



Connecting V4 and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions: V4 & Baltics

Dániel Varga

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Introduction

With the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, the internal dynamics between the countries comprising the bloc are to undergo significant changes that will substantially affect how decision-making is carried out within the EU. The value of effectively creating sustainable partnerships among the now 27 Member States has come to the fore, and the coalition-building potential of individual members once again becomes pivotal as it relates to qualified majority voting, as well as blocking minorities in the Council of the EU. Coalitions and majorities within the Union work best when countries cooperating in different forms engage intensively with one another, and this happens mostly on regional grounds. When it comes to European regional groupings, the Visegrad Group and the Baltic States have their respective geopolitical motivations regarding the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region, which dictate shared initiatives and cooperation through active engagement. However, even without a common foreign policy target area, the similar historical experiences and economic weights and sizes of the countries of the two groupings provide fertile ground for enhancing connections within the European Union.

The international expert roundtables titled 'Connecting V₄ and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions: V₄ & Baltics' took place on November 11 and 12, 2020, as the second occasion of a 19-month-long project focusing on building inter-regional connections across the Union by connecting V₄ and other regional expert networks, and, thus, researching the potential for future EU coalitions.

The online workshop was organized by the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID) in close cooperation with the Association for International Affairs (AMO), the Res Publica Foundation / Visegrad Insight and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA) with the support of the International Visegrad Fund.

This policy brief is based on the November expert roundtable discussions and provides an overview of the key points and ideas brought up by the participants, as well as the main conclusions and recommendations. As for the structure, the first part lays down the basic mechanisms of EU coalition building from the Visegrad and Baltic points of view. Then, a general overview of the state of Visegrad Four-Baltic Three relations and their mutual perceptions is presented. The third part focuses on the Eastern Partnership program of the European Union by summarizing its development and describing its achievements, shortcomings and current standing from the point of view of the two respective country groupings. The last part concentrates on the future of the EaP, providing recommendations as to what paths the V₄ and the B₃ could go down together to ensure that the program remains one of the key success stories of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The conclusion then includes further recommendations for the inter-regional opportunities.

Basis for inter-regional cooperation within the EU

As the European Union is – as of 2021 – comprised of 27 member states, seeking out potential partners and fine-tuning differing views between country coalitions is essential to keeping the Union on a forward path – and it has always been so. Coalition building has become vital to creating majorities in an environment where qualified majority voting applies in many different policy areas, while it also provides



flexibility to the various forms of European integration, as well as having the potential to be a trust-building tool for select policy-focused groupings.¹

Perhaps one of the most widely known examples of intra-EU coalitions is the Visegrad Group, in which the political leaders of the V₄ countries have rightly realized, especially in recent years, that a lack of institutionalization, but rather, pragmatic policy-level cooperation provides the basis for successfully defending interests on the European level, but only when these interests are overlapping. The Czech, the Hungarian, the Polish and the Slovak political leaderships are fully aware of the fact that, although their national interests do differ, cooperation in Brussels is beneficial for amassing influence and improving negotiation positions. This form of partnership is also an effective way of getting the attention of the bigger players, like Germany and France; as suggested by the ECFR survey, the Franco-German tandem is contacted more than any other countries in the EU.²

Due mostly to their size, the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have no other choice than to cooperate on a close level to amplify their voices and interests on the European level. Fully aware of the cons of being small states, all three Baltic countries place special emphasis on regional and interregional cooperation formats. The Nordic-Baltic partnership stands out when it comes to the latter. A quick glance at the map of Europe makes this unsurprising, though; the geographical proximity and the high level of formal relations between the Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6) will always keep Denmark, Finland and Sweden on the top of the strategic priority list for the Baltic states. However, following Brexit, it has become more important for like-minded small and medium member states to find common ground to be able to successfully influence the remaining largest ones.³

With the Lisbon Treaty coming into effect in 2009, extension of the use of qualified majority voting in the Council and new rules concerning voting mechanisms mean that the legislation adoption threshold is lower. This has appreciated the importance of the blocking minority, which means that now at least four member states representing more than 35% of the entire EU population are required to turn down a proposal during a vote.⁴ The V₄ comprises only 10.66% of the Union's population, while the three Baltic states' combined population is only a little more than the smallest Visegrad one, Slovakia's, making up only 1.35% of EU citizens.⁵ This means that even with Germany or France on board, the two regions would still fall short of the required 35%, meaning it is of utmost importance for them to gain the support of other states through successful coalition building efforts.

However, engaging in inter-regional cooperation is not only required for negative European involvement, that is to block certain initiatives, but also for increasing the potential of enforcing others. Enhancing regional cooperation between the Visegrad and Baltic states can help not just in understanding each other's views and providing more information about the nature and operations of the two regional groups, but also in potentially coming up with and promoting EU policies. Apart from the 65% share of population, the already mentioned voting mechanism

¹ Janning, J., Möller, A. Untapped potential: How new alliances can strengthen the EU. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019.

https://ecfr.eu/publication/untapped_potential_how_new_alliances_can_strengthen_the_eu/

² Busse, C., Franke, U. E., Loss, R., Puglierin, J., Riedel, M., Zerka, P. EU Coalition Explorer. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020. <https://ecfr.eu/special/eucoalitionexplorer/>.

