



# BULLETIN

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## Conclusions of the Polish V4 Presidency and the Challenges beyond It

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*Poland's one-year Visegrad Group (V4) presidency demonstrated its increased engagement in the region. This was bolstered by visible results in energy policy, security and defence, as well as by successfully increasing the internal and international visibility of the V4. After passing the presidency to Hungary on 1 July, Poland should stay active on the V4 platform and maintain leadership in areas where it can further ensure added value. Hungary in turn should prioritise the search for solutions to intra-regional transportation challenges, an issue insufficiently dealt with by Poland.*

Among the main priorities of the Polish V4 presidency were traditional areas of V4 consultations, such as energy, security and defence, and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) as well as current issues on the EU negotiation table, such as climate policy and the EU budget for 2014–2020.

**Energy and Climate.** With years of joint work to develop common infrastructure apparently bearing fruit, the Polish presidency has triggered debate on integrating the gas markets. Based on a conceptual analyses carried out by regulatory authorities and the expert community, a “Road Map towards a Regional V4 Gas Market” was adopted at the prime ministerial summit on 16 June. But while there has been little hindrance to political consensus on infrastructure matters (the primary condition for energy security), market integration and streamlined regulatory cooperation will largely depend on market actors. This means energy cooperation is reaching issues where common political decisions by V4 leaders will be far from enough. Still, the efforts of the Polish presidency are an important attempt to launch the debate and include the participation of all of the stakeholders.

In terms of climate policy, the V4, together with Romania and Bulgaria, has been advocating for competitiveness and growth rather than ambitious climate targets. The countries have also argued that EU climate and energy targets up to 2030 should be conditioned on the results of negotiations of a new global agreement on climate change to be adopted by 2015. Pushing ahead this common position proved to be successful as it led to a compromise in the Council: the European Council Conclusions of 22 May 2013 stipulate that debate on the 2030 framework is to be resumed once a common stance has been formulated on the global agreement. This shows the V4 managed to build a coalition around itself and exert influence in the debate, where it is very difficult to counterbalance the position of the older Member States that favour rigorous climate policy.

**Eastern Partnership.** The annual meeting of the V4 and EaP foreign ministers took place in May in Kraków. Additional weight was added to the event by the presence of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle and representatives of the Irish and Lithuanian Council presidencies. The discussion was dedicated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> EaP Summit in Vilnius in November and resulted in a joint statement. Additionally, the Polish presidency also managed to engage Japan in cooperation with the V4 for the EaP. But apart from this there were no groundbreaking new initiatives in the EaP. This can partially be explained by the fact that the bulk of the efforts of the presidency were invested in lobbying ahead of the Vilnius Summit—an activity with little visibility to the public and the actual impact of which will only be clear in November.

**Western Balkans.** In October 2012, the ministerial meeting of the V4 and the Western Balkans was organised with the participation of Commissioner Füle. This has been a V4 tradition for four years, and it is noteworthy that Poland

undertook the role to continue it even if its engagement in the Western Balkans is generally of a much lower intensity than in the Eastern neighbourhood. Remarkable, too, was the launch of the V4–Western Balkans Expert Network on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights at the meeting, a project aimed at establishing a permanent pool of experts sharing transformation experiences. The kickoff meeting took place on 12–13 March 2013 in Warsaw and gathered ombudsmen from all of the participating countries. With this, Poland took responsibility for pressing fundamental rights and its V4 partners will pick from a range of other topics of focus by the Expert Network.

However, there was no progress made towards establishing a fund in the Western Balkans based on the International Visegrad Fund model, an idea launched by the Czech presidency in January 2012. All this suggests that while initiating the Expert Network and organising the ministerial meeting demonstrated a moderate increase in Poland's engagement with the Western Balkans, it still lags the efforts of its V4 partners.

