

ESSAY

V4 DEFENCE COOPERATION IN LIGHT OF THE DIFFERING THREAT PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

The cooperation of the Visegrad Group (V4) traces back to the regime changes in the region after the fall of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s. Until 2004, the regional cooperation of the V4 was driven by the group's aim to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Since their accession however, cooperation was lagging behind due to lack of joint concern and vision. Nevertheless, due to the annexation of Crimea and the migration crisis, discourse on the cooperation was brought back to life, however, this time it is not driven by a common political project but by the endeavour to represent the interest of the V4 against Western European member states.

INTRODUCTION

The cooperation of the Visegrad Group (V4), Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia traces back to the regime changes in the region after the fall of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s. Until 2004, the regional cooperation of the V4 was driven by the group's aim to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Since their accession however, cooperation was lagging behind due to lack of joint concern and vision. Nevertheless, due to the annexation of Crimea and the migration crisis, discourse on the cooperation was brought back to life, however, this time it is not driven by a common political project but by the endeavour to represent the interest of the V4 against Western European member states of the EU whose opinion greatly differs from current "hot topic" of European security discourse, i.e. migration. Considering the differing threat perceptions of the V4 countries, a cooperation built on their joint stance against other EU countries on the issue of migration will not last long nor will it evolve into an institutionalized cooperation despite the current rhetoric that intends to flaunt a strong V4. In this essay, I first present a brief theoretical background to regionality and security communities, then, I provide an overview of the past cooperation in light of the introduced theories. Finally, I will draw conclusions regarding the (im)possibilities of the V4 security cooperation, claiming that

REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX AND
SECURITY COMMUNITY THEORIES IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

For analysing the possible scope of cooperation between the Visegrad countries, a constructivist approach will be used along with the theories of regional security complexes (RSCs) and security communities. I apply the constructivist theory to analyse the V4 (non-)cooperation because both realism and liberalism has failed to give answers to the lack of common security policy in the region as they both presuppose that geographical vicinity and joint membership in both the NATO and EU would result in a cooperative security policy.

According to the realist idea, international actors have fixed identities and interest based on their geographical location which predestines them to a static regional interaction. They „tend to define regions on the basis of geography because of the assumption that proximity generates common interests that derive from a common culture, economic circumstances, and security concerns. But individuals can organize and define themselves based on markers that are not necessarily tied to space, suggesting something of an "imagined region," or a "cognitive region."¹ The English school of liberalism focuses on "how states construct institutions to encourage cooperation and to further their mutual interest in survival, respectively"², however it cannot account for the lack of common security policy within the semi-institution V4 states. Constructivism, on the other hand, may provide an explanation for the volatile nature of the V4 cooperation, since it takes into consideration material, social and normative factors too.

The concept of security communities originates from Karl Deutsch's idea on pluralistic security communities. According to him, security communities are composed of states that share the same values and ideas making conflict unlikely between them. Deutsch's idea was elaborated on later in details in the works of Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, thus becoming an important part of the mainstream literature of international relations. The purpose of Adler and Barnett was to refine security policy analysis, which, according to them, was focusing solely on two levels of analysis, i.e. global and national, thus leading to insufficient or inappropriate answers.

When using the method of analysis developed by Buzan and Waever, one has to differentiate between the discourse and practice related to the region and the individual security discourse and practices of member states of the RSC, the latter being the subject of analysis. In this essay, instead of studying the discourse of the region which is the Euro-Atlantic in this regard, the security discourse and practices of the Visegrad countries will be closely looked at. In the framework of the proposed analysis, security policy will be examined on four levels: the domestic security discourse and threat perceptions of member states, relations between the constituting states and that to the neighbouring regions, and the role of great powers in the RSC.

In order to refine the analysis, the concept of insulator³ also has to be introduced. The term denotes a country or countries that are situated between two regional complexes: the V4 after the fall of communism could be considered as insulators, since they did not become members of another security community instantly, it took around a decade for them to integrate. After their accession in 1999 and in 2004 to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization⁴ and to the European Union respectively, their roles and identities has changed differently, and

they are constantly changing even nowadays. Some countries are returning to the role of an insulator: for instance, Hungary introduced its Eastern Opening Strategy aiming for closer economic ties with Eastern regions parallel to a foreign policy that instead of enhancing Euro-Atlantic integration, aims to maintain a “balanced relations with the major powers that define of our region, including the United States, Russia, Germany, China and Turkey”⁵, suggesting that the country now serves as a bridge between formerly two distinct security complexes.

