

CHALLENGES FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT AND ENLARGEMENT

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V4: A new brand for Europe? Ten years of post-accession regional cooperation in Central Europe

Abstract: The original purpose of the Visegrad Group (VG) was primarily to support its member states' (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) accession to the EU and NATO. Despite some serious doubts about whether it would have a viable future beyond 2004, actual EU membership has given the VG an ever-expanding agenda for cooperation and coordination in many aspects of EU affairs, internal and external. The VG is now firmly embedded in the European political landscape and operates as a distinct regional grouping within the EU. Indeed, the February 2011 VG summit that marked the VG's 20th anniversary was attended by Angela Merkel. Moreover, the leaders of the VG states recently met with Merkel and Francois Hollande at two VG-Weimar summits in November 2012 and March 2013. This paper will reflect on ten years of VG cooperation inside the EU. It will focus on several issues: how actual EU membership revitalised the cooperation agenda of the VG; the 'modus operandi' of the VG and why it should be regarded as a specific vehicle for cooperation and coordination around EU affairs with well-defined limitations and not as some kind of Central European 'lobby' or regional 'bloc' within the EU; examples and areas of VG coordination on EU affairs, with special emphasis on the VG's role in EU foreign

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policy – in particular with regard to relations with the eastern neighbours. Some parameters of VG cooperation will also be discussed, taking the VG's inability to engage in any cooperation around EU-Russia relations as a key example.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, subregional cooperation, Central Europe, EU Enlargement, EU-Russia relations.

JEL codes: F53, F55, F59.

Over the last year, we have strengthened the Visegrad brand and ties within the Group. We are a force for good changes in the European Union
(Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, Budapest, 26 June 2013)

Introduction

The original purpose of the Visegrad Group (VG) was to support its member states' (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) ambitions to join the EU and NATO. Despite some serious doubts about whether it would have a viable future beyond 2004, actual EU membership has given the VG an ever-expanding agenda for cooperation and coordination in many aspects of EU affairs, internal and external. The VG is now firmly embedded in the European political landscape and operates as a distinct regional grouping within the EU. Indeed, the February 2011 VG summit that marked the VG's 20th anniversary was attended by Angela Merkel. Moreover, the leaders of the VG states recently met with Merkel and Francois Hollande at two VG-Weimar summits in November 2012 and March 2013.

This paper will reflect on ten years of VG cooperation inside the EU.¹ It will focus on several issues: how actual EU membership revitalised the coopera-

¹ The paper draws on three previous studies by the author [Dangerfield 2008, 2009, 2012] that cover the transformation of VG cooperation after EU accession, the VG role in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood and VG cooperation vis-à-vis Russia. The articles were underpinned by research done in several field visits to VG states between 2005 and 2012 and which included interviews with key VG officials in the foreign ministries, scrutiny of documents outside the public domain (so-called non-papers etc.) made available to me, consultations with specialists and experts in think tanks and work in libraries in Prague, Budapest and Bratislava. Some earlier work on the VG focused on the security-building aspects of the VG and other post-1989 'subregional groupings' in Europe [Cotter 1999] and also on the VG as the manifestation of 'Central Europe' [Fawn 2001]. A few studies on the implications of EU accession for VG cooperation appeared during the run-in to membership [Lukáč 2002; Vykoukal 2004; Brusis 2002; Vachudova 2001; Bukalska 2003]. Jagodziński [2006] is a collection of essays on

tion agenda of the VG; the ‘modus operandi’ of the VG and why it should be regarded as a specific vehicle for cooperation and coordination around EU affairs with well-defined limitations and not as some kind of Central European ‘lobby’ or regional ‘bloc’ within the EU; examples and areas of VG coordination on EU affairs, with special emphasis on its role in EU foreign policy; some parameters of VG cooperation will also be discussed, taking the VG’s apparent inability to engage in any cooperation around EU-Russia relations, as a key example. The paper is divided into four main sections. The first section gives a general overview of VG cooperation and outlines its main characteristics. The second section describes the evolution of the VG and identifies three main stages in its development. These are the initial phase of cooperation between 1990 and 1993 prior to its period of ‘hibernation’ between 1993 and 1998, the development of VG cooperation between its revival in 1998 and EU accession in 2004 and VG cooperation since EU accession. The third section focuses on VG multilateral cooperation vis-à-vis countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Western Balkans. The fourth and final section discusses VG cooperation and Russia.