³ Janning, J., Raik, K. Estonia's Partners in the EU Coalitions Machinery: Maximising Influence in the EU through Coalition-building. International Centre for Defence and Security, 2020.

https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ICDS_EFPI_Policy_Paper_Estonias_Partners_in_the_EU_Coalition_Machinery_Janning_Raik_January_2020.pdf.

⁴ Karásková, V. Connecting V₄ and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions: V₄ & Benelux. Association for International Affairs, 2020. https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/AMOV4_Benelux.pdf.

⁵ Eurostat. Population on 1 January 2020.

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00001/default/table?lang=en>.



also requires 55% of the member states – 15 out of 27 after Brexit – to be on board for a proposal to be adopted. By simple math, the V₄-B₃ represent almost half of the total number of members needed to form a qualified majority. Pushing through decisions does indeed require a delicate balance in the Council, and this might very well be a favorable starting position for ad-hoc or more structured coalitions between the two groups and other EU geographies. There is an area in which extensive experience proves that common positions can be built both in the Visegrad and Baltic regions and beyond, and that is the Eastern Partnership.

V₄ and the Baltics: Poland and security in the middle

The history of V₄-B₃ cooperation

In terms of the history of inter-regional cooperation, both country groupings were preoccupied with the transition to market economies and democracies after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The goal for both Visegrad and Baltic cooperation was, unsurprisingly, integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, NATO and the European Union. Both official regional groupings, the Visegrad Group and the Baltic Assembly were established with these aims, reflecting the realization by the political leaderships that the goals set might be reached more effectively and sooner if countries in the regions worked together. Of course, the shared desire for independence from the Soviet Union's grip was an added layer in the Baltics, and after having declared their respective sovereignty, the Baltic Assembly (BA) was created in 1991, shaped by the experience and traditions from the Nordic and Benelux countries.⁶ These two country groupings have played a significant role in the formal relations of the Assembly since then. Coincidentally, 1991 was the year of the declaration of the Visegrad Group, too; the V₄'s establishment was also based on coordinating national approaches towards expelling Soviet troops from Central Europe and dissolving the institutional frameworks of the Eastern bloc, such as the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON).⁷

During the decade of transition and the path toward Western integration, the main foreign policy element between the countries of the two regions was the development of bilateral relations. Both the V₄ and the BA held their summits and sessions focusing on the agendas of their own respective regions and there was no talk of any deep collaboration between the Baltics and Central European states in the economic or political sphere. This was a result of factors like transitional difficulties, insufficient mutual economic interests or lack of resources⁸, which is, of course, understandable, given that they had reasons to see one another as competitors in the race to Euro-Atlantic integration.

This state of uninterest is evident in the calendar of V₄ events, too, as the first mention of an official Visegrad-Baltic joint meeting is only from 2006, already two years after the successful EU integration of both regions, when the foreign ministers expressed their firm interest in joining the Schengen area by 2007.⁹ The first prime ministerial level summit of the V₄-B₃ within the V₄+ format took place

⁶ Formation of the Baltic States' regional organisations, 1988 – 1991. Baltic Assembly. <https://www.baltasam.org/en/history/pre-history>.

⁷ Ananicz, A. From the Anti-Communist Underground to NATO and the EU. In: Jagodzinski, A. (ed). The Visegrad Group. A Central European Constellation. Bratislava: International Visegrad Fund, 2006. p. 28.

⁸ Bleiere, D. Cooperation of the Baltic States with the Visegrad Countries: Security Aspects. NATO Fellowship Final Report, 1997. <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/95-97/bleiere.pdf>.

⁹ Statement of the Visegrad-4 and Baltic-3 Foreign Ministers, Brussels, 13 November 2006. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/official-statements/documents/statement-of-the>.



in 2008 and was dedicated to ways of implementation of the Eastern Partnership initiative and relations with Europe's Eastern neighbors.¹⁰

The EaP played a significant role in the increase in number of joint meetings, positions and statements on the EU level, as these were all connected to the preparation and first years of the initiative, usually with third member states involved, as well (e.g., the Nordics, Bulgaria, Romania).¹¹

If a brief comparison of the two groupings is to be drawn up, the outstanding difference is in the degree of institutionalization between the V4 and the B3. The Visegrad Group operates in a much more pragmatic fashion that includes a high number of meetings and informal contacts between all levels of public administrations on sectoral and policy issues. The most visible appearances of the partnership are the annual prime ministerial summits and the joint consultations before EU summits. The only formalized organization of the cooperation is the International Visegrad Fund, whereas the Baltic Assembly is a much more structured institution, namely, an entity under international law with a Secretariat, committees, the Session and the Presidium. The overarching goal of the Assembly is to coordinate the cooperation between the three national parliaments, which delegate the members.¹² Both regional partnerships are led by annually rotating presidencies with their own priorities, currently, Poland and Lithuania,¹³ until the end of June.

As for current formal ties, only the lack thereof can be mentioned, since an official cooperation agreement does not exist between the Visegrad Group and the Baltic Assembly. It has been mentioned before that the two forms of regional cooperation the Baltic countries regard as examples are the Benelux and Nordic ones, and this is reflected in the BA's international partners. The Assembly has signed Agreements on Cooperation with the Nordic Council, the Benelux Parliament and the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly, while being an active member within the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference.¹⁴ In a similar fashion, the V4's website lists the Benelux countries, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the countries within the EaP and the Western Balkans as the Group's priorities, but not its Baltic counterpart.¹⁵ Even though both groupings are viewed as effective forms of regional cooperation, the lack of a similar official tie is "quite telling in terms of symbolism", as one of the speakers put it during the workshop, and might serve as a possible spur for developing deeper inter-regional relations.