**EU Budget.** The Polish presidency was successful in coordinating the existing V4 coalition in the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020. This was a challenging endeavour given that the Czech Republic was in the camp of net contributor Member States, while Hungary, Poland and Slovakia were in the so called Friends of Cohesion group. Yet, intra-V4 conflict was successfully avoided and the four states finally managed to find a common denominator: strong cohesion policy. This served as a good lesson for the V4 that even if consultations on EU affairs reveal differences in viewpoints, the focus can be constructively shifted towards articulating more common interests.

**Security and Defence.** An area with some technical cooperation since the early 2000s yet characterised by low dynamism received valuable political impulse. A letter of intent was signed in March to establish an EU Battlegroup that would begin operations in the first half of 2016 and consist of troops from all of the V4 countries. In April, the V4 adopted its next common declaration expressing support for closer cooperation in defence and announcing consultations prior to the December 2013 European Council on defence. While such steps demonstrate political will and provide visibility, there is still a long way from the declarations to implementation. Yet, any form of common action in this sector will be hampered by the rising gap in defence expenditures between Poland and the rest of the V4. While the battlegroup could serve as a vehicle for long-term cooperation, what is needed for harmonised defence planning, or even to improve the V4's contribution to NATO's smart defence and the EU's pooling and sharing initiatives, is a continuous platform for discussion and veritable commitments by all parties, not just Poland.

**V4+ Meetings.** In February, the prime ministers of the V4, Germany and France met to discuss current economic and security issues. In March, a meeting of the foreign ministers of the V4 and the Baltic and Nordic states was dedicated to topics of regional interest. Estonia signalled its willingness to organise another event in this setup. If held on a regular basis, such meetings could not only serve as a platform to exchange ideas such as those on infrastructure, environment, energy, and development assistance, but the Nordic Council could serve as inspiration for the V4 in terms of successful regional cooperation. Finally, in June there was a meeting of the prime ministers of the V4 states and Japan. Such high-profile meetings certainly opened new perspectives for the V4, and while there are some fears that too great an extension of the V4+ formats could harm the internal cohesion of the group, Poland's V4 partners generally appreciate the opportunity to exchange views with such important partners.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** All in all, its Visegrad partners have acclaimed the Polish presidency as a success as it was more engaged than ever. The most visible results are in energy, security and defence, and negotiations on EU issues (climate policy, EU budget). Successful also were undertakings for increasing the internal and international visibility of the V4, such as the V4+ meetings or even the inaugural Visegrad Bicycle Race. Yet, more could have been done in the conventional dimensions of V4 foreign policy (EaP and the Western Balkans), and especially in spatial planning and transportation development.

As such, the most urgent challenge for the upcoming Hungarian presidency will be improvement of infrastructure connectivity, because a poor intra-region transport system is posing obstacles to cooperation in all other areas. Beyond sectoral cooperation, important also is maintaining the momentum of the V4 created by Poland through the series of relevant high-profile meetings.

As for Poland, although its presidency has reached an end, it should maintain its leading role in areas where it can best foster coordination. In security and defence it should insist that the V4 go beyond political declarations and explore realistic limits and possibilities for concrete cooperation, for instance in the defence industry. In the EaP, Poland should keep the V4 involved, not just in the run-up to the EaP Summit but also in the post-Vilnius rethinking of the EU's Eastern policy, too. Finally, since it is often best positioned to link the V4 and its larger external partners, Poland should continue fostering V4+ meetings.

Finally, regarding the V4 as a whole, the Polish presidency demonstrated that the group is alive and functioning, probably more than ever since EU accession. Moreover, the internal asymmetry of the V4 (because of which Poland is said to be less keen on cooperation in this format) actually does not hinder the operations of the group, and is quite the contrary. But as the scope and intensity of Visegrad cooperation increases, with time certain updates in its form and mechanisms could become necessary. For instance, management of the rapidly expanding web of links with third countries or groups of countries may require a more systematic communication system than the one presently provided by the presidencies.