

POLICY PAPER

Assessing the importance of external factors on the perception and development of V4 policies

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- **The Ukraine crisis has highlighted the consequences of regional dissensions on the efficient and speedy functioning of multilateral institutions. However, the dual crisis in Europe's East and South is an opportunity for the V4 to enhance its usefulness to NATO and the EU and its influence in these institutions, if it showcases a minimal level of unity..**

The mood of the discussions regarding the Visegrad 4 cooperation in the past 18 months has seemingly gone from booming optimism to the repeated expression of serious long-term concerns. One can argue that neither of these two mindframes reflects the true nature of regional cooperation, and that the quickness with which debates have gone from one side to another reflects not only the difficulties in creating a united regional policy, but most especially the hopes that were created at the onset of the existence of the group.

The foreign perception of the V4 has been significantly heightened since the early months of 2014, when what seemed to be a coherent group regularly publishing communiqués before each Ministerial or Heads of State summit, devolved into bitter infighting around the very real issue of the region's seeming breakdown in approaches to the Ukraine-Russia crisis. The quickness with which strategic differences, that were previously hidden behind the veneer of peace, materialized and broke open the unity

of the region, represented a real cause for concern for European and transatlantic policymakers. Such disunity made it harder for the European Union and NATO to propose, in a speedy fashion, adequate policies that would encompass the interests of all its member states and allies. Reluctance expressed publicly by political leaders to use the full weight of institutions to sanction Russian behavior, whether justified by economical or security reasons, slowed down the process of designing the proper policies. Regional disagreements, within the V4 but also between Europe's main nations, regarding the extent of economic sanctions or the use of NATO mechanisms to assert deterrence, plagued early debates and speedy decision-making. Indeed, the blame here does not lie solely on the V4 member states, but such difficulties are representative of how regional disunity can have real consequences on the functioning and efficiency of multilateral institutions.

A wide body of policy literature has echoed real concerns about¹ the perception of the V4 in the current geopolitical

¹ See for example <http://visegradplus.org/opinion/unity-of-the-visegrad-group-in-the-face-of-war-in-ukraine/> or

<http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/view-central-europe-does-v4-have-future-0>

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context, which the V4 exists outside of the region, more often than not, as the sum of individual bilateral relationships, rather than a comprehensive united construct. While the V4 remains, in practice, a loose grouping whose members can coalesce on issues of common interest, the public diplomacy efforts to sell the V4, especially when joint declarations were issued, were quickly overshadowed by the different reactions to the Ukraine crisis.

This fact has a real importance on the way that the V4 should structure its future ambitions, and also on how it should present itself to partners within the EU and NATO. At a time where intergovernmental politics and the politics of creating consensus have become increasingly contentious (as symbolized by the discussions regarding the refugee crisis), the certain level of predictability that is, on paper and in certain instances, brought forth by regional institutions such as the V4 - but also other regional mechanisms - takes on a greater importance. If the V4 can successfully manage to speak with one voice on issues that are on the top of the agenda for Europe as a whole, then how can it improve decision-making and the adoption of useful policies at the European level, while at the same time enhancing regional unity?

The V4 was originally designed as a top-down effort to minimize strategic differences in uniting the region around a few key projects, not only on soft issues such as educational and cultural exchanges between countries, but also on more affirming issues of military cooperation and energy security, and as a useful tool to manage the parallel accession processes into NATO and the EU. The years following the accession, where countries faced rather similar institutional challenges in being able to translate accession into influence, created dynamics that favored regional cooperation and, above all, the setting of an ambitious agenda for deepened common work on the issues mentioned above. Whether this common agenda still exists today is not in question: it is rather the commitment of the countries to this agenda that is the source of tension. Such faltering commitment has led to soul-searching on whether

the agenda for cooperation was not altogether too ambitious, or whether the V4 format itself is the proper arrangement to achieve regional objectives.

