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East of Centre: Can the Visegrad Group Speak with One Voice on Eastern Policy?

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The Visegrad Group has for a long time been showing ongoing efforts to develop cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries by advocating for them in the EU and supporting their democratisation and transformation processes. However, even though the V4 as a whole has aspirations to create an active and compatible role in the East, each Visegrad country also pursues its own Eastern policy rooted in a historical and social background, particular economic and geopolitical interests as well as temporary political goals. Thus, there are areas in which the individual member states do not cooperate with one another, but rather act as competitors. By the same token, since Eastern policy is not necessarily a priority in the national foreign policies of each V4 country, there are also activities that are not promoted to the same degree by all of them. This paper analyses the Eastern policies (understood as maintaining relations with the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia) of Poland's Visegrad partners—the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia—and discusses areas in which the V4's efforts may be unified.

Motivational Factors of the Visegrad's Eastern Orientation

V4 engagement in the post-Soviet area is motivated by various reasons. The most crucial is that they are striving for stability in both their near and more distant neighbourhood by gradually extending the Euro-Atlantic sphere. A reliable, predictable and prosperous region across their borders will only increase each member's own security and significantly change the V4's current geopolitical position on the EU's external border. Lessons learnt from the 1990s in the Balkans showed how incalculable a turn developments might take in the EU surroundings and how dangerous it might be to leave them uncontrolled.

The next crucial element is that it helps the V4 build its own political identity as a regional alliance interested in democratic transition and strengthening civil society. It has become a sort of "Central European mission" and a Visegrad flagship motto to share their experiences after the fall of communism with systemic change and the establishment of new institutions. The post-Soviet area, which together with all of the V4 countries used to belong to the so called Eastern Bloc during the Cold War and which later followed different paths towards liberal democracy, is from the V4 member states' perspective an accurate place for sharing this tradition.

There is a third and very pragmatic reason. After joining the EU in 2004, the group's members had to find some sort of niche where they could make a specialised and visible imprint on EU policies. Therefore, because of its geographic proximity, Eastern Europe quickly became the Visegrad's area of specialisation,

and as such helps the V4's members to build their own positions within the EU as well as shape its political agenda. For the V4 countries, which as new EU Member States still strive to strengthen their international credentials, the focus on Eastern Europe is thus a good opportunity to increase their influence in the EU.

Finally, Eastern Europe still offers a relatively new and unexplored market for the V4 members. The development of political and social contacts with countries from that region may help shape beneficial conditions for each Visegrad member's investments and external trade. This seems to be especially important, since at the beginning of the new century all of the V4 states have started to pay more attention to countries in the east, which in comparison to the 1990s are nowadays much more significant economic partners.

The Czech Republic: Idealism and Economy

The Czech Republic is the only Visegrad country without a border with the former U.S.S.R. Although a significant number of national minorities from that area live in the country (Table 2), the Czech Republic, unlike Poland or Hungary, does not have to deal with problems of diaspora in the East. In terms of energy security, relations with this part of the world do not have as much importance as they do for Slovakia or Hungary (Table 3). Thus, it seems at first glance that of all the V4 states the Czech Republic has the fewest reasons to be interested in Eastern Europe. However, this is not exactly the truth. Apart from EU accession, which changed the attitude of most of the V4 members, the Czech Republic found it beneficial to use its own dissident traditions and experiences from the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938). During the latter, the country was not only proud of its liberal legislation and protection of minorities and human rights but also was the European centre of Belarusian and Ukrainian independence groups. Therefore, with former dissidents in charge, the idealistic imperative of supporting democracy in the East quickly appeared in Czech foreign policy.

