failed to release an immediate statement on the events in Ukraine in the fall of 2004 they were more aware than other European countries of the promising prospects resulting from the success of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and of the pro-European ambitions of Ukrainians.⁴ Following Poland's tremendous efforts to settle the crisis in Ukraine⁵, the Visegrad Four issued a common statement naming Ukraine as "a key neighbor and strategic partner of the European Union, but also a major player in regional and global security" and declaring the Visegrad countries' readiness to "share... unique experience gained within the consistent processes of transition... underwent in the past period."⁶ It is worth mentioning that the very supportive, albeit careful statement, contained a latent challenge for V4 policy towards Ukraine and that was consideration of the third party – Russia. While expressing support for democratic transformations in Ukraine, Visegrad group foreign ministers also noted that they "consider EU–Russia cooperation as an important contribution to the settlement."⁷ No doubt Visegrad ministers cannot be blamed for such an approach, since it coincided with the general EU approach towards Ukrainian affairs and to some extent corresponds with their economic interests. However, as in the case of the EU, V4 perceptions of Ukraine are reflected through the prism of the EU–Russia relations, and strong European beliefs that a rational, win-win approach can succeed with Moscow created preconditions for further international

⁴ A. Kwaśniewski, "A history of common success." Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-visegrad-book/kwasniewski-aleksander> (accessed on July 6, 2014).

⁵ Including the visits of leader of Solidarność movement Lech Wałęsa and the then Polish president, Alexander Kwaśniewski, to Kiev and remarkable negotiations with the participation of Kwaśniewski, EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana and the then Lithuanian president, Valdas Adamkus.

⁶ "Statement of the Visegrad Group ministers of foreign affairs on the situation in Ukraine," December 7, 2004. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/statement-of-the> (accessed on July 6, 2014).

⁷ Ibid.

complications. Crucial to this is the fact that you cannot apply a win–win approach to an international player who traditionally worships a zero–sum game and is, as was later discovered, seeking revenge.

After 2004 both the EU (including Visegrad partners) and Russia tried to adapt to the new realities in neighboring Ukraine. The EU was quite optimistic regarding Ukrainian democratic development. Victor Yushchenko’s victory was perceived as the triumph of soft power and proof that the Europeanization process added value. Inspired by this success and in order to strengthen democratic principles in Ukraine’s public life, an EU–Ukraine action plan was launched in February 2005. Many of the plan’s provisions, however, were later left unfulfilled because of political crises in Ukraine which developed into a long-lasting conflict between the “Orange leaders” – Victor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko. Nonetheless, the EU opened up a window of opportunity for Ukraine. The Visegrad group followed the EU’s policy in the region and this was reflected in the Joint declaration of the prime ministers of the V4 countries on Ukraine issued in Kazimierz Dolny on June 10, 2005.⁸ The V4 countries decided to exchange information on (and co-ordinate where beneficial) bilateral assistance projects and the engagement of Visegrad countries in the twinning co-operation. The prime ministers of the Visegrad Group fully agreed that it was in their common interest to ensure successful implementation of the EU–Ukraine action plan. Then, as earlier in 2004, neither the EU nor the V4 took into account the fact that where Ukraine is concerned it is not enough to implement sophisticated initiatives based on sustainable development, good governance and democracy promotion principles. While many of these principles were workable in most of the candidate countries that successfully joined the EU, in Eastern Europe they were rendered ineffective by increasing Russian leverage in the region.

Indeed, Russia was changing its “modus operandi.” As Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson correctly point out, the turning point came with the Orange revolution in 2004, when Russia’s pro-Yanukovich tactics of interference backfired, triggering a serious Russian tactical and strategic rethink. Russia began developing a rival “counter-revolutionary” ideology, supporting “its” NGOs, using “its” web technologies, and exporting its own brands of political and economic influence.⁹ Moscow was strongly reasserting itself in its sphere of

⁸ “Joint declaration of the prime ministers of the V4 countries on Ukraine, Kazimierz Dolny,” June 10, 2005. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2005/joint-declaration-of-the-110412> (accessed on July 8, 2014).