However, given the high expectations that the V4 has set out for itself, and given the need to structure this cooperation not only at the regional but also at the multilateral level, it seems that the current negative tone, inside and outside the region, regarding the prospects for continued regional cooperation is excessively harsh². This represents a gap in the perception on what the V4 can contribute as a united construct, such as continued European integration in the region and leadership on certain issues such as energy security, and expectations from partners, which centered on increased reliability and predictability coming from the region in terms of supporting European policies, and also the role of certain countries as regional stalwarts for furthering specific European policies. For example, Western Europe has reinforced its expectations from Poland, in its leadership on regional defense issues but also on enhancing the region's unity on energy security. Such examples can also be extended to Slovakia, the only V4 member part of the Eurozone, which serves as a model for other countries who are engaged in the process of joining the Eurozone, and also plays a strong role in advocating EU policies in the Western Balkans, along with Hungary; the Czech Republic retains at the core of its foreign policy a very strong attachment to human rights, which are central to the development of a normative European foreign policy. In of themselves, the unique sets of expertise that the countries bring to the development of EU and NATO policies have not disappeared, and constitute a very strong basis on which the region can rest to scale their ambitions, and devise future plans for cooperation, in the future. Part of existing disappointment and negativity surrounding the V4 results from the fact that there has been no common V4 communiqué issued before an EU or NATO Summit, as was customarily the case before each instance. With this tradition having fell victim of internal disagreements about the handling of relationships with Russia, the V4 has lost in visibility in Brussels, where the

² See <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/grappling-irrelevance-v4-after-its-split-ukraine> as the prominent example

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focus has increasingly been put on the case of individual countries. It has therefore become important for NATO and the EU to find ways to re-engage the region as a whole.

Any such ambitions for the V4 should clearly take into account the current strategic context in which regional cooperation mechanisms evolve, and how the V4 has been affected by current geopolitical trends, both in its neighborhood and internally.

The crisis in Ukraine, which in its nature is about the values that unite Europeans around common projects, and the values that create the transatlantic bond, has put a renewed focus on the importance of multilateral institutions, and their ability to respond quickly and efficiently to crisis, and demonstrate resolve and unity. While the crisis does contain a certain security aspect, its roots are inherently political - and so should be its final resolution, which is the contrary of the crises which NATO and the EU have responded to in the near past, in Libya or Mali, for example. Given their different nature, these situations have also called for different responses, and the ones that were given in Libya or Mali rested heavily on so-called "coalitions of the willing" or "minilateral" coalitions, meaning that leading military nations (France, the United Kingdom) had to, in the first place, go through the process of coalition-building, country by country, in order to garner support for the operation that would take place outside of a NATO, EU, or United Nations framework. The necessity to do so has created two effects: firstly, a certain level of "minilateral fatigue" from the leading nations, as these efforts require time and can lead to shaky coalitions; secondly, a certain unease on the part of institutions, especially NATO, who may see this minilateral process as eroding the consensus around which the institution is built and its role as the main security provider for the North Atlantic space. The combination of these two effects and the nature of the crisis in Europe's East has reinforced the importance of united and prompt responses from Europe and the transatlantic community, which a regional or ad hoc approach may not favor. As of such, the regional disagreements within the V4 have been tempered at a multilateral level, but have however not entirely been set aside, and have an effect on the perception of the V4.

The position of the V4 within the current geopolitical context is also determined by the level of engagement of the countries in multilateral institutions. Therefore, the vitality of the V4 and the image it sends outside of the region also contains a very strong national component, which has been put under an increased spotlight with the differences in approaches to the Ukraine crisis. The most symbolic example of this evolving situation is Hungary, where Prime Minister Orbán's aggressive political reforms have put the country in a problematic position as regards to its relations with the European Union, a factor that constitutes a cause for concern not only for Brussels, but also for the other countries of the V4. Indeed, the possibility that Hungary may break from the EU - at least on paper - causes real concerns for the continued influence of the V4 in Brussels. There is therefore an effort to leverage the weight of bilateral relations to keep Hungary in the fold. In parallel, repeated comments by Czech President Miloš Zeman criticizing Western policies regarding Russia - especially the sanctions packages - and offering support to Vladimir Putin, which have been widely picked up by international press, have cast an unfortunate shadow over Czech positions and undermined the unity - both publicly and privately - of Czech foreign policy, which is nominally conducted by the Prime Minister. Such positions by the President have often overshadowed the - sometimes reluctant - policies conducted by the government, contributed to creating a rift between the Czech Republic and Poland, who spearheads the movement devising strong responses to Russian aggression. Prime Minister Robert Fico of Slovakia has also made similar comments regarding the efficiency of sanctions and questioned whether they are the appropriate tool to ensure a long-term relationship with Russia. Given these comments, the visit of Mr. Zeman and Mr. Fico to Moscow in May of 2015 for the celebration of the 70th anniversary of Victory Day has taken on a different significance than a simple historical one.