This democratic orientation is, however, limited to only a few countries. In Belarus, for instance, the Czech Republic does not only follow the general EU policy of imposing sanctions on the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko but also has taken many individual actions aimed at boycotting the Belarusian leader and strengthening the opposition in that country.¹ Moreover, Czech diplomacy also continues the best traditions of the First Republic, risking a cooling of bilateral relations by granting political asylum to dissidents persecuted by authorities, including Belarusian presidential candidate Ales Mikhalevic (in March 2011) and those of the opposition movement Razam (in July 2012). For many years, dissident and prominent writer Vasil Bykau lived in Prague, too. The same asylum offer has been extended towards opposition members in Ukraine since former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's prosecution.²

The Czech Republic has similar goals at the EU level. The country is among the Member States most devoted to the Eastern Partnership, a fact that is additionally facilitated by the presence on the European Commission of Czech Štefan Füle, the Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy. The EaP was actually launched during the Czech presidency of the EU Council, and its first summit took place in Prague in May 2009. Afterwards, the country, along with Poland, has constantly sustained attention on Eastern Europe.³ Along with this, the Czechs in 2008 co-founded the European Partnership for Democracy, an independent organisation supporting democratic transformations outside the EU and whose patron was former president, Václav Havel.

¹ An example of this is the refusal to give Lukashenko a visa for the summits in Prague of NATO in 2002 and the Eastern Partnership in 2009. Moreover, President Václav Havel in 2004 set up in Prague the international think tank "Občanské Bělorusko" ("Civic Belarus"), which supports democratic initiatives in Belarus. Two years later, it almost led to the freezing of bilateral relations when it turned out that the Czech embassy in Minsk had the UN report on human rights violations in Belarus translated into Belarusian and then had it distributed by Czech diplomats.

² The Czech Republic provided shelter to Bohdan Danylyshyn, a minister of economy in Tymoshenko's government, as well as to the former prime minister's husband, Oleksandr.

³ Good examples of this include the common letter of Polish, Czech, British and Swedish ministers of foreign affairs on fostering Ukraine's political association and economic integration with the EU, published in March 2012 in the *New York Times*, or the unofficial paper prepared in January 2013 by Poland, Czech Republic and Germany addressed to EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, presenting joint ideas on how to handle post-Soviet countries.

It is quite significant, though, that this democratic orientation does not affect economic relations. This is because the Czech Republic in its Eastern policy does its best to separate the imperative of democratisation from pragmatic connections. In December 2011, which was the centre of the greatest crisis in Czech–Ukrainian relations, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov came to Prague encouraging Czech businesses to invest more in Ukraine. In relations with Belarus, the same factor is equally important—the Czech Republic, besides Poland and the Baltic States, is the most significant Central European partner for Belarus in external trade.⁴ The ability to use contacts in the East to do business is even more visible in South Caucasus, an area mostly neglected by the V4. Czechs are regional leaders in terms of foreign trade with all three of the Caucasus states—Armenia, Georgia and especially Azerbaijan.⁵

However, this democracy-oriented strategy does not apply to relations with Russia. In fact, except for the second half of the 20th century, the Czech Republic was never for a long stretch of time under the umbrella of Russian political or cultural influences. Anti-Russian moods are nowadays not widely spread among either society or a large part of the political class. Particularly important was the attitude of President Václav Klaus, who during his two tenures (2003–2013) was the patron of the Czech–Russian rapprochement. Klaus did not hide that on many issues, including on the independence of Kosovo, the war in Iraq, climate change or intervention in Georgia, is much closer to Russia’s leader than to any of the EU partners.⁶ During his 10 years in office, Klaus met with Vladimir Putin five times, and recently has started to openly lobby for a Russian–Czech consortium in the tender for the Temelín nuclear power plant.

Czech policy towards Russia is thus different. It is difficult to find here any humanitarian accents. In September 2012, Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas refused to criticise Moscow for the *Pussy Riot* political trial, although a few months earlier his government openly backed the opposition against both Lukashenko and Yanukovich.⁷ What supports this specific treatment of Russia is the benefits of the country’s economic contacts and dependency on Russia’s natural resources (Table 3). Although the latter is much smaller than it is for other V4 countries, it is large enough—as demonstrated by the sudden disruption of oil supplies in spring 2012—to threaten the country’s energy security. Another major area of bilateral contacts is the economy, which especially started to bear fruit after the U.S. withdrawal from the missile defence system project in the Czech Republic—in 2011 the value of trade reached a record level of €9.1 billion (Table 1).

