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## The Security and Defence Cooperation in the Visegrad Group – Actual and Alternative Formats of Cooperation

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### Abstract

In the last 30 years, the Visegrad Group (V4) is identified as the most noticeable and constant format of regional cooperation between states in Central Europe and a significant collective player. All four countries from the V4 are able to function as separate actors in different policies and activities, but their perception as a group of countries is more emphasized in the presentation of V4 as a successful model of cooperation. In a various occasions its existence has been challenged by other forms of regional cooperation, but the V4 remained stable through the years. In recent decade, all four member states of the Visegrad Group have experienced the possible creation of parallel regional alliances that could offer them a new platform if any of them decide to leave the Visegrad Group. The paper sections focus on the security aspects of cooperation. It locates the beginnings of their regional cooperation and the possible effects of future cooperation alternatives regarding their security policy. The paper also analyzes their mutual relationship and their relations with other forms or models of security and defence cooperation in Europe, emphasizing the changes that happened in the last decades in the fields of security and defence. The paper also deals with the successes and failures of their security cooperation so far and the future security challenges for the V4 countries.

**Keywords:** Central-Eastern Europe; cooperation; defense; security; Visegrad Group.

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## **1. Introduction**

The Visegrad Group, known as V4 (Visegrad Four or the European Quartet), is a regional group of countries from Central-Eastern Europe that functions actively and independently within and outside the area of the European Union (EU). It is a political and cultural alliance founded in 1991. It consists of four European countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Before V4 there was V3 initiative. The days before the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, on 15 February 1991, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic (CSFR) signed a joint declaration for coordinating their plans to join NATO and European Communities. The meeting took place at a historically important location: the same place where Hungarian, Polish and Czech kings met in 1335 in order to discuss their common problems. In 1993, after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and its transformation in two separate countries, the group became the V4.

The countries from the V4 group had an aim to accomplish a membership in the European Union and in the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO). The Visegrad Group is seen as regional structure for cooperation of four Central-Eastern European countries, but there is a question about the alternatives that this group offers in individual policies and interests of the countries or does it have a capacity to identify their shared ambitions, priorities, and interests and to promote them not only on European soil, but much broader.

Speaking of cooperation between states and its security aspects, the role of the state in the security field is not connected only with the preservation and maintenance of territorial integrity, state sovereignty and security of the population, but with a broad variety of non-military aspects that significantly impact the states. The security and defense issues in the past were more dependent on the military power, while nowadays the security of the state can be observed from a different perspective. The defense and security cooperation between V4 countries is not an issue in peaceful times, but it becomes important concern in cases of security risks. The various changes and new developments in the field of security in the last thirty years disclosed new trends in this field, such as the transformation from hard to soft type of security, giving strength to the non-military aspects of security (cyber security and environmental problems), the tendency of the states to integrate in collective security and defense systems, and the growing number of key players worldwide.

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was crucial for the relations between the V4 countries. At that period the main changes in geopolitical aspect took place. Before that, these four countries were part of the Soviet bloc and their political and economic orientation was determined by that fact. After the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, these countries started a new path: they became independent, but with limited natural resources and that was the reason why they remained dependent on other countries. Their development was strongly affected by the aspiration for membership into international security organizations and their expectation to achieve economic prosperity, security and stability. In 1993 they became members of the United Nations (UN). Two years later, in 1995 they became members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). With the Partnership for Peace programme they integrated into the North Atlantic treaty Organization (NATO). They did not become members of NATO at the same time: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined NATO in 1999 and Slovakia in 2004. The reason for the delay of Slovakia's membership in NATO was the country's unsatisfactory development in complying with the democratic criteria. They accomplished their key target to

join the EU in 2004. Today, all four countries of the V4 group are members of the European Union (UN), they joined the Union in May 2004.

## **2. Security policies of the V4 countries**

Security is a key element of the foreign and defense policy of the state, which can determine the direction of a concrete foreign policy and is connected with the security policy of the state. In this section of the paper will be identified the main factors that had an effect on V4 countries and their security policies.

As mentioned previously, the membership of these four countries in the international security organizations have an important effect on their attitude toward security issues, mainly because they rapidly transform into members of the EU, NATO and OSCE.

After the World War II, these countries were exposed to the so-called Warsaw Pact and the influence of the Soviet Union and affected by its security policy [1].