As insulators, during their early years of membership the V4 countries could take up the role of a mediator, and were able and willing to lobby for establishing closer relations with both their Eastern neighbours such as Georgia and Ukraine and with the Western Balkans through the Eastern Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy. Nowadays, however, it can be observed that the V4 currently does not have a common mission, as it would be expected both from scholars and practitioners of security policy. They “Historical hatreds and friendships, as well as specific issues that trigger conflict or cooperation, take part in the formation of an overall constellation of fears, threats, and friendships that define an RSC.”⁶

The Visegrad cooperation has started as a political project with the aim to help each other in the process of EU and NATO integration. Initial endeavours of integration were successful because the Visegrad countries were aspiring for political and economic integration to the liberal democracies in Western Europe and the importance of security policy was negligible at that time, the V4 articulated only the return of communism as a security threat⁷. It is important to note, that at the time of the V4 joining the EU and NATO, the two group of states both focused primarily on political and economic cooperation, while they

articulated distinct security concerns: while it was communism that was considered a security issue by the V4, EU member states started cooperating in order to prevent the return of “EU’s past”⁸ (which may be the reason for not having a common European army yet, the lack of shared fear from one external actor).

The fear from a possible war in Europe was reassured by the Yugoslav war, which further enhanced the integrational endeavours of the previous communist bloc. Thus, the security policy of the Visegrad Group cannot be examined independently from NATO and the EU since no matter how different the current threat perceptions of V4 states are, their security policy is confined to their membership to the two organizations.

REGIONAL SECURITY SUB-COMPLEXES WITHIN THE V4

Due to the great number of states belonging to the Euro-Atlantic security community and due to its great territorial extension, it is both extremely hard and futile to try to define one regional security complex to which the whole community belongs. In the Euro-Atlantic security community, states face security threats either on the borders of the regional security complex to which they belong or threats rooted in other security complexes but projected by the greater powers of the security community, like the United States, the United Kingdom or Germany. Thus, it is useful to define the term of sub-complex too, which “represents distinctive patterns of security interdependence that are nonetheless caught up in a wider pattern that defines the RSC as a whole.”⁹ The V4 may be part of a tightly-coupled security

community, but the four countries are securitizing different threats, and their defence and security policies are highly polarized, since they belong to different regional security sub-complexes at the same time.

For instance, Poland plays with the global league instead of the regional one (as distinguished by Buzan and Waever¹⁰) due to the country's size, thus having a threat perception which differs from that of other V4 countries. During the Yugoslav wars, all V4 were affected, except for Poland because it did not share borders with the conflicted area, and it belonged to another regional security sub-complex than the rest of the Visegrad group. Instead of securitizing the Western-Balkan, Poland has been focusing on EU's Eastern neighbours, especially to the threat posed by the Russian Federation's aggressive power politics in the past years. As the Polish Minister of Defence stated, Poland now focuses also on deterrence besides defence¹¹. As a result, a territorial defence force was established, and security cooperation with Western allies were enhanced: a new German-Polish brigade was formed as a reaction to the annexation of Crimea, indicating that some V4 states are entering into closer security cooperation with their Western-European allies despite the adversarial rhetoric of the Polish political leadership. Poland also joined the multinational Saber Junction¹² exercise along with Germany and many other states in 2017, however, Hungary and the Czech Republic did not take part in it.

It is also important to note that Poland has always put more emphasis on V4 security cooperation in its programmes for the Polish Visegrad presidency¹³ than other Visegrad countries. In 2000/2001, Slovakia's NATO accession was supported, in 2004/2005 they entered into cooperation with Austria in fighting political extremism in the region. In the same year, the Polish presidency also elaborated on the

importance of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy and energy security. Then in 2008/2009, they lobbied for the integration of Ukraine, Georgia, and for closer cooperation with the Caucasus. In 2012-2013, emphasis was put on the establishment of the *Visegrad Battlegroup*, on *Pooling and Sharing* and *Smart Defence*. Nevertheless, during the latest Polish presidency starting last year, a shift could be perceived in a sense that in the program, Poland is taking a firm stance for the representation of V4 with regard to EU's future, and demands a greater role in tackling the Union's challenges¹⁴. It emphasizes the importance of V4's "strong voice" in the Union and the common heritage of Visegrad, with less focus on security cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic community in the program. This trend is also continued during the current Hungarian presidency which will be detailed below.

On the contrary to Poland, Hungary was greatly preoccupied by the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s: the country even allowed NATO aircrafts to use its airspace during the air campaign in spring 1999. Even nowadays, the Western Balkan bears a great importance with regard to Hungarian security policy due to its long border with it and to the Hungarian minorities living in Serbia. The importance of Southeast European stability was always a priority in Hungary's V4 programs along with the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy, however the active support of the latter one seems to sink into oblivion since the war in Ukraine has started. Also, maintaining troops in the Middle East and increasing capacity within NATO KFOR TACRES BN (Tactical Reserve Battalion) suggest a continued, permanent role in the Balkan rather than on the Eastern flank of NATO. However, Hungary is also taking part in other projects too on an ad-hoc basis. For instance, Hungary performed a Baltic Air Policing mission in 2015 (note that

Poland and the Czech Republic has been contributing to the mission since 2006 and 2009), it is planning to participate in the Trident Juncture NATO exercise in 2018. Notably, Hungary contributes to the work of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence along with all other members of the Visegrad Group.