Hungary: Eastern Winds Too Gusty

In Hungary’s foreign policy, Eastern Europe has been treated since the 1990s as a limited priority. At the beginning this was because of different strategic aims (Euro Atlantic integration), difficult developments beyond its borders (the war in Yugoslavia, disputes with Romania and Slovakia) and a lack of significant cultural links with the post-Soviet states with the exception of Ukraine.⁸ Besides, historically the country has always been much more interested in the Western Balkans. Only Ukraine enjoyed a special position because of security motives and the issue of Hungarian minorities. One of the three general priorities of Hungary’s foreign policy that was formed at the beginning of the 1990s was to protect Hungarians living abroad, and Ukraine is the only Eastern European country in which ethnic Hungarians live, totalling 150,000 in the Zakarpattya region. Even today, Ukraine seems to be treated differently mainly because of the

⁴ *Data on foreign trade of the Republic of Belarus with selected countries in 2012*. National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, http://belstat.gov.by/homep/en/indicators/foreign_trade_preliminary_data.php.

⁵ Although there is a significant difference between Czech and Azeri sources on the amount of common trade relations (in 2011, the Czechs listed it as €1.3 billion, while the Azeris stated it was €237 million), nevertheless the Czech Republic is by far the most important Visegrad economic partner for Azerbaijan. Both numbers are actually still much higher than all the other V4 countries combined.

⁶ P. Kratochvíl, P. Kuchyňková, “Russia in Czech Foreign Policy,” in: M. Kořan (ed.), “Czech Foreign Policy in 2007–2009: Analysis,” Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, Prague, 2010, pp. 196–197.

⁷ “Nečas: Podpora Pussy Riot či dalajlamy škodí českému exportu” (“Nečas: Support for Pussy Riot or Dalai Lama damages Czech export”), *Lidovky*, 10 September 2012, http://byznys.lidovky.cz/necas-podpora-pussy-riot-ci-dalajlamy-skodi-exportu-fys-/firmy-trhy.asp?c=A120910_181740_In_domov_sk.

⁸ A. Rácz, “A Limited Priority: Hungary and the Eastern Neighbourhood,” *Perspectives*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, pp. 146–147.

minority, which in July 2012 were given official status by the Ukrainian parliament and allowed to use the Hungarian language in this region.⁹

However, since EU accession, Hungary has tried to intensify its presence and activities in Eastern Europe, mainly by strengthening involvement in pro-European reforms in Moldova, a fact that is indirectly connected to the Hungarian–Romanian minority issue. But, the main post-Soviet partner for Hungary still is Russia. The policy of all of its governments—despite their different ideological backgrounds—for the last decade has been quite similar: to foster bilateral energy, trade and business cooperation, and to keep sensitive issues off the political agenda. Surprisingly, this pragmatism was also maintained by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s cabinet, which took power in 2010 and is far from the ideological, knee-jerk Russophobia that one might expect from some of Orbán’s earlier statements. He thus seems to be aware of the asymmetry that characterises the mutual relationship, and has not only avoided anti-Russian declarations but also seeks to lead a policy of pragmatic cooperation with the country. Although in May 2011 his government succeeded in buying back a 21.2% stake in the national oil and gas company, MOL, from Russia’s Surgutneftgaz, this was an example not only of the current government’s policy but also of a long-term strategy of a gradual renationalisation of a primary Hungarian economic sector, introduced by left-wing cabinets that consequently blocked all foreign MOL stakeholder initiatives. At the same time, Budapest is willing to increase Russia’s stake in its nuclear power plant in Paks, which was built in the times of the U.S.S.R. and operates on Soviet technology, as well as join South Stream, the Russian-supported gas corridor. It seems therefore that Hungary still holds a “friendly pragmatist” attitude towards Russia.¹⁰