After the Cold War, these four countries had to decide which alternative approach is most suitable for each of them: neutrality with institutional security or without it; integration into an existing international and regional security organization(s); establishing their own regional and independent security organization or even reviving an eastern security organization; creating some type of a pan-European security structure; or reliance on national defense exclusively [2].

Each of these alternatives has its own concerns. For example, the neutrality as a “soft” approach did not offer security guarantees, because the V4 countries lacked the support for the “hard” approach that might come from the Security Council of the United Nations. Establishing their own independent organization was not an option due to their different interests. Integration into an existing security organization was also debatable, because some organizations, such as OSCE had never used military force and for that reason they could not guarantee their security. Revival of an Eastern European security organization was not attractive because of their previous historical experience. The most appealing alternative was integration into Western security structure, but it was unrealistic because NATO was not very familiar with an enlargement policy. Creating a pan-European security structure in practice was a very difficult task, if not impossible. Relying on a national defense system was too expensive, taking into consideration their outdated defense technology and the necessity for new investments in this field. However, the Central European states decided to establish their own regional security organization, to integrate into existing Western security structures, but also to rely on their national defense. The creation of V4 gave these countries the chance for cooperation and their preparation for integration into European Union, NATO and OSCE [3].

Nowadays, their membership in NATO influenced their security and defense policy and the EU membership focused on economic integration primarily has established some instruments that can have an effect on security and defense policy, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The shape and development of the security policies of the Visegrad countries are influenced by the development

of the security environment and their internal political circumstances.

### **3. Challenges in the security policy for Visegrad Group countries**

The current security policy of V4 is based on the security-related cooperation with EU and NATO and the pro-EU and pro-NATO positions maintained in the countries. It developed in an environment that at first was a territorial barrier between great empires and later was a barrier between different ideological blocks. The last few decades the area has changed, especially after the expansion of EU and NATO into the countries from the former Eastern bloc. The pro-Western position prevailed in these countries primarily because of economic reasons, but also ideological, social and cultural. This position acted as a stimulus for changes in the area of security policy [4].

The V4 countries base their security policy on NATO as a guarantor of their security and stability. However, there are minor differences within domestic and regional security environments, but also a number of security challenges that can influence their cooperation and determine the path of the security policy in the V4 countries. These security challenges include the migration crisis, the crisis in Ukraine, reducing defense budgets, the rising influence of extremism and nationalism in all V4 states.

The migration crisis and the role of the EU center contributed for greater European integration in the fields of security and defense. However, possible disengagements of one or several V4 countries could easily endanger the cooperation between them.

The ongoing situation in Ukraine is also a major challenge for V4, taking into consideration the nature and the origin of the conflict and the role of the Russian Federation, that can lead to different attitudes and ambiguous statements of the V4 representatives.

Regarding the necessity to reduce defense spending, all V4 countries were under pressure to reduce the defense spending and to avoid their obligations as NATO members to allocate around 2% of their GDP to defense. This led to a situation where the V4 countries were only “consumers” of security, relying on other countries to pay their “bill” [5].

The rising popularity of nationalism and extremism and their possible transition into political life is a major challenge that has two possible scenarios: it could put pressure on mutual cooperation or may strengthen further cooperation as an alternative to integration on a higher level [6]. Some of these challenges can create opportunities for further cooperation in the Visegrad Group. Their security and defense policies in the past depended on the great powers, which had their own strategic interests in the region. If we put aside their shared interests and values, we can easily conclude that much of their actual cooperation is a result of their geographical closeness and active membership in EU and NATO as international organizations.

### **4. Cooperation in security issues among the V4 countries**

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the four countries from the

Visegrad Group made an effort to build a new identity in the international ambiance. The democratization is not an easy process and democracy can be endangered by crises in the same way as any other system. That was the motive why the V4 countries were inspired to initiate a mutual cooperation.

Speaking of their cooperation, there is one phenomenon that is not adequately researched: the sectoral cooperation and its role in regional integration. The countries from Central Europe, including the V4 countries participated in the institutional systems of cooperation before the collapse of the Soviet bloc. They participated in the Central European Free Trade Agreement, also known as CEFTA, and the Central European Initiative, known as CEI. The participation in this kind of institutional systems facilitated their way to the European political and economic integration. The membership of these countries in the Partnership for Peace led them to a project that was not officially implemented by the Visegrad countries, but it marked the start of research in the field of security and defense. The Visegrad initiative was based on Anglo-centric terminology, which was not suitable for Central European countries. They started to focus on their differences, analyzing how to adapt their cooperation to actual conditions. Their differences and past mistakes help them to reunite and build a common idea of mutual cooperation. The last thirty years we have witnessed the development of this initiative which aim was to share common goals and values while transforming the cooperative and collective security. These common values were reflected in the V4 security policies. Today, all V4 countries promote conflict prevention, smart defense, using the peaceful non-military means for settlement of disputes managing the crises and conflicts with the principles of international law. Their policies are based on international cooperation and collaboration.