The mixed messages coming from Prague and Bratislava have also affected the nature of the relationship with Poland, as alluded to above. Warsaw has stated at multiple times its clear concerns regarding the Russian resurgence, has aggressively denounced attempts to destabilize the Baltic States, and, as a leading "frontline state", leads the

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European front to provide more solidarity to the embattled region, which also includes other frontline nations such as the Baltic nations, Bulgaria and Romania. These calls have been accompanied by a plan to increase the country's military readiness and a resulting defense budget increase, buoyed by Poland's solid economic health and growth rate, with Poland now forming part of the few NATO allies spending 2 % or more of their GDP on their defense budget, after an extensive modernization process of the national armed forces. At the same time, Poland has been engaging in conversations with V4 partners, and the other frontline allies, to ensure that they will not bear this burden alone. This process of regionalization of Polish foreign policy, initiated by newly-elect President Duda, aims to ensure that a strong voting block will support the Polish expectation from the NATO Warsaw summit in July 2016, where, as part of the Warsaw Strategic Adaptation Initiative, Poland would like to announce (among other items), the permanent positioning of NATO troops in Central and Eastern European allies. A certain unease in the rest of the V4 at supporting such measures has left Polish policy-makers nervous about the region's unity in facing threats from Russia. Despite these doubts, it remains that in the months following the September 2014 NATO Summit, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have announced their intention to continually increase their defense budget at the 2020 horizon, and to continue to work towards fulfilling the NATO pledge of 2 % of GDP. Despite the fact that the figures are expected to reach, in 2020, 1,4 % and 1,3 % of the GDP in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, these joint increases give the V4 a real opportunity to display unity and solidarity, but have in effect led to discussions about the existence of a "V3" from which Hungary would be left out. This seemingly undesirable solution, even if it would enhance regional dynamics between "willing and able" partners, would however increase the existing gap within the V4, and would also indirectly help fulfill the Russian agenda of dividing Europe. The pledges to increase military spending have also highlighted to a very powerful extent the gap that sometimes exists between political public discourses, especially in Slovakia and to a lesser extent in the Czech Republic, concerning the Ukraine crisis, and the actual policies that are being carried out by the governments.

While public pronouncements have certainly played a role in the way V4 unity is perceived abroad, the quiet progress made in terms of solidarity, as first symbolized by the increase of defense budgets and strong participation in the implementation of the NATO Readiness Action Plan, has had a real impact that the V4 has not been able to translate into changing the perception of its own response to the crisis.

It is important to reinforce the fact that the V4, if it can continue to demonstrate appropriate levels of solidarity and deliver on its military and financial commitments, can play a real role in reinforcing the defense of continental Europe. Despite varying threat perceptions, the V4, by the combination of its size, influence, and by the virtue of being a region where defense budgets are increasing, remains a significant military player with a proven savoir-faire and that can prove immensely useful to a Europe that is divided on defense issues (especially in the context on ongoing defense budget increases in the region), in great part because of the different difficult phases that European major military players are going through at the moment. The decreasing defense budgets of the post-Cold War era have led to a "de-alignment" within Europe and the eventual real fragmentation of burden-sharing in Europe. It is here essential to take a detailed look at where these leading nations stand at the moment, in order to understand how they affect the overall European security architecture and impact any potential role for the V4.