The economisation of Eastern contacts is quite risky, though, if taken too far. A good example of this is South Caucasus, which has always enjoyed the rather narrow attention of Hungary. Azerbaijan, with its stable economic and energy situation, has only recently started to be seen as a potentially important partner in trade and investment for Hungary, but due to diplomatic carelessness, attempts to strengthen relations with Azerbaijan have ended up in the breaking of relations with Armenia.¹¹ Another example is Georgia. In September 2012, Orbán openly supported President Mikheil Saakashvili before the parliamentary elections, but his party lost to Bidzina Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream party. Orbán’s step was thus a tactical mistake, and does not bode well for future Hungarian–Georgian relations, which are already weak.¹²

All of these factors, though, do not mean that Hungary is not interested in the East. It is quite the opposite. Since the 2000s, the East has been playing a pivotal role in Hungary but has been generally based on enhancing relations with China and other Far East countries, not with the post-Soviet area. The year 2004 marked the beginning of an increase in trade between Hungary and China, with trade volume tripling compared with the previous year. Since then, economic cooperation has intensified each year, and today China is a much more important partner for Hungary in terms of external trade than all of the Eastern Partnership states put together. In terms of FDI, China’s investments in Hungary in 2010 rose to about \$460 million, which was more than half of all Chinese investments in Central Europe. Under Orbán’s government, this strategy maintains a firm conceptual footing—the so called “Eastern opening” or “Eastern wind doctrine.”¹³

Hungary’s contacts with Eastern Europe should thus be seen in this context. Consequently, the country’s Eastern policy in the very broad sense means that—unlike for all the other V4 members—the post-Soviet

⁹ Although, in the government’s rhetoric Ukraine is going to be involved in large strategic projects, such as the Far East–Central European railway corridor. This, though, should be treated as a very long-term plan with not only no concrete details available but also no known reaction from Ukraine.

¹⁰ The term appeared in M. Leonard, N. Popescu. “A Power Audit of EU–Russia Relations,” European Council on Foreign Relations, EFCR/02, November 2007, http://ecfr.3cdn.net/456050fa3e8ce10341_9zm6i2293.pdf.

¹¹ A natural step in deepening friendly relations seemed to be the agreement on the extradition of Ramil Safarov, a lieutenant in the Azerbaijan army who was charged with the killing of an Armenian soldier, an issue that for six years had been a thorn in the eye for Baku. Orbán’s decision of August 2012 to transfer Safarov not only aroused international criticism, including voices accusing Budapest of subordinating foreign-policy responsibilities to short-term economic goals but also to which Armenia responded by immediately severing diplomatic ties with Hungary. See: D. Kačan, “The Crisis in Hungarian–Armenian Relations,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 85 (418), 18 September 2012.

¹² “Hackertámadás, semmis szavazatok—túl korán ünnepel a grúz ellenzék?” (“Hacking attack, invalid votes—too early celebration by the Georgian opposition?”), *HVG*, 2 October 2012.

¹³ D. Kačan. “Relationship of Special Significance? The Chinese Direction of Hungary’s Foreign Policy under Viktor Orbán (May 2010–May 2012),” in “Croatian International Relations Review,” Summer 2012, vol. XVIII, no. 66, 2012, pp. 59–74.

area is not the most important. Certainly, it still holds general geopolitical importance and focuses Budapest's responsibilities connected with either EU policy (Eastern Partnership) or its direct neighbourhood (Ukraine), but it seems that the "close" East already has a significantly reduced role in favour of the Far East—Asia.