1. The main characteristics of visegrad cooperation

The Visegrad Group, or Visegrad 4 (V4) as it is often (also officially) referred to, is, in its own words, a Central European ‘regional alliance’ between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Formed in 1990, the VG was one of several subregional groupings that mushroomed in and around post-communist Europe after the end of the Cold War.² This first section gives a brief description of the essential characteristics of the contemporary VG, which is now ten years into the post-accession cooperation phase. The origins and evolution of the VG are covered in the next part of the paper.

many aspects the VG, including the personal recollections of many actors involved with the VG during the various stages of its development, published to mark the 15th anniversary of the VG. For additional useful analyses of contemporary VG cooperation see, for example [Kořan 2010; Törő, Butler & Grüber 2013] and the many short analyses available on www.visegrad.eu and <http://www.visegrad.info/>.

² There is no clear consensus about whether the VG, and the many similar entities within Europe and beyond, are most appropriately referred to as regional or subregional organisations. The two are often used interchangeably. Subregional is the chosen terminology for this paper.

Like many subregional organisations in Europe, the VG has no supranational governance and no ambitions to travel in that direction. Cooperation remains strictly intergovernmental. Probably the most significant characteristics of the VG are first its fixed membership and lack of scope therefore for expansion and, second, its role as a *flexible* platform for cooperation and coordination around its wide-ranging areas of action. In the case of cooperation within the EU, this means that the VG is not some kind of Central European ‘bloc’ within the EU28 that automatically seeks to take joint positions across the whole range of EU business. However, it is an important default mechanism for exchanging experiences and preferences and therefore identifying areas where coordination is viable and then acting in concert on those specific issues. As well as cooperation vis-à-vis the EU, the declared areas of VG cooperation include a host of external partners. Interactions with other states, either individually or as groupings, are usually managed via the ‘V4+’ mechanism. The VG is also a vehicle for a plethora of internal cooperation activities that cover virtually the whole range of government policies together with culture, science, education, youth exchange and others.

Visegrad cooperation is very light in institutional terms.³ The only permanent body is the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) based in Bratislava. The IVF receives an annual budget from the VG for the various projects for internal and externally-oriented cooperation that it manages.⁴ Otherwise, the VG works on the basis of coordinated sets of activities that involve a range of actors, both governmental and non-governmental. VG cooperation is multi-level, involving both governmental and non-governmental actors including Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers, Parliaments, NGOs, academic and cultural institutions. VG Presidents meet on an annual basis. Prime Ministers hold two regular summits per year and in addition meet prior to every European Council meeting. Ministerial meetings occur as and when, with Ministers of Foreign Affairs tending to meet most frequently and often in V4+ mode. Parliamentary cooperation consists of annual meetings of various groups, including Speakers of Parliaments, European Affairs Committees and Committees on Public Administration and Regional Policy.⁵ NGOs, academic and cultural institutions’ role in VG cooperation is within the frame-

³ See Dangerfield [2008] for more discussion of the VG machinery and debates about institutionalisation (particularly on the question of a VG Secretariat).

⁴ The IVF budget is currently Euro 8 million.