Current considerations and perceptions

As mentioned during the online discussions, in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the V4 is almost synonymous with Poland. While, of course, the public in the Baltic states knows what the Visegrad cooperation is, Poland is very much seen as "the bridge" between the Baltics and the V4. The tendency seems to be that all Baltic states prefer bilateral cooperation with their Visegrad counterparts to inter-regional engagement, with the special ties elevating the largest Central European country even higher.

This is confirmed by looking at the numbers and data; Poland simply is the most important partner in Central Europe for the Baltic states. According to the 2020 EU Coalition Explorer, the Baltics are second only to the other Visegrad countries

¹⁰ Press Release of the Polish V4 Presidency after the Official Summit of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group Countries and Baltic States <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2008/press-release-of-the>

¹¹ See the selected events of the V4 calendar in 2010, 2012 and 2013. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>

¹² How do we work? About Us. Baltic Assembly. <https://www.baltasam.org/en/structure/how-do-we-work>

¹³ Working plan of the Baltic Assembly under Lithuanian Presidency in 2021. https://www.baltasam.org/images/1_2020/LT_Presidency/WP_2021.pdf

¹⁴ Partners of the Baltic Assembly. Cooperation. Baltic Assembly. <https://www.baltasam.org/en/cooperation/partners>

¹⁵ Cooperation. Visegrad Group. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/cooperation>



when it comes to shared interests with Poland¹⁶, and according to the figures of the Observatory of Economic Complexity, Poland is the only V4 country that is included in all three Baltic countries' top 10 list of trade partners.¹⁷ These lists are, naturally, topped by the other Baltic and Nordic partners. Based on expert opinion mentioned at the discussion, the bilateral relations with Poland are good in every Baltic nation, and “when there is open space and good relations bilaterally, then there are positive perspectives for the whole V4.” Simply put, “Poland is the most important player for the whole Baltics when it comes to Visegrad”, it is seen as the sole player with a regional weight, whereas this cannot be said in the cases of Czechia, Hungary or Slovakia.

Despite the clear density of regional ties in the CEE region, the need for reaching out further beyond the immediate geography is also visible in the Baltics, as, for instance, Estonia “tries to avoid all sorts of groupings that are comprised solely of Eastern European countries”; this stems from the country's historical attempt to decouple itself from even the Baltic group in the 1990s.¹⁸ Though the B3 is generally seen as a homogenous grouping, both Latvia and Lithuania too might sometimes identify Sweden and Poland as their main foreign partners¹⁹ respectively, which points to a more competitive side to the intra-regional dynamics. However, “by expanding ties to the North and West”, the Baltic and Visegrad regions could together push for more positive initiatives with other European partners, too, as shown by the wider-scoped formats already in existence.

There are, however, tangible examples of engagement in the inter-regional relations in the areas of security and defence, as the common history during the Cold War period ensures an understanding of the regional security priorities by both regions.²⁰ In the Baltics, regardless of which country, political actors generally understand that security is, simply put by one of the speakers, “the most important thing”. According to the Baltic experts at the discussion, the European Union is just as or even more important to the region than NATO from a security perspective, even though it is not a security organization. All the freedoms, the trade, the aquis help strengthen the state of democracy in the Baltics, and everyone recognizes the gravity of the security situation on this European premise. As for the tangibility of defence cooperation, the presence of NATO forces within the NATO Response Force (NRF) is felt in the region on an everyday level, as members of the Transatlantic alliance, the V4 states too, play their part in providing troops for the deterrence exercises and the overall military presence on the Eastern flank.²¹ This can also be seen from NATO's Baltic Air Policing deployments within which the Organization's member countries have taken turns safeguarding the Baltic airspace since 2004, Hungary having led the 50th, latest mission with V4-involvement back in 2019.²²

There are additional layers of regional cooperation between the Baltics and the V4, as both groupings are part of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which is a de facto link between the two regions, the Bucharest Nine (B9) group, and the so-called 17+1

¹⁶ Busse, C., Franke, U. E., Loss, R., Puglierin, J., Riedel, M., Zerka, P. 2020.

¹⁷ See the three countries' profiles on the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) platform. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/>.

¹⁸ Raik, K. The Coronavirus Crisis Has Brought New Realism to Estonian-Finnish Relations. International Centre for Defense and Security, 2020. <https://icds.ee/en/the-coronavirus-crisis-has-brought-new-realism-to-estonian-finnish-relations/>.

¹⁹ Boucart, T. Which European integration for the Baltic countries? The New Federalist, 2018. <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/which-european-integration-for-the-baltic-countries?lang=fr>

²⁰ Lieģis, I. Widening Nordic-Baltic cooperation to the South. Latvian Institute of International Affairs. Opinions, 2012. <https://www.liia.lv/en/opinions/widening-nordic-baltic-cooperation-to-the-south-184>.