Slovakia: Towards Eastern Diversification

Of all the V4 countries, Slovakia's Eastern policy has for a long time been the most Russia-oriented. This, though, might be seen as a quite logical choice given Russian influences in Slovakia's politics and economy, which are relatively large even when compared with the other V4 countries. Indeed, in all of Central Europe, Russia is a key player in national energy strategies, but Slovakia is almost totally dependent on both Russian gas and oil, which is unique among the V4 (Table 3). Moreover, after the controversial privatisation of the main Slovak companies in the 1990s, they fell into the hands of then Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar's supporters and quickly came under the control of powerful groups with Russian capital. Bilateral contacts are crucial for Slovakia's external trade, too. As recently as 2011, trade volume between the two was about €8.25 billion, which compares favourably with Russia's trade relations with larger states such as Hungary (€8.1 billion), Bulgaria (€4.67 billion) or Romania (€4.34 billion).

This is this way, though, not only because of an awareness of Russian influence in the country's main economic sectors that drives Slovak governments but also because of the public's sentiments towards or general popular sympathy with Russia¹⁴, with whom Slovakia shares no serious historical problems—an experience quite extraordinary for Poles, Czechs and Hungarians. In the Slovak intellectual traditions there is still a powerful heritage of slavophilism, visible politically especially during the Mečiar era (1993–1998), when enhanced ties with Moscow became a cornerstone of the government's foreign policy and an alternative to the country's Euro-Atlantic integration.¹⁵ After Slovakia's EU accession, Russia stopped being seen as an alternative to the West, rather became the Union's equivalent complement and with whom Slovakia shared a similar position on Kosovo and the U.S. missile defence system in Central Europe as well as the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2009 gas crisis.

Nevertheless, for some time, Slovakia has been actively and quite successfully searching for diversification in its Eastern policy by increasing its interest in other post-Soviet states. Two crucial factors have contributed to that shift. First was EU accession, which resulted in the formulation of "post-accession" priorities for Slovak foreign policy, among which Ukraine and the Western Balkans appeared. The second was the 2009 Ukraine–Russia gas crisis, which in the long run helped Slovakia to realise both the importance of neighbouring Ukraine and how unpredictable Russia can be. For Slovakia, which became one of the main victims of the sudden reduction in gas supplies, it was a lesson in realism.

Even though it has quite limited resources because of its small economy, Slovakia has started to participate in sharing its transition experience and supporting reform processes in Eastern Europe. The country focuses especially on Ukraine, its only non-EU neighbour, with whom it shares a 98-kilometre-long border. Slovakia thus backs programmes towards Ukraine, mainly in the framework of the EU such as the Group of Friends of Ukraine, which held an initial meeting in January 2013 at Slovakia's initiative,¹⁶ as well as bilaterally through new channels of communication among ministries and NGOs. In terms of gas supplies, surprisingly the role has somehow changed recently: in September 2012 Slovakia agreed to start reverse flow to Ukraine in 2014, which will allow its larger neighbour to decrease its dependence on Russia. Also, Moldova—one of the main beneficiaries of Slovak Official Development Assistance—has appeared in the orbit of Slovak policy interests as a place where it is crucial to support a pro-European angle in that

¹⁴ This is quite visibly shown in every year's edition of *Transatlantic Trends*, where Slovaks are among the nations with the most positive view of Russia (in 2011, it was 58%, and in 2012, 64%). See: <http://trends.gmfus.org>.

¹⁵ After all, it was Ľudovít Štúr, the iconic leader of the Slovak national revival of the mid-19th century and author of the Slovak language standard, who presented numerous theories on Russia's historical destiny as a "hegemon in the whole family of Slavonic nations." Mečiar, who often used Štúr's name in national propaganda, coupled this tradition with his own short-term political goals, cementing a clear "Russia first" policy in the East. This practically ignored all other post-Soviet states, including neighbouring Ukraine. See: A. Duleba. "Slovakia's Relations with Russia and Eastern Neighbours," *East European Studies (EU-Russian Relations and the Eastern Partnership)*, no. 1, 2009, Institute for World Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, pp. 10–16.