⁵ Further details can be found in the Calendars of VG meetings posted on the VG Website. See: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>.

work of IVF projects and is a very important element of the operational level of both internal and external VG cooperation. The VG has its own rotating 12 month Presidency, which runs from July to June.⁶ The Chair country undertakes the key coordinating role and is responsible for planning the work programme and organising the meetings that take place. Thus rather than a permanent secretariat the VG has a rolling one, a task which befalls to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Presiding member. Finally, it is important to mention VG cooperation that goes on outside the official framework. VG country ambassadors to third countries, for example, are in regular contact. There is also, of course, intensive interaction between VG officials in Brussels, so much so that Kořan [2010, p. 118] noted that “(m)utual communication in Brussels is becoming so dense that it is gradually becoming difficult for the national headquarters to follow its development”.

2. Main phases in VG cooperation

2.1. ‘Visegrad 1’ (1990–1993)

Following the end of the cold war the new post-communist leaderships of the then Visegrad 3 recognised the need to cooperate after the end of the Cold War. The common desires to detach from Soviet-era regional defence and economic alliances, prevent the creation of any successor organisations and pursue closer ties with West were key drivers. The importance of the ‘visionary’ founding fathers of the VG, including Vaclav Havel, needs also to be stressed. As Havel himself recalled: “after the historical changes and the fall of the Iron Curtain, the countries of Central Europe – Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland – were faced with the emergence of another enormous task: To integrate our young democracies into European and transatlantic structures... It was clear we couldn’t achieve such ambitious goals if our three countries were to compete with each other on the international stage. On the contrary, we could only reach our aims through close cooperation. We had to convince our western colleagues that we were willing and able to participate in broader forms of cooperation, on both the European and the trans-Atlantic levels” [Havel 2006, p. 54]. The inaugural VG meeting in Bratislava took place in April 1990 and just under a year later, at Visegrad in Hungary,

⁶ The VG Presidency rotates in this order: Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia.

the V3 Presidents signed the “Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration”. This contained various cooperation goals, most notably that of “harmonising activities to shape cooperation and close contact with European institutions” [Jagodziński 2006, p. 34].

The early successes of the first phase of VG cooperation were significant, including its contribution to abolition of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation, success in resisting the creation of a replacement for the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, securing an early departure of Russian forces from VG territories and enhancing the pace of associate membership of the EU [Rusnak 2001; Dangerfield 2008]. The VG rapidly became established as the ‘*avant garde*’ of postcommunist countries and took advantage of their privileged position in the race to engage with Euro-Atlantic integration. As well as a regional lobby for closer relations with the EU and NATO, the VG was also the vehicle via which economic (re) integration was initiated. After 1992 Visegrad cooperation lost momentum rather abruptly and entered what is usually described as a period of ‘hibernation’. This was partially because its early agenda was more or less complete with the disentanglement from Soviet-era organisations but the division of Czechoslovakia also played a key role in undermining central European political cooperation since the Slovak leadership drifted towards a somewhat eastern pro-Russia rather than a Euro-Atlantic agenda while Vaclav Klaus was unconvinced of the need for the VG.⁷

2.2. CEFTA: Visegrad in another guise

As Dangerfield [2008] argues, whereas formal VG political cooperation seemed to more or less disappear after the end of 1992 and certainly was no longer visible in the form it had taken in the initial phase, this was more of

⁷ In the publication commissioned by the IVF to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the VG (*The Visegrad Group – A Central European Constellation*, edited by A. Jagodzinski) Jiri Paroubek wrote that after the division of Czechoslovakia VG cooperation “began to flag. The Czech right wing government decided that it would be most effective if each country took an individual approach to European integration...After the Czech parliamentary elections in 1998, which brought Czech social democratic parties to power, there was a revival of the cooperation between the Visegrad states on the political level”. Similarly the chronology contained in the same – authoritative – volume states (pp. 44–45) that on 21 October 1998 the “Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland – Milos Zeman, Viktor Urban and Jerzy Buzek – declare their wish to reactivate the Visegrad cooperation...The Visegrad Group’s ‘hibernation’ ended with Vladimir Meciar’s departure from power in Slovakia”.