There is another key element that affects the security policies of the V4 and that is the doctrine of transnational organizations. As previously mentioned, the common goal for the V4 countries was the membership in the international organizations. After these countries joined UN, OSCE, EU and NATO, they automatically achieved another set of common goals.

In these accessions, the international organizations saw a confirmation of their plan for strategic enlargement that would strengthen the collective defense. Some of them even enabled cooperation with non-member states that shared similar values and interests with the members [7].

## **5. Achievements and weaknesses of security cooperation of V4 countries**

Important aspect in V4 cooperation is to identify their achievements and their weaknesses. These countries are in good bilateral relations and they successfully managed their historical conflicts. The absence of tension in their relations or some minor disagreements between them has no impact on their cooperation. With their internal cohesion they created notable collective voice within the EU [8].

The regular meetings of military specialists, defense ministers, state secretaries and chiefs of general staff are one of the most successful and important achievements of their security and defense cooperation. Establishing the initiative “V4 EU Battlegroup” in 2016 was one key accomplishment of the V4. It consists of Force Headquarters and the operation and strategic resources units. It is based in Krakow, Poland and involves more

than 3700 soldiers from the V4 countries. The operations of this initiative were repeated in 2019 and they included two inevitable parts of any security and military cooperation: defense planning and joint military training. This cooperation is important in order to ensure coordinated and prepared managing of potential military threats.

International organizations, such as EU, supported the initiative V4 EU Battlegroup. On the other hand, NATO supported another successful initiative – NATO Counter –Intelligence Centre of Excellence, located in Krakow, Poland. This project was a big challenge and a major opportunity for the V4 countries, especially in the area of nomination of personnel: the V4 countries have a tradition of group consultations and support for candidates coming from one of the V4 countries. These kinds of consultations were very important for the coordination in the area of external relations of the V4 countries.

There were some weaknesses and failures, too. Initiatives in the field of common defense policy and defense spending, that includes joint efforts to improve the military equipment, such as helicopters and obtain mobile 3D radars, were compromised by different national interests and a variety of interest groups connected to different countries, which led to slowing down or delaying the progress [9].

## **6. Future opportunities for security cooperation**

The V4 countries are facing many challenges, but there are also opportunities that appear in response. A security challenge means a potential security interference or disruption. Individual countries respond differently, depending on the influence of the challenge. However, the main motive for cooperation in the field of security is identifying the common characteristics of the countries that are concerned. These characteristics can be revealed by knowing the security concerns of the countries concerned. Although the V4 countries share similar characteristics, they have different positions on several issues, especially on the perception of a threat. The V4 countries are aware of the threats, but they have different positions regarding the nature of the threats and their eventual extent. Therefore, the EU and NATO are in a position to manage the security: EU coordinates the eliminations of risks in the area of non-military security and NATO coordinates military reactions. The EU and NATO gave their support to V4 and now they can have effective security and defense sub-system within the EU and NATO.

The V4 countries are involved in different security initiatives and defense activities, but still the question of threat perception is fundamental to their mission for common values and interests. The cooperation will survive and the V4 countries can prepare their cooperation for situations where their strategic and vital interests can be endangered.

## **7. Alternative formats of cooperation**

The V4 Group is known as the most noticeable and constant format of cooperation in Central Europe in recent history. However, it has been challenged by other complementary and alternative initiatives and projects, such as the Polish-Croatian Three Seas Initiative, Austrian Concept of Strategic/Regional Partnership, the EU's macro-regional Strategy for Danube Region (EUSDR), and the Austrian-Czech-Slovak project Austerlitz –

Format/Nord-Trilaterale. The identity of the Central European region has been challenged by proposals to merge with Western Europe. On the other hand, Poland's domination within the V4 Group based on its size and different policies; the internal conflicts about some policies within the V4; and the actions of some external players who cannot accept their secondary position in Central-Eastern Europe when confronted with the central status of the Visegrad Group in the region, such as Austria, Slovenia and Croatia, are some of the factors that can lead to alternative new or parallel formats of regional integration and cooperation in the region.