¹⁶ "'Friends of Ukraine' meeting in Brussels initiated by Minister Lajčák," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 31 January 2013, www.foreign.gov.sk.

country's foreign policy. Other Eastern Partnership states enjoy rather limited attention, a fact that is especially true in terms of South Caucasus—in fact, Slovakia is the only V4 country with no embassy in that region.

Indeed, the “Russia first” policy is no longer very visible, however strategically, Russia is maintained as Slovakia's most important eastern partner in the areas of the economy, trade and energy. Today, the country does not rely as much on Russian gas as it did in 2009 because it now has significant domestic supplies and reverse flow with the Czech Republic, but it still remains the most dependent on Russia of the V4 members. Its value will deteriorate further after the completion of the Nord Stream pipeline, since Slovakia will then lose its position as a transit country for gas to the West. It is thus very likely that its pragmatic economic approach to Russia will be sustained, as will the first “commandment” of Slovak Eastern policy, which is not to alienate the country. As put by President Ivan Gašparovič during President Medvedev's 2010 visit to Bratislava: “No matter what problems we are trying to solve, we need to have good relations.”¹⁷

Conclusions: Visegrad Commonalities in Eastern Europe

The Visegrad countries have been attentively following the general EU trend to promote democracy and transition processes in the post-Soviet area as well as support the Eastern Partnership program. However, generally speaking, this region is still hardly present among any of their main foreign policy priorities. This is due either to a lack of tight historical and cultural connections, weak social links, a deliberate intention not to alienate Russia, a focus on different non-EU parts of the continent (such as the Western Balkans), or other short-term political goals. Only the Czechs show above-average activity in raising democracy and human rights issues towards former post-Soviet countries, but this can be explained by their own political heritage and that such a position hardly influences bilateral contacts, which, because of a lack of a common border or social problems, are not very strong.

The interest of the Visegrad states in the region is very selective. Ukraine and Moldova are by far the most important Eastern Partnership countries for all four states. The Visegrad members' maintain quite active diplomatic representation in both countries, but the reason to take a special look at them is different. Moldova, as an Eastern Partnership star because of its policy of opening to the EU, has raised the highest expectations amongst all of the European countries involved in the East, including the V4. Ukraine is important not only as a regional geopolitical and energy player but also because of it is in the direct neighbourhood of three of the Visegrad countries, which is also the reason why such bilateral issues as minority questions, transfer of illegal immigrants, and others have been introduced into the relationship. Belarus in turn is treated almost exclusively as an EU-level problem, while South Caucasus enjoy extremely limited (Slovakia) or precisely economy-directed (Czech Republic and Hungary) attention.

Although all of the Visegrad diplomatic efforts have been consistently concentrated on seeking to diversify the approach to Eastern Europe, they are still dominated by a focus on Russia. High asymmetry, Russia's active energy sector policy, as well as increasing economic cooperation, contribute to these very pragmatic and individualistic strategies, well-proved during the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2009 gas crisis when the V4 was unable to present a common position. This is the intention of Russia, to follow the ancient “divide et impera” rule and to build relations with each country rather than with the Visegrad Group as such. Moreover, in all of the Visegrad countries there is quite a significant part of the political elite that tends to see Russia not only in pragmatic but in fact outright friendly terms. This approach may result in even more separation of the two dimensions—Russia and the Eastern Partnership countries—practically leaving the latter on the margins of the countries' Eastern policies.

¹⁷ “We need to maintain Slavic unity with Russia—Slovak president,” *RT.com*, 11 May 2010, <http://rt.com/politics/slovakia-president-russia-gasparovic>.