²¹ McNamara, E. M. Securing the Nordic-Baltic region. NATO Review, 2016. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/03/17/securing-the-nordic-baltic-region/index.html>.

²² Hungary to lead NATO's Baltic Air Policing, joined by UK and Spain. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2019. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_165751.htm.



format or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This latter brings up the presence of China and its influence, which has become a factor that cannot be ignored in today's global power competition. Placing the BRI and the 3SI next to one another is a rather peculiar comparison from the Visegrad and the Baltic regions' point of view, for while the 17+1 is a China-initiated business and investment instrument in Central and Eastern Europe, one of the main goals of the latter is to actually curb and counter the Chinese presence in the region. The general aims of the Three Seas Initiative are to better connect the participating 12 Central and Eastern European countries²³ through infrastructure development, climate action intertwined with energy security, the promotion of smart solutions and digitization, all while fostering economic growth.²⁴ For example, the 3SI in the Baltics has primarily business, digital and infrastructure dimensions underlined by key projects such as Rail Baltica, the Via Baltica or boosting liquified natural gas (LNG) capacities²⁵, and these directions are shared in Central Europe, too. Here, the Via Carpatia transport corridor can be mentioned, which has one of its endpoints in Lithuania, or LNG infrastructure plans that will provide gas flows from Poland to Croatia, and thus pose a challenge to Russian gas interests. Better connecting the Visegrad and Baltic regions through the numerous already planned 3SI projects can only increase connectivity in inter-regional relations, and by creating a safe, stable and predictable environment for private investors who can pitch in through the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF), the shared realization of the common projects can generate positive benefits for both regions.²⁶

What is less shared, however, is the individual countries' stances towards China; even though it has become quite apparent that the 17+1 has waned in its attractiveness relative to the 3SI in the past few years, the conflicts around 5G networks have elevated the China question even higher in the region, especially in the eyes of the United States. Hungary, for one, has gone forward with Huawei's technology, granting access to the Chinese company to develop the network in its territory, while many other CEE countries plan on distancing themselves from the Eastern technology and opting for the US backed one within the 'Clean Network Security' program – this might very well drive a wedge between the countries of the region in the near future, given the topic's national security sensitivity. Regardless of whether former President Trump or freshly sworn in President Biden sits in the White House, the United States has certainly realized the room for potential here²⁷ and by pledging support for the whole 3SI, it aims to counter China's (and Russia's) deeper European penetration²⁸ in Central and Eastern Europe, providing a regional element to the steadily intensifying global competition between the two powers.

Another field of paramount importance from a Baltic standpoint is energy. Historically, the three states have operated in sync with the electric power systems of Russia and Belarus, however, with European integration, came the possibility of synchronization with the European grid. Possibility then became reality, and this huge infrastructure project, co-financed by the EU itself, is set to be completed by 2025.²⁹ Energy security and dependence considerations are, of course, the main

²³ Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

²⁴ Objectives. Three Seas Initiative. <https://3seas.eu/about/objectives>.

²⁵ Priority Projects. Three Seas Initiative (3SI). Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://vm.ee/en/three-seas-initiative-3s#Priority%20Projects>.

²⁶ How, M. The Region's Untapped Potential: Managing Expectations and Navigating Risks of the Three Seas Initiative. Visegrad Insight, 2020. <https://visegradinsight.eu/region-untapped-potential-risks-three-seas-initiative/>.

²⁷ Gosling, T. Navigating the Three Seas Initiative. Balkan Insight, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/30/navigating-the-three-seas-initiative/>.

²⁸ Sieradzka, M. Europe's 'Three Seas Initiative' aims to curb Chinese influence. Deutsche Welle, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/europes-three-seas-initiative-aims-to-curb-chinese-influence/a-55314607>.

²⁹ Synchronization with Europe. AS Augstsprieguma tikls (AST) <https://www.ast.lv/en/projects/synchronisation-europe>.



motivating factors behind the initiative, securing supply alternatives, decreasing dependence on Russia and meeting EU energy strategy targets are all in the mix. Geography, again, elevates the importance of the V₄'s only neighboring country, Poland, as the 30-km-long Suwałki Corridor that separates the Polish-Lithuanian border from the Kaliningrad enclave and Belarus is the only on-shore entry point for synchronization purposes, acting as an “electric bridge”. However, Belarus might have thrown a spanner in the works by putting its new nuclear power plant at Astravyets into operation in late 2020, just 50 kms away from Vilnius, potentially flooding the Baltic electricity market with cheap energy that might disrupt the whole sync process. A political agreement had earlier been reached to boycott all Belarusian electricity in the region, but the Lithuanian energy regulator backtracked in the end, causing subsequent tensions. Fears of a possible nuclear threat have also emerged in the country, not without basis³⁰, throwing more into the hat of already numerous frictions between the Baltics and Belarus. Poland's proximity, of course, brings with it the possibility of more intense V₄-B3 cooperation on this matter, however, that might be more appropriate within the Eastern Partnership framework.

The Eastern Partnership: Geopolitics or Normative Agenda?