a case of the VG entering a transitional phase with the focus of cooperation shifting to economics and the development of a free trade area for the now four Visegrad states. Certainly, statements that proclaimed the ‘clinical death’ of VG cooperation were wide of the mark. The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) was signed in Krakow in December 1992 and entered into force in March 1993.⁸ Though CEFTA and the VG should not be treated as exactly one and the same thing, it is certainly beyond dispute that as well the successful development of market integration, and enlargement to other post-communist states (Slovenia in 1996, Romania in 1997 and Bulgaria in 1999) CEFTA acted as a proxy for the dormant VG. CEFTA had another significant role as well, as the incubator for some key structures and practices that were adopted by the revived VG after 1998. These included the regular summits of Prime Ministers that became an established practice in CEFTA from 2004 onwards. Other Ministerial level meetings gradually became regular occurrences with the appearance of ministerial level working groups (agriculture, finance, public procurement). A further important contribution of CEFTA was as a vehicle for ongoing dialogue and contact with Slovakia at the highest political levels. Finally, the 1998 CEFTA summit facilitated the revival of the VG, being the occasion at which its formal restoration was proposed and the invitation extended to fill its ‘empty chair’ extended to the new post-Mečiar Slovak leadership. The new Czech leadership under Milos Zeman were, in contrast to the Klaus era, enthusiastic supporters of central European sub-regional political cooperation.

2.3. “Visegrad 2’ (1998–2004)

After some five years of ‘dormancy’ the VG was formally reconvened on 21 October 1998 and the first summit took place in May 1999 in Bratislava. The key outcome of that summit was the approval of a major document – *Contents of Visegrad Cooperation as approved by the Prime Ministers in Bratislava, 14 May 1999* – that set out the VG’s role and structure and which also served the important purpose of ensuring the sustainability of the VG by making it less prone to the factors that undermined the first phase of VG cooperation. These guidelines affirmed that the key areas of Visegrad cooperation would be vis-à-vis the EU and NATO. The revived VG went on to play an impor-

⁸ See Dangerfield [2000, 2004] for detailed analyses of CEFTA during the period when the VG states were members and Dangerfield [2006] for the impact of the 2004 EU enlargement on CEFTA, including the process and implications of the VG states withdrawal from it.

tant role in assisting Slovakia to make up for lost ground in its Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly for NATO accession. The development of intra-VG cooperation was also an important aspect of the new phase of cooperation, initiating therefore the civic/citizens level of cooperation that had been absent from the essentially elite-based first phase of the VG. The main spheres of intra-VG cooperation include science, culture, technology, education, environment, sport, youth exchanges. The IVF, the first and only VG permanent institution was established on 9 June 2000 as the instrument to implement intra-VG cooperation. Finally, the quasi-institutional structure of VG cooperation as described in section 1 above was also approved.

Though the key purpose of the VG was still very much framed in terms of its role in supporting the EU accession endeavour of the VG, there was in fact little evidence that the VG played much of a role in this respect between 1999 and the end of accession negotiations in December 2002. The main reasons for this were to do with the restricted potential for multilateral inputs to the EU membership negotiations. Since the contribution of the VG to the actual accession process had been negligible, discussions about the viability of the VG beyond EU accession were not altogether optimistic, especially as there had been tendency for VG solidarity to collapse at critical times [Dangerfield 2008].⁹ As it happened, actual EU membership would create the conditions for a far greater level of cooperation on EU affairs compared with the pre-accession period.

2.4. 'Visegrad 3' – beyond EU accession

As mentioned above, EU entry stimulated a reflection on the VG's future role and relevance given that its original mission of guiding the VG to full EU and NATO membership was completed. Despite some doubts expressed at the time, both by various commentators and officials, the Prague meeting of VG leaders in May 2004 affirmed the continuation of the VG. The 2004 Declaration on post-accession VG cooperation identified four dimensions of future cooperation which were: Intra-VG cooperation; Cooperation within the EU; Cooperation with other partners (individual countries and groups of countries); Cooperation within NATO and other international organisations. Since EU accession, the VG schedules always ensure that the VG Prime Ministers meet prior to European Council meetings and, on occasions, meet