⁹ N. Popescu, A. Wilson, “The limits of enlargement-lite: European and Russian power in the troubled neighbourhood,” European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2009, p. 29. Available online:

influence trying to regain exclusive weight and to push back against Western attempts to expand NATO and EU influence into the former territory of the Soviet Union.

Another test for the European approach and Visegrad strategy towards the Eastern neighbors took place in 2008. Although Russia's brutal vetoing of Ukraine's and Georgia's NATO membership at the Bucharest summit in April 2008 was a sobering wake-up call for the European states and proved that Moscow considers no "moral limitations" in its attempts to preserve control over post-Soviet space, some EU countries were still treating Russia as a stakeholder with legitimate interests in the post-Soviet region. The outcome was that the EU member states vetoed the American proposal to provide Georgia and Ukraine with MAP. A few months later, the Russian intervention in Georgia gave a clear signal that Russia had returned to a "big game" and sought to obtain the leading position in the former Soviet sphere.

Although the Russian hard security approach did not pose a direct threat to the V4, it still hampered V4 countries' hopes for a secure and prosperous neighborhood. There were no joint statements regarding the Georgian war; however, it did not go unnoticed by the Visegrad capitals (Polish President Kaczynski together with the leaders of the Baltic states and President Yushchenko went to Tbilisi in August 2008 to support the Georgians). Besides, the Visegrad countries faced another challenge. Apart from directly intervening in Georgia and threatening Ukraine, Moscow was also very active in undermining European cohesion. Instead of dealing with the EU as an entity, the Kremlin established direct contact with the governments of the most influential EU countries. It was a sort of twenty-first century interpretation of "divide et impera".

Furthermore, the 2008 economic crisis and particularly the unwillingness of Germany and France to bail out the then-troubled Central European economies sent another signal to the V4 countries that the EU heavyweights were not necessarily reliable partners.¹⁰

Despite the clear bitterness of the lessons learned after 2004 and 2008, they undoubtedly prepared the ground for the V4 to be able to face the 2013–2014 crash-tests catalyzed by the Ukrainian crisis and followed by Russian military involvement, the annexation of Crimea and the backing of terrorists in the east of Ukraine.

http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR14_The_Limits_of_Enlargement-Lite_European_and_Russian_Power_in_the_Troubled_Neighbourhood.pdf (accessed on July 24, 2014).

¹⁰ "The Visegrad Group: Central Europe's bloc," *European Business Review*, February 7, 2011. Available online: <http://www.europeanbusinessreview.eu/page.asp?pid=879> (accessed on July 10, 2014).

The preface to the 2014 crisis was the fact that Yanukovich, who succeeded Yushchenko as president in 2010, first of all froze the process of Ukraine's European integration and then took the decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU at the EU Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in 2013. His decision provoked peaceful protests, beginning as a grass-roots initiative and further expanding into a mass movement. The reason the protestors mobilized and the violence increased was that the students who were expressing their desire to live their lives outside Moscow's control and were campaigning in favor of the EU were brutally beaten by riot police. The next day, on December 1st, more than half a million people protested on the streets of Kyiv. The protests continued up until the end of February 2014 with serious clashes on January 19th and February 19th–21st and ended when Yanukovich escaped to Russia where he remains today.

It should be admitted that the numerous casualties and the shooting of protestors in the streets by snipers catalyzed a prompter reaction by the EU and the United States. The Visegrad countries also reacted far more rapidly than in previous crises in Ukraine. Poland and the Czech Republic were particularly active in showing solidarity. While Poland played its traditional role of Ukraine's advocate within the European Union and did quite well in engaging European heavy weights in the negotiations on crisis resolution, the Czech Republic focused on issues of human rights violations, and quite demonstratively provided political asylum for Ukrainian asylum seekers, etc.