Can the Visegrad Group Speak with One Voice on Eastern Policy: Six Major Challenges

Short-term challenge: people-to-people contacts and borders

This is actually what the V4 has been doing best: strengthening networking and building people-to-people contacts between Eastern European nations and EU members from Central Europe through the International Visegrad Fund and the national programmes of individual V4 countries. A new platform established in 2012 called the “Visegrad 4 Eastern Partnership,” with a total annual budget of €1.5 billion, also covers the chief area of V4 activity. However, what certainly discourages the development of people-to-people contacts is the EU visa regime. **An agreement reached during the Second Eastern Partnership Summit**, that took place in Warsaw in September 2011, on a gradual and conditional exit of the visa regime, **should be used as an argument for directing the V4’s efforts into pressuring the EU to analyse an easing of visas** within the Schengen Programme. But, what is even more important is **that the V4 treat with more sensitivity and kindness residents of Eastern European countries on their own borders.**

Long-term challenge: big projects

The lack of a proactive agenda of long-term projects that could better integrate the Visegrad area and Eastern Europe is visible. **There is a need for big projects not only to effectively and strategically connect the Visegrad states with the post-Soviet area but also to extend the base of common interests and responsibilities.** Certainly, the V4 has limited economic tools to finance them, however **it can start lobbying the EU to include them in the scope of EU external financial instruments.** Recently, there have been a few more or less advanced projects on the table that involve the two, such as the Far East–Central Europe railway connection, energy interconnectors joining South Caucasus with the EU, and the development of gas connections between Ukraine and Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. There is also a chance to reinforce military cooperation. In 2016, the Visegrad Battlegroup will become fully deployable, hence it is worth considering opening it to Eastern Partnership partners.

Time for greater attention to Moldova and Ukraine

From the Visegrad point of view, keeping Ukraine and Moldova in the same bag with Belarus or Armenia might be seen as quite risky and unfair. The latter two not only have limited interests in Central Europe but also share only moderate attention to integration with the EU as such. The pace of changes in the systemic transition of Moldova are also incomparable with what has happened at the same time in other Eastern Partnership countries. Ukraine still declares it has pro-EU ambitions and, although the political developments of the last three years have been unambiguously less than beneficial, it is still not a “lost land”. Besides, its geopolitical and geoeconomic potential as well as it being in the direct neighbourhood with three of the V4 members requires special treatment. Especially challenging to the EU as well as the V4 will be the November deadline for the fulfilment of EU terms concerning the signing of an Association Agreement.

The V4 as a group should therefore **continue to strictly follow and strengthen general EU policy towards Belarus and South Caucasus**, which is mostly directed at cooperation on democratic transitions, creating a free trade area between the six states and the EU and, in the case of Georgia, finalizing negotiations on Association Agreements, **but towards Ukraine and Moldova their common efforts should reach further.** In terms of both of them, **the V4 should not only encourage the EU to be more ambitious with its offer**, so that the countries’ aspirations could be reflected in the political declarations of EU officials on future accession, **but also engage them more in Visegrad cooperation**, which for both may become a first step towards approaching the EU. In the long run, **the V4 could in turn become the EU’s avant-garde for additional amelioration of the Eastern Partnership** in order to further separate countries that have advanced the most in negotiations with the EU.

Harmonisation of aid and civil support

The Visegrad Four should start to better coordinate their activities directed to Eastern Europe. The facts that Ukraine and Moldova are important countries for all V4 members and that the Visegrad Group has for years been a supporter of the Eastern Partnership program should be sufficient reasons to prepare a common agenda towards these issues. **Particularly important is to have a common strategy on aid and civil society support**, which is a core Central European goal. Here, the Visegrad Four usually prefers to act individually or in partnership with older EU Member States for reasons of prestige; for instance, the Czechs were among the co-founders of the European Partnership for Democracy, while the Poles and Slovaks recently supported a different agency, the European Endowment for Democracy. From the V4 perspective, the lack of harmonisation here has negatively influenced the Visegrad brand and its international perception. **Modification of the International Visegrad Fund to cover external development aid, or maybe the setting up of a new Visegrad Development Fund to support the sharing of V4 members' transition experiences may be considered in this context.**