First of all, France remains an active player on security issues but has focused its efforts (and diminishing forces) on the South, notably because of prevalent national security concerns regarding terrorism in the Sahel and the troubled countries of Syria, Libya and Iraq, and has participated, only reluctantly and with the little available forces that it has at the moment, in the reassurance measures for Europe's East. At the same time, France's traditional partner, the United Kingdom, has seemingly chosen to lay low on international security issues while a fractious electoral campaign monopolizes political attention, in a seeming revival of insularism and EU skepticism that has all but distracted the UK from the major crises, in combination with severely diminishing defense budgets that have led many to question the current and future role of the UK in the world. The new

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European power, Germany, remains in the process of discovering the responsibilities that come with increased power, and is undergoing a transitional - not to say transformational - process regarding the use of power that entails the reconfiguration of many legal tools (especially in the Bundestag), military tools (recent media reports about the state and readiness of the German Army have proven worrisome) and a real necessity to change the prevalent German public opinion about these issues. Finally, the countries in Europe's South have significantly decreased their defense spending, and economic indicators highlight that there will be little appetite to reverse that trend, even in the face of the challenges related to migration that prove a real burden to the region.

In this context, a strong and united V4 on security issues could turn out to be a real asset to Europe and the Atlantic Alliance, by showing its ability to provide in good part for the core missions of collective defense and territorial security, thereby confirming the trend of a geographical division of labor on burden sharing, and by extension allowing the United States to focus its efforts further into pressing Middle Eastern issues and more importantly, investing in economic growth in Asia. Of course, the combined military weight of the V4 cannot substitute continued U.S. engagement in the region, but should be able to send messages to its partners that there exists a willingness to move away from the tired debates of free-riding, and by extension should also give a boost to continued European integration on security issues, principally in the NATO framework. Further to this, the existence of the V4 battlegroup that will rotate into effect in 2016 (details), and about which discussions about its extension or perpetuation have started at the V4 inter-governmental level, provide a good symbol of how regional security cooperation mechanisms can weigh positively on the European and transatlantic security architecture, and by extension, enhance the perception of the V4 as a serious security provider.

The security challenges that the V4 region faces, most notably as concerns Russian hybrid warfare, also provide a real opportunity for real cooperation within the region, on top of constituting one of the ways in which to engage

a reluctant Hungary into issues of regional magnitude. Awareness-raising campaigns about this issue have been taking an increased space in discussions about the Ukraine crisis, and it seems for now that Europeans have been divided about the way to devise useful responses to increased Russian activity and influence on European territory. In this context, the V4, alongside the Baltic States who are bearing the brunt of Russian hybrid tactics, have a real need, and should aim to share information and intelligence about covert Russian activities on its territory and create a comprehensive toolbox, in close cooperation with the EU and NATO. All V4 countries, including the more geographically removed Czech Republic, have reported increased Russian activity on their territory (whether via various hybrid warfare tactics, or the reported cases in the Czech Republic of spies passing as diplomats), in what constitutes a structured Russian effort to create divisions within local populations. The ultimate goal of Russia, which has been oft-analyzed, is to destabilize European nations by instilling doubt about the viability and legitimacy of the European project; financing extreme-right anti-EU parties is one of the favorite methods employed to cast a shadow over the future of Europe. Here, national political leaders have an opportunity to create a virtuous circle of cooperation around issues that are at the heart of European integration and to reaffirm the role of the common values that constitute the basis of togetherness in the European Union. However, it seems that this opportunity has not been seized by leaders to anchor their country deeper in the European project; partly, the refugee crisis has come to add a layer of complication that has made this feeling of belonging a bit weaker. Nonetheless, fostering such regional dynamics would also prove a stepping stone for increased necessary cooperation between NATO and the EU on these issues, as hybrid warfare is by its nature at the crossroads of civilian and military affairs. The V4, alongside with the Baltic states, Bulgaria and Romania, can show the EU and NATO that regional cooperation can provide the institutions with expertise to face such existential challenges, and help coordinate how the two institutions work together. There is here a real opportunity for the V4 to prove its added value on issues that are central to the continued existence of the

institutions it is part of, and showcase to Russia the unity and solidarity of Europe and the transatlantic partnership.

The way the V4 works is influenced by national trends and by the broader geopolitical context in which it evolves, as has been described earlier, and there exists the opportunity for the V4 to enhance its usefulness to NATO and the EU. In parallel, the V4 should continue to influence the way in which the policies of these two institutions develop, and continue to showcase a minimal level of unity on specific security and defense issues in Brussels, in order to maintain the image of an active and adaptive V4.