Contrary to the offset of Bundeswehr-V4 cooperation, Hungary has proposed a national level security policy for the next decade, aspiring to outrun other V4 members in security spending and modernization within the framework of the so-called Zrínyi2026 plan, indicating that Hungary considers the rest of the V4 as its rivals rather than as possible actors for deepening defence cooperation.

Regarding the Zrínyi2026 plan on military force reform, István Simicskó, the defence minister of Hungary pointed out the main objectives: the improvement of the country's air defence capabilities, increasing spending and the size of the military reserve force, and promoting "national defence education" too. Enhancing V4 or EU level defence cooperation and interoperability was not mentioned with regard to the reform until now (however, the strategy is not public).

As opposed to the Poland's and Hungary's alienation from the Euro-Atlantic community, the Czechs have entered into military cooperation with Germany this year via the Framework Nations Concept by delegating one rapid deployment brigade to the German army, clearly signalling its position with regard to the recent fallout between the EU and the Visegrad Group despite the typically pro-Russian and Eurosceptic public opinion and rhetoric in the Czech Republic. Security cooperation with Western-Europe is beneficial for the Czech Republic also because of its export-oriented arms-industry.

During the Czech V4 presidencies, the emphasis was usually on deepening Visegrad cooperation, promoting democracy, enhancing regional communication, and also on the project of tackling extremism together with Austria. The Czech presidency was outstandingly effective during 2015/2016, because it addressed one of today's greater security issues: cyber security. The Czechs founded the Central European Cyber Security Platform (CECSP) with the help of Austria already in 2013, and the Visegrad Group Military Educational Platform (VIGMILEP), thus achieving a greater level of institutionalization of the V4 cooperation.

Along with the Czech Republic, Slovakia was also focusing on integrational issues when they were presiding the V4, as opposed to Hungary or Poland. Despite possessing a military industry, Slovakia has the lowest defence spending with regard to NATO in the V4 region. Also, their activity on security policy issues is much lower than other states'. This is also indicated by the fact that they withdrew their forces from KFOR in 2014, and the largest size of Slovak troops are stationing in Cyprus under the flagship of the UN. Also, they are quite reluctant in delegating military capabilities to the EU Battlegroups: since its establishment, Slovakia delegated forces only twice to the Battlegroup: once in the framework of the Czech-Slovak Battlegroup in 2009 and within the Visegrad Battlegroup in 2016. This indicates that Slovakia usually takes a more passive role within the V4 than other states, however, it is not reluctant to cooperate when the framework for it is provided.

Their reluctance regarding NATO and V4 is also manifested in the public opinion: according to a survey conducted last year, almost half of Slovaks would support an exit from NATO¹⁵, and one of the opposition parties, Kotleba (People's Party – Our Slovakia) that is

gaining more and more support, has already started collecting signatures for holding a referendum on exit from NATO. This trend seemingly affects V4 cooperation besides Slovakia's disputes with Hungary regarding minority rights.

CURRENT STATE OF THE V4 SECURITY COOPERATION AND ITS PROSPECTS

The regions to where each state delegates their greatest military power indicate the discrepancy between the states' threat perceptions. The largest Hungarian contingent is stationed in Kosovo, followed by the troops to Bosnia Herzegovina, and Afghanistan was only the third in the line until troops were withdrawn. The Czechs delegate the majority of their military force to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, the Polish army also has its greatest presence in the Middle East: they were the commander of the Multinational Division Central-South until 2008 (Iraq). And finally, Slovakia delegates its army primarily to Cyprus suggesting a low level of engagement with both NATO and with the security community of the region. Nevertheless, the 2016 deployment of the V4 Battlegroup is a significant achievement in the defence cooperation of the region which has been planned since 2011, originally with the contribution of Ukraine, but as the Euro-Atlantic community gave up on the country's integration, the Battlegroup was formed without Ukraine.

Military cooperation in the fields of research and development, education and training, and modernisation are also considered a long awaited progress of V4 which were adopted in the Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening Their Defence Cooperation¹⁶

in 2014. Nevertheless, enhanced defence cooperation cannot be achieved without interoperability, which could be facilitated by joint procurements or by the joint development of capabilities, for which Poland just introduced the Regional Security Assistance Program¹⁷, however the extent of V4 countries' extent of contribution is still to be announced. Despite the significant military industry the region had in the 20th century, no harmonization or re-establishment of the industry took place in the framework of the Visegrad cooperation on one hand due to the competition within the sector between member states, and on the other hand, due to the lack of a joint vision on security and defence projects. A coordinated armament industry in the region would significantly boost the V4's role on EU level, and member states could benefit greatly from the cost-effectiveness of joint procurements in which they are also lagging behind despite the fact that these objectives have been clearly articulated in almost every presidential program of the Visegrad Group since the early 2000s.