The EaP's Development from a V₄-B3 perspective

From a geopolitical perspective, the so-called big bang enlargement of the European Union resulted in a new situation for the foreign and security policy of the EU, since its borders significantly moved to the East in 2004. In 2007, another two South-Eastern European post-communist countries joined the EU – Romania and Bulgaria. Thus, the European Union “found” a whole variety of European post-soviet countries in its proximity in diverse political, social and economic situations with differing attitudes toward EU integration. The countries of Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine) and the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) had not appeared on the radar of the EU until 2004, so the task of constructing a policy towards the new neighborhood became a pressing issue. Furthermore, these countries all had complicated relations with Russia who soon started to exert more and more pressure over this region, for instance, in the Russia-Ukraine gas disputes of 2007 and 2009 or the Russian-Georgian war in 2008.

Partly based on their own historical backgrounds, an active role in the East became part of a new *raison d'être* for the Visegrad Group based on the Kroměříž Declaration of 2004, which included support for further EU enlargement as well as reforms in the Union's Eastern and Southern neighborhood as one of the new priorities after EU accession.³¹ Several politicians and experts have argued that while the V₄ received assistance for their transformation efforts from Western countries in the nineties, the former beneficiaries should now return their “debts” by assisting the countries that were then and are still currently in need.³²

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which was the *modus vivendi* of the EU vis-à-vis its Eastern partners before the EaP, met neither the expectations

³⁰ Belarus' new nuclear power plant complicates Baltic energy alignment. LSM.lv, 2020. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/economy/belarus-new-nuclear-power-plant-complicates-baltic-energy-alignment.a384481/>.

³¹ The Kroměříž Declaration. Visegrad Group, 2004. <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/declaration-of-prime>.

³² Bukovskis, K. Facing the Realities. In: Bukovskis, K. (ed.) *The Politics of Economic Sustainability: Baltic and Visegrad Responses to the European Economic Crisis*. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2014. https://www.liia.lv/site/docs/Politics_Economic_Sustainability_Baltics_Visegrad_European_Crisis.pdf.



of the V4 countries and the Baltic States, nor the ambitions of the Eastern neighbors. Simultaneously, the Visegrad Group intensified consultations with other EU countries interested in strengthening the Eastern dimension, for instance, Germany, Sweden and the Baltics. The benefit of having Sweden along with Poland as the initiators was that the Eastern Partnership could not be easily viewed by sceptics as a project supported exclusively by the “new”, post-communist Central European member states. Considering the V4’s engagement in developing relations with the region, the fact that the Eastern Partnership was launched during the Czech EU presidency at the Prague summit in 2009 was of symbolic importance. Not only did the Partnership become an instrument of the EU’s Eastern policy, but also a multilateral platform for the member states and the partner countries. It includes annual meetings of the foreign ministers, and summits of heads of state and governments of the EaP countries every two years (Prague 2009, Warsaw 2011, Vilnius 2013, Riga 2015, Brussels 2017).³³ The only exception to this was the 2019 meeting, which did not include the high-level summit, only the annual ministerial meeting and a “High Level Conference”³⁴, which is a very unfortunate optic, to say the least, given that this was the initiative’s 10th anniversary.

The Declaration adopted in Prague did not announce the prospect of direct membership for the partner countries, but it set an aim to “accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries”.³⁵ The EaP is therefore focused on supporting socio-economic reforms in the partner countries. The main instruments of more closely aligning them with the EU are the Association Agreements (AA) with the aim of concluding the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA), as well as the visa liberalization process, supporting the mobility of the citizens.³⁶

Achievements, shortcomings and current matters

Based on the online discussion about V4-B3 inter-regional cooperation on the Eastern Partnership, there is a crystal-clear consensus in each of the Baltic states about the role of the EaP as a foreign policy priority and objective of the respective countries, and the same has already been presented in relation to the V4. However, as mentioned in the debate, when it comes to all 27 EU member states, the situation is not this universal, as not every member intends to work with the EaP with the same intensity, therefore, “more pragmatism is needed”. This, of course, is only natural in a community of 27 nation states with 27 sets of national interests, however, there is definitely an opportunity in this regard for the V4 and the B3 to work together in continuously underlining the importance of the Partnership on the EU level. After all, it has been in existence for more than a decade, and the shared interest of the EU-27 is to keep the EaP going in the future by elevating the success stories of the initiative so far.

Of course, the 10th anniversary of the EaP in 2019 was an appropriate occasion for looking back and taking stock of the results of this joint policy initiative within which all partners have committed to demonstrating and delivering tangible benefits to the daily lives of their citizens across the region. According to the EU, the top 10 interlinking achievements of the EaP in its first 10 years are the new political

³³ Sadecki, A. The Visegrad Group Policy towards the EU Eastern Partnership. In Stepper P. (ed.) Central Europe and the Visegrad Cooperation: Historical and Policy Perspectives. Antall József Knowledge Centre, 2018. pp. 260-267.

³⁴ Celebrating 10 years of the Eastern Partnership. European Commission Press Release, 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_2489.

³⁵ Eastern Partnership Key documents. European Union External Action Service 2016. https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp/12269/eastern-partnership-key-documents_en.