Some of the countries in Central and East-Central Europe are trying to reconfigure present cooperation in the region in order to promote their national interests. For that aim they use either non-formal alliance with the V4 or new formats of cooperation that can help them to promote and advance their goals and interests. All activities in regard to existing or new formats and models of cooperation between the countries in the region discreetly reflect not only their internal policies, but also their ideological preferences.

The V4 countries have different expectations from the Visegrad Group: for Poland it is an instrument that can provide a balance between Germany and Russia; for Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland it is a chance to declare an aspiration to lead the V4 Group; for Slovakia it is an opportunity to become a player in the region and to leave behind the political isolation. Nevertheless, Poland, as the biggest nation by size and population and a country with the great economic growth among V4 members appears to be the natural leader in the V4 Group. This idea is not widely shared and very well accepted by the other V4 countries [10].

Austria and its lack of interests to develop a partnership with the post-Communist countries of Central Europe had an influence in establishing the Visegrad Group. In the 1990s, Austria preferred early membership in the European Community and its diplomats started to think how to create a more active role of Austria in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, which resulted in creating a Regional Partnership in 2000, which original title was Strategic Partnership. Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia were invited by Austria to join, with a possibility to extend the invitation to Poland. The initiative was rejected by the invited countries and its original name (Strategic Partnership) was replaced with a new one (Regional Partnership) that put an accent on the regional character of the alliance. Its main objectives were to support partner countries in their preparations for EU membership and to define and promote their shared values and interests in the EU.

Another initiative for cooperation was the Austerlitz Triangle or Nord-Trilaterale as an inter-governmental cooperation between the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria, officially launched in 2015. The intention of the governments of these three countries was to distance themselves from the governments in Poland and Hungary that were conservative-nationalists governments. At that time, the diplomats from the Czech Republic focused on mutual interests and goals between V4 and Austria.

The Three Seas Initiative is an ambitious initiative that promotes wide regional cooperation in the region of East-Central Europe, especially between Russia and Germany. The diplomats from Poland observed the attempts of other V4 countries to make alternative regional alliances with a dose of disrespect and worry. These initiatives include the cooperation of Hungary with Slovenia and Croatia in the so-called "HCS Triangle" (Hungary Croatia Slovenia Triangle) and the macro-regional Strategy for Danube region (EUSDR), which did

not include Poland. The Three Seas Initiative is an attempt of the most dominant nation in the region of Central Europe to take the control and launch a regional cooperation platform broader than the V4 Group. Croatia and Poland launched the initiative in 2016. Twelve countries and their representatives were invited to its first summit in Dubrovnik, Croatia, in 2016. All invited representatives came from post-Communist EU member states. Poland presented the goal of strengthening the relations between North and South Europe as a correction to the East-West European axis. The main goal was said to be economic, with a view to security. The initiative was established two years after the Austerlitz Triangle and was an attempt to overcome the rivalry between V4 and Austerlitz Triangle through a new platform for cooperation. One of the challenges of this initiative was the fact that its founders were all post-Communist countries, with exception of Austria, and this fact emphasized the East-West division. Within a group of twelve countries it is much more complicated to reach all common interests of the group. Important differences can come out among the members when it comes to their “perfect” solutions to essential issues and policies.

However, the V4 Group remained the preferential cooperation platform for joint action. There is no alternative platform that can challenge or even replace the V4 Group.

## **8. Conclusion**

The concept of V4 cooperation in the field of security is based on an affiliation to the region of Central Europe and the geographic proximity of the countries. Although there were some supporters of the idea for V4 enlargement, it has not taken hold so far. These four countries were able to achieve a consensus on their common strategic and vital interests in the field of security, but it was a complicated task to accomplish cooperation in every other area of mutual interests. Their membership in international organizations means fulfillment of a certain obligations, and that requires cooperation between them on security and defense issues. The V4 countries decided to use a “soft” power and non-military means to advance their external interests. Their response to new challenges can be very flexible and they can also launch new forms of coordination or promote new projects into existing cooperation, or even create space for new similar regional initiatives.

Both optimists and skeptics believe that the Visegrad Group is a stable structure for regional cooperation that will continue to exist. It has the potential to be a rather confident rival of broader alternatives in Central and East-Central Europe. On the other hand, the current image of V4 can change the direction of some EU members to search for alternative formats of cooperation within the region and to avoid the so-called “toxicity” of V4 membership.

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