Long before the violent clashes and mass use of weaponry against the protestors, the Visegrad countries released a joint statement on December 13th asking for dialogue and emphasizing the right of Ukrainians to choose their course of integration. The Polish and Czech governments expressed vocal support for pro-European Ukrainians and Ukrainian opposition parties. At the same time one cannot omit the fact that despite the impression of reinvigorated solidarity among the V4, Hungary was much more focused on its own priorities (the issue of the Hungarian minority overshadows many other concerns for the current Hungarian government). Slovakia, though expanding its presence in the region, was also cautiously silent.¹¹

Technically speaking, instead of serving as a platform for elaborating joint committed approaches, the V4 was misused by some member states to make harsher statements than the

¹¹ B. Jarábik, "Ukraine and the Visegrad Four: a half c(r)ooked partnership," *Visegrad Revue*, January 21, 2014. Available online: <http://visegradrevue.eu/?p=2184> (accessed on July 10, 2014).

official stances adopted by the same states at home and the joint format was used not to make messages clearer and louder but to make them faceless. However, the room for maneuver in pursuing this approach is steadily narrowing.

Russia's annexation of Crimea then prompted another expression of solidarity from the Visegrad countries. In a joint statement issued in Warsaw in March, the Visegrad group members blasted Moscow. Its leaders said they were "shocked to witness a military intervention in twenty-first century Europe that resembles their own experiences in 1956, 1968 and 1981."¹² However, again it was noticeable that Poland and the Czech Republic, along with the Baltic states, reacted most strongly. By contrast Slovakia and Hungary, like in the previous case, took a moderate position. However, this deeper split in the opinions of the national governments, camouflaged by another, stronger, V4 statement, this time together with the Nordic–Baltic 8 (the regional format comprises Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), and the weakness of the Hungarian position alongside the under-developed Slovak stance were compensated for mostly by the uncompromising NB8 governments (particularly the Baltic states and Sweden). As part of Nordic-Baltic (NB8) and Visegrad (V4) cooperation, the ministers of foreign affairs of the NB8 and V4 countries met in Narva on March 6–7 and issued a joint statement emphasizing:

"The situation in Ukraine is critical. Against a European country an act of aggression has been committed by Russian military forces. Referring to the Statement of the European Council on Ukraine from 6 March 2014, NB8 and V4 Ministers condemned the unprovoked violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by the Russian Federation and called on the Russian Federation to immediately withdraw its armed forces to the areas of their permanent stationing, in accordance with the relevant agreements."¹³

Further developments in the region, the ongoing escalation in the east of Ukraine, fruitless negotiations by the EU and the US and the shift to militarization in the region prove that the Visegrad countries are likely to face even more challenges this year. Forever balanced

¹² "Former Soviet satellites 'shocked' by Russia's Ukraine moves," *GlobalPost*, March 4, 2014. Available online: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/140304/former-soviet-satellites-shocked-russias-ukraine-moves> (accessed on July 12, 2014).

¹³ "The Foreign Affairs Ministers of the Nordic, Baltic and Visegrad countries met in Narva on 6-7 March and issued a joint statement regarding the situation in Ukraine," *Utanríkisráðuneyti*. March 7, 2014. Available online: <http://www.utanrikisraduneyti.is/media/gunnar-bragi/NB8-VN4-statement-Narva-FINAL.pdf> (accessed on July 12, 2014).

between Brussels, Moscow and their own national interests, the Visegrad countries developed a particular approach when using their collective voice against Russia, while reserving the right to be milder for the national governments. However, as said before, the room for maneuver is becoming ever more limited. As part of its strategy to regain control over post-Soviet space, the Russian Federation is constantly inflicting its opinion on the Western world and both the EU in general and the V4 in particular have to introduce serious changes into their placid way of life.