There exist a few specific policy areas where leadership from the institutions could create the conditions for increased intra-regional solidarity. For example, the development of the NATO's Framework Nations Concept (FNC), whereby small groups of nations ('clusters') work together to pool resources, under the aegis of a larger 'framework nation' which provides the cluster with military command and control structures and the backbone of the military. Under such concept, which is still under development, NATO implicitly recognizes the usefulness of regional approaches to certain security issues and for the preservation (and eventual development) of capabilities, which the V4 has been attempting to do, albeit relatively unsuccessfully. With Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia taking part in a cluster led by Germany, there will be another prime opportunity for common thinking about defense policy, in partnership with the reluctant giant that Germany remains: this creates an extra incentive for a deeper cooperation within the region, with the added value of an important partner becoming a stakeholder in Central European security. At the same time, this will also reinforce the extent to which the V4 countries share the same objectives for NATO, which may not necessarily have been the case - at least in the public attitudes - at the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine. A realignment of the respective countries' NATO strategies will therefore participate in a broader acceptance of NATO's objectives (namely, the reassurances measures) in the region and enhance the organization's long-term military and capacity planning. In parallel, a partnership with powerful Germany may provide the region with incentives to "deconflict" any remaining

issues in their respective NATO policies, given the significant influence that Germany yields both in the current crisis with Russia and in its individual relationships with the V4 countries, especially with the Czech Republic, whose strategic priorities are increasingly closer to the German ones. Finally, closely aligned NATO strategies also give national leaders a new opportunity to discuss the potential efficiencies brought forth by NATO, in terms of procurement, joint training or even regional influence in the NATO structures, and an impetus to remain strongly engaged in its structures and policy development.

However, institutional proposals such as the FNC do not necessarily represent the necessary tools to deal with major crisis such as Ukraine, that have shaken V4 unity, but also can be framed as another impetus for a stronger V4 role. While the crisis in Ukraine has showcased a sizeable amount of internal disagreements within the V4, these are often borne of national approaches - often opportunistic ones - that do not necessarily reflect the deep-held policies of a country. At the contrary, there is a case to be made for framing the dual crisis in Europe's East and South as an opportunity for the V4 to test its fundamentals and chart the course for structured regional cooperation on specific issues that are central to the region's vitality, and building on these to chart out a path for cooperation to achieve European strategic interests in areas other than the East, for example in the fight against the Islamic State. The V4, even since the onset of the crisis, has proven that it can credibly influence events and that it maintains strong enough a role so as to not give undue credit to voices that emit doubts about the usefulness of the grouping; as we have discussed, both in bottom-up and top-down approaches, the V4 and NATO and the EU have real interests in preserving a strong link in order to advance common interests, and it is more than likely that this will continue with the European response to Russia more firmly set. At the end, the real value of the V4 for the institutions remains predictability, even if there exist different national interests; if the V4 can guarantee a certain level of predictability on certain key issues for the institutions, then the tools of its continued development will remain valid, and in turn justifications for an improved role of the V4 will also become more natural (even if the Central European

response to the refugee crisis has cast doubt on the region, and may harm its long-term influence in the EU framework).

In fact, it seems that the V4 has a real role to play in today's situation, at a time where the EU is thinking more and more about its role as a security provider and is re-thinking the tenets of its own security strategy; at a time where NATO is more than ever at a crossroads, going from a 'credibility' Summit in Wales to a 'delivery' Summit in Warsaw which will prove key as to understanding the Alliance's ambitions for its two neighborhoods. There therefore is a real window of opportunity to inject a level of regional sensitivity in these ongoing institutional thought processes that will affect the security architecture of the next 10 years. At the end, it seems that the V4 will be judged not on the way it handled the crisis - internally and externally - but how it emerges from it: by having participated in the strengthening of the institutions and the values they represent. For a region that is in need of a new narrative about its attachment to the EU and NATO, the crisis represents a real opportunity to refocus discourses about the institutions and insist on how they represent an essential part of the national and regional long-term ambitions.



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