The V4 could not find a platform for concise joint military or security cooperation before 2014 since NATO missions took place primarily far away where Visegrad had no direct interest to intervene – due to their geographic distance – other than to take its fair share within the organization. At this point, it is important to note that the lack of V4 security cooperation cannot be blamed solely on member states that are reluctant to realize the impact of a possible cooperation, but it also stems from the nature of their wider security community.

On one hand, the European Union also lacks joint military capabilities and cooperation along with a common foreign policy which would serve as an incentive and framework for a deeper cooperation in the future. On the other hand, in the past decade NATO conducted primarily out-of-area missions, the support of which was not a question for Visegrad

countries despite that those security threats were not securitized in V4 countries due to significant geographical distance, but, delegating military power for these missions served primarily the purpose of showing solidarity with other NATO member states and allegiance to the alliance.

CONCLUSION

Considering that after decades of occupation by the Soviet Union and after a (more or less) parallel accession procedure to both the EU and NATO, one might think that the security policies of the four countries are driven by the same ideas, thus cooperation between them is self-evident. On a more theoretical level, it would be convenient to apply the idea of regionalism to the Visegrad Group, which denotes –as Joseph S. Nye put it – “a limited number of states linked by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence”.¹⁸ Nevertheless, despite the common historical and cultural background, there seems to be no Visegrad group, only a Visegrad project with occasional short-term joint projects.

Indeed, in the case of the Visegrad countries, there are several factors that could encourage their cooperation. Three out of the four are quite small countries, thus they can never have a decisive role in the international anarchy, however, by cooperating with each other their political capital could be increased significantly. The V4 has already realized it when aiming to join the Euro-Atlantic community. Since their accession, however, cooperation only existed on a rhetorical level.

As new threats are emerging over time, more closely to the V4, the lack of joint security policy is more conspicuous despite the current

political leaderships' efforts to signal the image on a unified and potent cooperation. As both NATO and the EU are focusing more and more on the region's collective security instead of out-of-area missions, greater cooperation will be needed between member states, if they want to establish a permanent V4 cooperation. Nevertheless, cooperation in different fields of security will be possible only if member states agree at least on the nature of security threats.

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- ¹ Adler E., (1997). Imagined (Security) Communities: Cognitive Regions in International Relations. *Millennium*, 26(2).
- ² Adler E., Barnett M. (1998). Security communities in theoretical perspective. In: Adler E., Barnett M. (eds.), *Security Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 11.
- ³ „Defines a location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back” In B. Buzan & O. Waever, (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 41.
- ⁴ Note: Slovakia joined NATO only in 2004.
- ⁵ Press conference of the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade on Hungary’s foreign policy:
<http://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/this-year-the-goal-of-hungarian-foreign-policy-will-continue-to-be-the-representation-of-hungarian-interests>
 Accessed: 09/24/2017
- ⁶ B. Buzan & O. Waever, (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 50.
- ⁷ History of the Visegrad Group:
<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/history> Accessed 07/24/2017.
- ⁸ B. Buzan & O. Waever, (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 353.
- ⁹ Ibid. p. 51.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 14.
- ¹¹ The Defense Concept of the Republic of Poland, p. 6.:
http://en.mon.gov.pl/p/pliki/dokumenty/rozne/2017/07/korp_web_13_06_2017.pdf Accessed 24/07/2017
- ¹² Saber Junction Exercise:
<http://www.eur.army.mil/SaberJunction/> Accessed: 07/24/2017
- ¹³ See: Stepper Péter Visegrad cooperation beyond the Polish and during the Hungarian V4 Presidency, *Foreign Policy Review* (10) 93-107 (2017) and Stepper Péter: Consistently Inconsistent: The sinusoidal V4 Presidency struggles to find areas of cooperation which will unite the region’s priorities
 Visegrad Insight, 2017/06/20.
- ¹⁴ Programme of the Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group, 1 July 2016 - 30 June 2017:
<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs>
 Accessed 09/24/2017
- ¹⁵ <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20266421/poll-almost-a-half-of-slovaks-would-welcome-neutrality.html> Accessed 09/24/2017
- ¹⁶ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014-03-14-ltv>
 Accessed 09/19/2017.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.defensenews.com/2015/10/04/poland-launches-effort-to-help-arm-e-european-allies/> Accessed: 09/24/2017
- ¹⁸ J. S. Nye, (1968). *International Regionalism: Readings*. Boston: Little Brown. p. vii.