The only way to outmaneuver the Russian Federation and to preserve both the unity and identity of the Visegrad group is to combine the European approaches – democratization, soft security and good governance with hard security. Undoubtedly developing the strategy to fit the new circumstances would require enhanced cohesion, investment and truly strategic thinking and the outcome would still be uncertain. However, at the moment it is possible to talk of a symbolic litmus paper that would indicate whether the V4 can adapt to the new realities of a “hybrid war.” The V4’s litmus paper is its ability to develop a common security and defense policy at a time when there is no European common security and defense policy. The first attempt to make progress in this area occurred as far back as in 2007 when the chiefs of staff of the V4 armed forces discussed the notion of a Visegrad Battle Group¹⁴ (to include Ukraine). The project gained momentum only in May 2011 when the defense ministers of the Visegrad countries finally decided to create a V4 Battle Group, which is supposed to begin its first duty in the first half of 2016. It is intended to be their first major success in the field of regional defense collaboration, rather than their final achievement. The Battle Group could and should induce much greater collaboration and policy leaders in the four capitals are already considering the follow-up steps to make it happen.¹⁵

At the same time, however, it is not out of the question that in the current circumstances and bearing in mind the freezing of relations between Poland and Russia, Warsaw will strengthen military cooperation outside the V4. The most probable potential partners are the Nordic states, on the one hand, and Romania and Bulgaria, on the other. On July 4, 2014, the V4 prime ministers confirmed their commitment to making further progress in defense

¹⁴ B. Bodnářová “Visegrad four Battle Group 2016: run up to Visegrad four NATO Response Force 2020?” *CENAA Policy Papers*, June 2013. Available online: <http://cenaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/PP-6-2013-Visegrad-four-Battle-Group-2016-Run-up-to-Visegrad-four-NATO-Response-Force-2020.pdf> (accessed on July 12, 2014).

¹⁵ Z. Báli, J. Bátor, M. Šuplata, eds, “DAV4 II Report: From battlegroup to permanent structures,” Central European Policy Institute, November 18, 2013. Available online: <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/dav4-ii-report-battlegroup-permanent-structures> (accessed on July 12, 2014).

cooperation and, moreover, emphasized that the V4 are open to cooperating with other partners outside the V4, when and where useful.

The Visegrad Battle Group is a flagship political project and, as such, it is a strong signal that the V4 group is gaining momentum, that there is political will to invigorate it further and that all of its members take defense capabilities seriously. The Battle Group is the basis for a more permanent battalion-sized structure, with elements periodically assigned to both NATO and EU platforms and operations.¹⁶

If this initiative, which involves hard power, on the one hand, but aims at preserving democratic and predictable EU neighborhood, on the other, is successful then we will be able to talk of a new wave of Visegrad solidarity, which will prove that the group has passed the crisis test and has good prospects for further development and adjusting the new mission to the new circumstances in the neighborhood.

The success of this initiative depends a lot on the V4 solidarity's ability to outweigh the Russian influence within the group, since it is at once the most uniting and dividing factor. In fact, members of the group see Russia's increasing power as a problem, but to varying degrees. The Hungarian government has for many years been guided by economic pragmatism and particularly now that it is gaining financial support from Russia will most probably avoid direct involvement except for in the V4 format. Slovakia, which has gone through periods of very close collaboration with Russia because of the politics of the Mečiar and Fico governments, is not as opposed to a strong Russia as the others. Poland is, of course, the most concerned, but hesitates over whether it makes sense to take leadership of the V4 or seek other alliances. If the V4 countries manage to overcome this contradiction with the Battle Group initiative they will have the potential to transform themselves into a self-sufficient and CSDP shaping body.

However, even if the Visegrad countries fail on this, the group's role will be taken up by Poland in cooperation with the other partners, since it was the Polish leader Pilsudski who proposed an alliance stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and encompassing the countries to the west of the Carpathians – Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. In some formulations, this would include Yugoslavia, Finland and the Baltics. In our times, Ukraine will definitely be aboard as well either with the V4 or with Poland and its new allies.

¹⁶ A. Akulov, "Visegrad group to become a permanently deployed EU-NATO Rapid Response Force reinforced by Ukraine," *Strategic Culture*, July 10, 2014. Available online: <http://m.strategic-culture.org/news/2014/07/10/visegrad-group-become-permanently-deployed-eu-nato-rapid-response-force-reinforced-by-ukraine.html> (accessed on July 12, 2014).