⁹ See also Vachudova [2001] for a pessimistic take on the longevity of the VG.

also with other EU members (e.g. VG – Benelux summits). Once EU entry had been complete, the VG agenda expanded and many areas of potential cooperation presented themselves. As the latest (2012–2013, Polish) VG Presidency report states “In the early years of our EU membership, key areas of Visegrad cooperation began to crystallize. One central theme was European policy, in particular ways of speeding up the economic development of our countries, i.e. the cohesion policy and the common agricultural policy. Apart from European policy, other frequently discussed topics included national security and military cooperation. Another area of Visegrad cooperation was relations between our region and its closest neighbours. Much attention was paid to promoting the integration aspirations of the Western Balkan countries and to fostering the European community’s cooperation with the EU’s eastern neighbours” [Polish VG Presidency Report, 10/11].

The guiding principle for cooperation was that it would be on a flexible basis and that the VG would not develop as an automatic platform for common positions in EU affairs. Other areas of early cooperation on EU affairs included joint preparation for Schengen entry, cooperation with the Benelux Economic Union, the Russian embargo on meat imports from new members, the use of structural funds, free movement of people/labour restrictions and others. As already noted, at the time of EU entry the VG states declared that they would support, both politically and practically, the enlargement to the Western Balkans and closer EU relations with eastern neighbours. There is no doubt that this has developed into *the* major preoccupation of VG cooperation and (as the next section demonstrates) represents the main VG contribution to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The VG’s profile in the CDSP is being expanded in a rather significant way by the current preparations for the Visegrad Battle group, to be led by Poland and scheduled to become operational in 2016.¹⁰

One easy way of verifying how the growing scope and relevance of VG cooperation has grown – both towards the EU and more broadly – during the EU post-accession period, is to look at the records of VG Presidencies which are actually quite revealing. The consistent expansion of the VG’s agenda and activities is reflected in the various Presidency programmes and reports all of which are available from the VG website for any reader to check. For the purposes of this paper some evidence from the Final Report of the most recent – 2012/2013 – Polish Presidency will be used. First, in contrast to the Final

¹⁰ For a critical assessment of the challenges of forming the VG Battle Group see Šuplata [2014].

Report of 2000/2001 Polish Presidency which had just 3 pages the 2012/2013 Final Report is 60 pages long, revealing how much the agenda and outcomes of VG cooperation have expanded. Second, another point of note is the level of external recognition that the VG now tends to receive. Appendix 1 lists the many events that took place at government level during the 2012/2013 Presidency and the report itself mentions several occasions that underline the credibility of the VG. They included: an historic first a joint VG/Weimar Triangle meeting on 6 March 2013; the Cracow summit of the Visegrad Group and EaP on 17 May 2013 which was attended by both High Representative Catherine Ashton and the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle; the meeting of the VG Presidents in Wisła on 2 July 2013, where they were “joined by the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, with whom they discussed the state of cooperation between Ukraine and the European Union ahead of the November summit of the Eastern Partnership in Vilnius” [Polish VG Presidency Report, 18/19].

Finally, with reference to VG cooperation on EU affairs, including joint positions and collective contributions to EU policy debates, numerous examples were in evidence during the 2012/2013 period. They included common positions on: reform of the Common Agricultural Policy; the European Commission’s proposals for the Cohesion Policy 2014–2020 Regulatory Package; EU climate and energy policy; various proposals/preferences around the CDSP. The 2013/14 Hungarian VG Presidency programme focused on coordination and common positions in the following spheres of EU affairs: EU’s next multiannual financial framework; enlargement; Eastern Partnership; CDSP; energy; transport and various other technical issues.¹¹

3. VG foreign policy after EU accession: multilateral external cooperation vis-à-vis eastern neighbours and West Balkans

A distinct feature of Visegrad cooperation during the pre-accession phase was the priority attributed to externally oriented cooperation in that the goals of NATO and EU entry were the main driving force of the VG. By the time

¹¹ For full details see <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20132014-hungarian>.