³⁶ Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, Council of the European Union, Prague 2009 May 7. www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf.



and economic agreements; more diversified and vibrant economies in the region; more trade and investment opportunities; better transport links and infrastructure; visa free regimes; more energy resilience and efficiency; support for young people; more public services for citizens; easier access to high-capacity broadband internet for the academic sphere; and, finally, more awareness of the EU among the region's citizens.³⁷

From the expert community's standpoint, "doom and gloom are usually mentioned" in the context of the Eastern Partnership, but in reality, a lot of things have indeed changed for the better. Of which the most visible one is probably the fact that Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have already signed the Association Agreements and are trying their best, albeit with a lot of obstacles, to implement them. This indicates that the EU still has that leverage – as mentioned during the discussion, "if you want a better life in the EaP, the only way of getting closer to that is the EU". Membership in the near future does not necessarily arise from this, but the overall long-term tendency is positive for the EU with polls showing that in the majority of EaP countries, the perception of the EU is very positive. Based on the latest survey, 52% of the partner countries' citizens have a positive view of the Union, which is a 7% increase compared to the 2016 base.³⁸ Beside the AAs, the aforementioned three countries have already engaged in the visa-free travel schemes, as well.

As for more concrete successes and forms of engagement from the point of view of the V4 and B3, emphasis was put on cooperation in the civil society, scientific and public administration sectors during the online discussion, areas that are all definitely tangible. Estonia's small-scale yet thorough work in training of EaP members of civil society organizations, or the Think Visegrad think tank platform of the V4, a network that hosts several fellows from the region each year, as well as coordinating study visits in the framework of the Civil Servant Mobility Programme to share the V4's experience in sectoral reforms and harmonizing national legislation with EU laws, all add to the EU-level efforts. The EaP region, together with the Western Balkans, also became the territorial priority for International Visegrad Fund grants and scholarship activities, while Ukraine is the biggest beneficiary of the IVF among external countries.³⁹

This topic touches on the dilemma that surfaced during the discussion, namely whether the EU should engage in geopolitics with Russia in the region or stick to its "normative agenda" which is based on the core values of democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms, among others. As the last 12 years since the creation of EaP show and the arguments underlined, the seven countries of the Visegrad-Baltic regions simply cannot engage in geopolitics on their own, while even the EU itself is not fully capable of doing so; however, the nature of geopolitics is that "it is sticking to us and something that we cannot avoid". This was definitely the case during the Ukrainian events in late 2013 and early 2014, when first, the Euromaidan protests took place in Kiev, then after, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ensuing hybrid war. Both the Visegrad and Baltic regions, perhaps with Poland as the loudest voice, called out for EU-wide sanctions as countermeasures against the Russian aggression, which can be considered as a more successful piece of power play, as this regime has been in place ever since. The most recent but, from the European Union's perspective, less effective example of geopolitics was the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in the fall of 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two EaP countries. When it came to conflict settlement, the EU "hardly played any role, Russia basically sidelined the

³⁷ Top 10 Achievements of the Eastern Partnership in the last 10 Years. European Commission, 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eastern_partnerships_top_10_achievements.pdf.

³⁸ Opinion Survey 2019: Regional Overview. EU Neighbours East, 2019.

<https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/opinion-survey-2019-regional-overview>.

³⁹ Sadecki. 2017. p. 265.



whole EU involvement”, and acted along with Turkey, whose influence thus greatly increased in the region. However, this does not mean that the Union can sit back and relax. It has the experience, the resources and the credibility to assist in the ensuing humanitarian crisis, for instance, having already pledged 500 thousand euros for this cause in immediate aid.

With this conflict, a potential differentiation is to be expected within the South Caucasus and the Eastern Partnership itself, shifting the emphasis and the focus of the V4+B3 on to Georgia and the Western countries of the region. And this is where geopolitics can come into play again, as in the case of Belarus, where it is evident that Poland and Lithuania have indeed gotten involved in the events, influencing politics in and towards Belarus in the whole EU and in their respective regions by being first to recognize Svetlana Tikhonovskaya as the de facto Belarusian leader after the elections in late August 2020. Thus, the EU's and the regions' geopolitical abilities are not so black and white in the end, i. e. it is not necessarily a clear choice between geopolitics and normativity. Nonetheless, getting caught up with “brutal geopolitics” with, for instance, Russia over the matters of the region will “slow down the whole process of approximating the region with the EU and limit the room for maneuver”. Lack of credibility and sincerity of attitudes toward the EaP can also be limiting factors, whilst lack of commitment or the possible double standards stemming from Hungary's and Poland's current democratic backsliding within the EU can undermine the image of the Union's member states in the eyes of the EaP countries' citizens, too. On the other hand, the overused rhetoric on membership expectations by EaP officials can become “extremely counterproductive”, as was stated during the workshop. These expectations have to be managed, or at least reassessed, as bringing up the issue of membership at every official occasion inflates the meaning behind it, even if the EaP stakeholders are fully aware of the fact that this prospect is one of the uniting tools in their societies.

Possible ways forward

As for what is to be done in the future with the Eastern Partnership from the two regions' and the EU's perspective, “a low profile will result in a longer road traveled”, as the Russian saying goes. **The Visegrad and Baltic countries tend toward pushing for a more ambitious agenda regarding the EaP, aiming for visible change in a year or two, but just continuing with the already used long-term approach and a step-by-step perspective while not losing “our strengths, being the shining city on the hill and using our leverages in this normative respect” might just do the trick.** There have been cases of domestic backsliding and issues in some of the EaP countries, which is underlined in the EU's Eastern Partnership Beyond 2020 strategy, as both the EU member states, most EaP partner countries and civil society actors “stress the need to significantly improve” the state of the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organized crime, and the situation of independent media and civil society⁴⁰ across the region in the future; however, the fact that “no one has ever quit from an Eastern Partnership Association Agreement is an extremely important success story”, as was agreed by the panelists.