Searching for a broader platform in Central Europe

A few other countries from Central Europe have declared their interest in the Eastern Partnership, too. **The Visegrad Four should use this fact to create a broader regional platform directed to the East.** This would not only show the ongoing interest in the Eastern Partnership program of the new EU states but also strengthen the V4's position in both the region and the EU since a broader group could efficiently make concerted diplomatic efforts towards EU institutions and other Member States. **After all, the V4 has the Visegrad Plus format**, which through political meetings and sharing ideas, **offers a fine and not fully utilised platform of cooperation.** A good example of this is the Baltic States, which are particularly interested in closer economic integration of the EaP countries with the EU internal market. Hence, **during the Lithuanian presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2013, the V4's efforts should be directed at promoting the Eastern Partnership to a broader Central European constellation.** The Third Visegrad Summit, set for Vilnius in autumn 2013, creates an opportunity for that. Also, as it is in the direct neighbourhood of both Ukraine and Moldova and has been actively assisting these countries in their EU Action Plans, **Romania can help pressure the speeding up of the Eastern Partnership.**

Russia: smart bilateralism

Russia is a moderating factor in the eastern policies of all the Visegrad states. Still to be avoided in their relationship with Moscow are three things: **First, the Visegrad double talk on Russia in EU forums**, since fragmentation of the V4 in the EU power structures does not serve the strategic interests of any of the four countries; second, although realistically contacts with Russia belong more to individual country policies, **there is still a need to counter Russia's "divide et impera" policy in the region**, by, for instance, attempting energy diversification, and the best chance to achieve that is further reinforcing the idea of the North-South Energy Corridors; and third, **not making the mistake of the 1990s, when bilateralism with Russia utterly dominated the Eastern policies of the V4 countries**, and practically with one partner in the East the V4 countries tended to either ignore other post-Soviet states or simply make them subordinate to their dialogues with Russia. **It is thus recommended to try as much as possible to treat as separate relations with Russia and not to allow Russian pressure to influence contacts with other Eastern European countries.**

Annex:

Table 1. Value of Trade, 2011, in euros (€)

	CZECH REP.	HUNGARY	POLAND	SLOVAKIA
ARM.	20.1 mln ¹	12.6 mln	17.2 mln	8.2 mln ¹
AZE.	1,300 mln	48.1 mln	94.6 mln	14.8 mln ²
BEL.	340.1 mln	105.1 mln	2,300 mln	186.2 mln
GEO.	78.4 mln ³	22.8 mln	54.1 mln	11.6 mln ³
MOL.	54.9 mln ⁴	87.9 mln	198.8 mln	22.1 mln ⁴
RUS.	9,100 mln	8,100 mln	24,500 mln	8,300 mln
UKR.	1,900 mln	2,400 mln	5,400 mln	1,100 mln

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the national statistical offices of the V4 countries as well as Armenia (1), Azerbaijan (2), Georgia (3) and Moldova (4).

Table 2. Eastern minorities in the V4 countries

	UKRAINIAN	BELARUSIAN	RUSSIAN
CZECH REP	124,300	-	31,800
HUNGARY	16,500	-	3,500
POLAND	37,100	36,100	8,100
SLOVAKIA	7,400 + 33,500*	-	1,900

*who declare themselves Rusyns

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the national statistical offices of the V4 countries.

Table 3. Dependence on Russian Energy Supplies, 2011

	CZECH REP.	HUNGARY	POLAND	SLOVAKIA
GAS	59%	85%	62%	98%
OIL	73%	80%	93%	98%

Source: Author's calculations based on data from Eurostat.

Table 4. Official Development Assistance (ODA), 2011, in euros (€)

	TOTAL,	%GDP	Priorities in the East:
CZECH REP	184 mln	0.13%	MOL., GEO.
HUNGARY	100 mln	0.11%	MOL., UKR.
POLAND	299 mln	0.08%	BEL., GEO., MOL., UKR.
SLOVAKIA	62.6 mln	0.09%	BEL., GEO., MOL., UKR.

Source: Author's calculations based on data from AID Watch, National ODA Programmes.