EU entry occurred, the intra-VG cooperation agenda that was initiated after 1998 was growing steadily and, again as noted above, a substantial agenda for flexible cooperation on EU affairs developed naturally. As for foreign policy cooperation, the VG states have focused their collective attention on the EU integration of their eastern and southern neighbours. A number of factors were at work: the need for the VG states, and new members in general, to find their niches in CSDP; the need to find appropriate targets for the Overseas Development Assistance programmes that EU membership now obliged them to have; as mostly adjoining states to the EU's new eastern neighbours and/or West Balkan EU aspirants the VG are key stakeholders in the formers' future development and EU integration prospects; the role of the VG as a vehicle to support third party country reform and EU/NATO integration preparations became embedded during the 'Visegrad 2' period with the focus on assistance, both political and practical, to help Slovakia with its catch-up process in Euro-Atlantic integration. As Dangerfield [2009, p. 1740] wrote, this "helped lock assistance to slow-lane post-communist countries into the portfolio of VG tasks. Thus there was a clear synergy of the VG's own experience of transition and EU pre-accession, an established tradition of using the VG for experience-sharing and know-how transfer, and the adaptation of the VG's character as a foreign policy actor to EU requirements".

As far as the emphasis on the eastern neighbours was confirmed, this was evident to some degree before EU accession but the concurrence of EU entry, the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Orange Revolution all helped make this a core component of foreign policy cooperation. Thus the 2004 VG Declaration emphasised that the VG was "ready to assist countries aspiring for EU membership by sharing and transmitting their knowledge and experience. The Visegrad Group countries are also ready to use their unique regional and historical experience and to contribute to shaping and implementing the European Union's policies towards the countries of Eastern and Southern Europe".¹² Subsequent declarations confirmed that was an important element of the VG agenda. After review and reform of the ENP came onto the EU agenda after 2006 it became clear that, together with support for enlargement to the Western Balkans, this had become the prime theme of VG external cooperation. The programme of the 2008/9 Polish VG Presidency stressed the need for greater engagement "in the establishment of the eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy" (Polish VG Programme, 2008/9, p. 2) while the Slovak 2010/11 Presidency's programme

¹² VG Declaration 2004.

stated that “by intensifying mutual relations, the VG countries should support further development of cooperation with the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, and their endeavours for European and/or Euro-Atlantic integration” (Slovak VG Programme 2010/11). The subsequent Czech Presidency continued this emphasis and introduced what seems to be a regular annual meeting of the VG plus Baroness Ashton plus Stefan Füle plus EaP Foreign Ministers to discuss progress and new initiatives for the EaP. That year’s meeting, in Prague on 5 March 2012, “focused on the EaP, namely on the VG EaP programme and the EaP roadmap”.¹³ The 2012–2013 Polish Presidency reflected on VG initiatives vis-à-vis the EaP states and the Joint declaration of the meeting of the VG plus Baroness Ashton plus Stefan Füle plus EaP Foreign Ministers, in Cracow on 17 May 2013, focused on the expectations for the 2013 Vilnius EaP summit and also encouraged the European Commission and External Action Service to “further develop programmes in the sphere of people-to-people contacts, support for youth and students’ exchanges, and scholarship programmes which are of vital importance for strengthening ties between societies across the continent and enhancing cooperation between the Union and the Eastern European countries. In particular, they stressed the need for full opening of the new comprehensive ‘Erasmus for All’ and the ‘Creative Europe’ programmes for the participation of the EaP countries”.¹⁴ One particularly interesting outcome of the 2012–2013 Polish Presidency was the affirmation that Ukraine would participate in the Visegrad Battle Group as part of three areas of VG-Ukraine defence cooperation, announced at a VG defence cooperation meeting of VG Chiefs of General Staff in Sopot in April, part of which was attended by Ukraine’s Chief of General Staff.¹⁵ The 2013/2014 Presidency programme of Hungary stresses many aspects of support for EaP countries and also states that ongoing preparations “for setting up a Western Balkan Fund based on the model of the International Visegrad Fund will continue, as well as the establishment of an expert network on rule of law and fundamental rights initiated by the previous Polish Presidency”.¹⁶

VG efforts to engage with the countries of the EaP have tended to prioritise Ukraine and to a lesser extent Moldova. The actual activities have been in

¹³ Report on the Czech Presidency of The Visegrad Group [2012], p. 4.