From the official perspective, the EU set up the “20 Deliverables for 2020” reform agenda until 2020 at the 2017 summit with the motto “Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all”, underlining 4 priority areas: stronger economy, stronger connectivity, stronger society and stronger governance.⁴¹ For the

⁴⁰ Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions. European Commission, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/joint_communication_on_the_eap_policy_beyond_2020.pdf.

⁴¹ 20 Deliverables for 2020. Eastern Partnership. Council of the European Union, 2020. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/20-deliverables-for-2020/>.



period after 2020, the Eastern Partnership policy includes new long-term objectives and sets out measures that aim to strengthen resilience, foster sustainable development and deliver tangible results for societies. The policy objectives include resilience in the fields of economy, institutions, climate and environment, digital transformation, as well as the societies, while also stressing the importance of the need to work together against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴² These are all opportunities for further and deeper cooperation that should be made use of by the Visegrad and Baltic states on a joint basis, because, evidently, the two regions possess the necessary soft power on their own.

The same 4 soft areas as the 4 priority fields were underlined during the discussion. The coronavirus pandemic could not be a more relevant and present task, as the sharing of medical and scientific capacities, along with the vaccine are not only public health and administration, but important foreign policy tools, too. Especially, in light of the competition between Russian and Western 'vaccine diplomacies', as offering assistance in this respect would be of extreme value for the region; this was underlined by 13 EU foreign ministers, the V4 and B3 included, in a joint letter to the Commission in early January 2021, saying that EU vaccine-aid would "send a strong and coordinated message on the strategic value of the EaP".⁴³ The letter, however, did not include any of the founding members of the EU, nor Portugal, currently holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the Union. This could add to the intra-EU tensions also stemming from the slower-than-expected vaccine rollout, which has some European politicians pointing fingers at and blaming Brussels for falling behind population-proportional inoculation levels relative to the UK or Israel, for instance. Member states, in December 2020, decided to pool their vaccine demands and procure the necessary number of vaccines under the EU's umbrella, as an act of European solidarity; however, Western vaccine producers Oxford-AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech, postponed delivery of some of the EU's order because of capacity and supply issues in January 2021. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen admitted to the flawed rollout but still maintains that a joint EU response was the correct decision in dealing with the pandemic.⁴⁴ As a sign of external solidarity, the Commission, in a later communication⁴⁵, laid the grounds for a common EU vaccine sharing mechanism of some of the 2.3 billion doses already secured with special attention given to the Eastern Partnership, along with the Western Balkans, the Southern neighborhood and Africa. This mechanism would act as a single point for requests and a pipeline through which initial doses can be provided, possibly through COVAX, the joint WHO-led international aid program for less developed countries, without disrupting Member States' vaccination plans. Dose numbers would increase as supplies of vaccines increase, and until COVAX is able to supply large enough volumes directly from companies. Rarely has time been more of the essence, as vaccines will only be allowed to leave the EU if the amount does not threaten agreed deliveries in the bloc.⁴⁶ Ukraine and Poland have, in parallel, opted to take a bilateral route as well, reaching an agreement⁴⁷ on Poland sharing 1.5 million doses with Ukraine after the Polish side receives its own designated share. Ultimately, it could all come down to who is able to mend their supply shortages quicker. The V4 and the

⁴² Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020.

⁴³ Rettman, A. Eu vaccine-sharing could have 'strategic value'. EUObserver, 2021. <https://euobserver.com/foreign/150532>.

⁴⁴ Covid: EU's von der Leyen admits vaccine rollout failures. BBC, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56009251>.

⁴⁵ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. A united front to beat COVID-19. European Commission, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-united-front-beat-covid-19_en.pdf

⁴⁶ Wishart, I., Baschuk, B. EU Risks Global Vaccine Battle With Bold Export Control Plan. Bloomberg, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-29/eu-sets-vaccine-export-controls-risking-global-battle-for-doses>.

⁴⁷ Poland offers 1.5 m doses of Covid-19 vaccine to Ukraine. Visegrad Group, 2020. <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/news/poland-offers-1-5-doses>.



B3 could work together to keep the external partners' demands on the agenda, thus achieving a possible strategic advantage against Russia in this issue.

Another area of potential cooperation is education. Scholarships, fellowships, either Erasmus or Visegrad ones are of insignificant costs compared to their effect of contributing to the modernization of local elites in the Eastern Partnership region. They represent a relatively “cheap, easy and efficient tool” that has stayed below Russia's radar level, too, and the trends pointing in the direction of internationalized education systems both in Central Europe and the Baltics make it a lot easier to include more students from the EaP. With a full or partial focus on English level programs and a bit more funding, this is an open goal waiting only to be missed.

Conclusions

Further potential for cooperation between the Visegrad and Baltic countries was clearly demonstrated during the online expert discussions, and not only in relation to the Eastern Partnership. However, the EU's Eastern neighborhood has been and probably will always remain the main area of common focus, where, by joining forces, the V4 and B3 have to use their limited resources wisely and effectively as role-models to reinvent and re-energize EU support for the European fate of the region.⁴⁸ They can also further play a role in keeping the EaP high on the EU agenda and speaking with a common voice to like-minded countries, such as Germany, Sweden or Romania.⁴⁹ This also provides perfect grounds and a launch pad for further-reaching coalition building not only when it comes to the EaP.

In terms of further inter-regional cooperation, there are also ways of strengthening ties outside the Eastern dimension. As was mentioned during the first part of the discussion, the V4 has first-hand experience as to how a region can successfully consult on EU affairs at the middle levels of public administration on a daily basis, for instance, when it comes to the national implementation of the hundreds of legal acts coming from Brussels each year. The corresponding ministry departments or sub-units can always turn to their V4 counterparts via “a simple phone call” to consult on pieces of sectoral European legislation and how best to implement them at the national level, and this has proven to be one of the backbones of effective regional cooperation that could be more fluid in nature elsewhere. Sharing best practices and engaging each other on the policy level could especially be very helpful during possible further waves of the pandemic, with the logistical and administrative challenges of mass vaccinations and the following economic recoveries of the countries, as well. These will all require swift and coordinated government actions to bring this unprecedented situation under control, therefore, there is room for intensified dialogue on how these mechanisms could be implemented and developed at the middle and lower levels of public administration in both regions.

As was mentioned before, both the Visegrad Group and the Baltic Assembly were established in 1991, meaning that both forms of regional cooperation celebrate their 30th anniversary this year. This would provide a perfect opportunity for joint events and activities that commemorate the common historical backgrounds and the tremendous journeys these two regions have navigated since regaining their independence in 1989/90. At the same time, of course, the important roles that the two regional initiatives have played since their creation should be highlighted, as only thus could these small and medium sized countries pool and exert their interests, as well as amplify their voices with good effect.

⁴⁸ Kořan, M. Where should the external priorities of the Visegrád Group lie? In: Przybylski, W., Dostál, V., Janebová, P., Strážay, T. and Végħ, Zs. V4 – 25 Years: The continuing story of the Visegrád Group 1991 – 2016. Warsaw, 2016. p. 141.

⁴⁹ Sadecki, 2017. p. 267.



The upcoming Hungarian presidency of the Visegrad Group could be a good framework for this, as the possible German and French leadership questions, posed by the federal elections in Germany in 2021 and the presidential elections in France in 2022, could pave the way for smaller and more flexible coalitions within the EU. Hungary will assume the V₄ presidency from 1 July 2021, and since the Hungarian leadership always happens partly during an election year, the coordination of the Group will be of paramount importance for the Orbán government. Two main dimensions have to be highlighted in this respect: on one hand, the opportunity to fill the vacuums and openings within the EU (though the room for maneuver is greatly determined by V₄-German relations, but there are still unclear questions in this regard due to Chancellor Merkel's departure), and the V₄+ formats, on the other. Southeastern Europe, the countries of the Eastern Partnership will almost definitely be in focus⁵⁰, so there is ample basis for the V₄ and the B₃ to engage in more positive agenda building in the EU and attract more partners for either ad-hoc or more structured coalitions.

⁵⁰ Az EU belső dinamikája. In: Baranyi, T., Salát, G., Szalai, M., Ugródsy M. Six Defining Trends for 2021. Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020. <https://kfi.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/KKIElemzesek.E-2020.100.pdf>.



Association for International Affairs (AMO)

AMO is a non-governmental not-for-profit Prague-based organization founded in 1997. Its main aim is to promote research and education in the field of international relations. AMO facilitates the expression and realization of ideas, thoughts, and projects in order to increase education, mutual understanding, and tolerance among people.



+420 224 813 460



www.amo.cz



info@amo.cz



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Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID)

The Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental and non-partisan think tank based in Budapest, Hungary. It was founded in 2001 with the objective of promoting the Euro-Atlantic dialogue. Since integration to both NATO and the EU has been successfully completed, CEID was re-launched in February 2014 with a broader focus that is based on two pillars: security and defence policy and foreign relations of Hungary. Furthermore, the Centre focuses on the regional cooperation between the V4 countries and – in a broader context – Central Europe.

Dániel Varga

Dániel Varga is the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy's project associate and oversees the implementation of the various projects CEID is involved in, such as the European and Euro-Atlantic Cafés or the Dwa Bratanki conference, while also representing the Centre in the activities of the Think Visegrad think tank platform. He obtained a BA in International Studies and an MSc in Regional and Environmental Economics at Corvinus University of Budapest after having studied in the United States for a year. Dániel is also a co-founder and former president of the Corvinus-based and accredited student organization, Central Europe Association Hungary.



daniel.varga@ceid.hu



The policy brief was written in consultation with Alexander Duleba, Tetiana Poliak-Grujić and Vendula Karásková.

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Artūrs Bikovs, Latvian Institute of International Affairs
Alexander Duleba, Slovak Foreign Policy Association
Pavel Havlíček, Association for International Affairs
Edit Inotai, Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy
Vytis Jurkonis, Freedom House Lithuania & Vilnius University
Linus Kojala, Eastern Europe Studies Center
Piret Kuusik, Estonian Foreign Policy Institute
Wojciech Przybylski, Res Publica Nowa / Visegrad Insight
Andžej Pukšto, Vytautas Magnus University
András Rácz, German Council on Foreign Relations.

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