¹⁴ Polish VG Presidency Report [2013], pp. 48–49.

¹⁵ Polish VG Presidency Report [2013], p. 19.

¹⁶ Hungarian Presidency in the Visegrad Group (2013–2014), <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20132014-hungarian> [access: 31.01.2014].

two main spheres: political cooperation and concrete assistance programmes. The former has included attempted inputs to EU policies and some independent VG-level interactions. Efforts to exert a multilateral influence on the direction of EU policy gathered pace after 2006 in the context of the European Commission's review of the ENP and Germany's subsequent ENP-Plus proposal and 'non-papers' put forward by Poland and Lithuania. The first major VG initiative came in the form of a substantial document entitled *The Visegrad Group Contribution to the Discussion on the Strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy* which was presented at GAERC (General Affairs and External Relations Council) in April 2007. Though this 'non-paper', which ran to six pages and covered a range of issues, failed to have any serious impact (mainly because little of it was genuinely novel) its significance lay in the fact that it represented the first major attempt by the VG to act multilaterally on this issue. Though the EaP was of course proposed not via the VG machinery but as a successful Polish-Swedish initiative, the VG did however play an important role in bringing the EaP to fruition by its coalition-building activities. For example "a Warsaw meeting convened via the VG mechanism on 24 November 2008 brought together Foreign Ministers of the VG, Baltic 3, Sweden, Romania and Bulgaria. It resulted in a Joint Statement showing that these countries would together push strongly for Council endorsement of the ensuing (3 December 2008) Commission Proposal on ENP" [Dangerfield 2009, pp. 1742–1743]. VG political cooperation has also included regular, high-level (including leadership level and inter-ministerial) political dialogue between the VG and specific eastern neighbours. Most recently, meetings of first the VG Foreign Ministers on 22 January 2014 and then Prime Ministers 29 January were convened to discuss the Ukrainian crisis. The Joint statement of the latter, which condemned any possible use of force and the role of extremist groups, stated that „all responsible Ukrainian stakeholders – including the authorities, the opposition and representatives of civil society – should be guided by their historical responsibility to preserve a stable, democratic and unified Ukraine. We call on all sides to stop immediately the spiral of violence”.¹⁷ Finally, the VG were all signatories of the Swedish-led non-paper '20 points on the Eastern Partnership post-Vilnius' prepared for discussion at the EU Foreign Ministers meeting of 10 February 2014.¹⁸

¹⁷ Joint Statement of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group Countries on Ukraine, January 2014.

¹⁸ The non-paper is available at: <http://blogs.ft.com/brusselsblog/files/2014/02/20-points-on-Eastern-Partnership.pdf>.

The concrete aspect of VG cooperation towards EaP countries operates mainly via the IVF. EaP (and West Balkan) states participate in various categories of regular IVF project, although their number is small so far and the effect negligible. More significantly, since 2004 an ‘incoming’ stream of the *Visegrad Scholarship Programme* has enabled students from eastern neighbours (including Russia) and the Western Balkans to study at nominated VG universities.¹⁹ The IVF has also in the past sponsored *Visegrad Strategic Projects* involving relatively large sums for projects that combine the resources of institutions of all four VG countries to generate policy analysis and recommendations on current foreign policy priorities. Various strategic projects have focused on the eastern neighbourhood and “Sharing VG Know-How with Neighbouring Regions” was a priority theme for the 2009 applications [*IVF Annual Report 2008*, p. 12].

In 2008, the VG added to the IVF’s portfolio by launching the ‘Visegrad +’ which “is a grant programme created to administer and finance projects which contribute to the democratization and transformation processes in selected countries and regions, especially non-EU member states in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the South Caucasus (countries within the EU’s Eastern Partnership)”.²⁰ Finally, in June 2011 VG leaders’ approved a new IVF programme that looks like a significant effort to upgrade their multilateral engagement with EaP countries. The ‘Visegrad 4 Eastern Partnership’ (V4EaP) has an annual budget of €1,456,800. It provides ‘standard grants’ for small projects which must involve a minimum of three VG countries and one EaP country. It also finances bigger, longer term, ‘flagship’ projects that must involve each of the VG countries and a minimum of 2 EaP countries. The themes of flagship projects are as follows: political, social and economic reforms in EaP countries; facilitation of approximation to the EU; regional cooperation within the EaP area; enhancement of institutional capacity; development of civil society. Also included in the V4EaP are grants for university studies in EaP countries connected to V4EaP themes and an extension of incoming Visegrad scholarships.

Despite the various obstacles that have affected the scale and effectiveness of VG multilateral cooperation towards EaP countries in particular it is clear that the role and impact of the VG has gathered increased visibility and significance during the post-accession years. The VG supports and amplifies its

¹⁹ ‘Incoming Visegrad Scholarships’ are offered to Masters’ and Doctoral students for stays from 1 to 4 semesters.

²⁰ Reproduced from: http://visegradfund.org/grants/visegrad_plus/#visegradplus_approved_projects.

member states attempts to become serious players in shaping the EU's role in the EaP region and, as well as the role at the political level, there has been a genuine ongoing programme of useful multilateral practical/concrete contributions commensurate with the size and resources of the VG states. The VG states have been striving to upgrade and improve the latter dimension of their cooperation vis-à-vis the EaP states, and also towards the Western Balkans, as shown by new initiatives such as the V4EaP and willingness of the VG to provide a growing budget. The major actors in the EU and the EaP states evidently recognise this as shown by their participation in VG meetings, events and project activities. All this rather contrasts with VG cooperation vis-à-vis Russia which is conspicuous by its absence both in reality and in rhetoric, and which seems to be a significant gap in the VG's alleged focus on eastern neighbours in the broader sense. The final section of the paper looks at the VG non-policy towards Russia and the lessons it provides about the limitations of entities such as the VG.

4. The VG and Russia: limits of foreign policy cooperation

Finally, some comments about VG cooperation – or to be precise absence of cooperation – vis-à-vis Russia. The Russia factor was essentially *the* driving force of the initial phase of Visegrad cooperation and relations with Russia still remain hugely significant in terms of energy supply, trade, and security considerations. Yet cooperation with Russia is conspicuous by its absence. As well as, *prima facie*, an intriguing omission in itself, there is also the question of whether the VG's claim to be specialised in the EU's 'eastern policy' is really credible if Russia is not incorporated?

Scrutiny of VG programmes and activities confirms that there has never been any place for relations with Russia in the post-1999 VG agenda. There have been no meetings between the VG and Russia within the V4+ framework, either for political dialogue or other discussions. There is virtually no mention of Russia in the VG Presidency programmes and reports which have been produced since 2000. Russia qualifies for involvement in IVF small and standard projects but hasn't taken part in any and though a few 'Incoming Visegrad Scholarships' have gone to Russians the number is not great – for example in 2010 Russia received 10 scholarships and Ukraine 47.²¹

²¹ http://visegradfund.org/scholarships/approved_scholarships/.

Various reasons exist for the VG non-policy on Russia and the main ones are as follows.²² Firstly the VG can be classified as a classic case of post-Cold War subregional cooperation, which means that it primarily deals with low politics/soft security which both places a 'high politics' issue such as relations with Russia out of its scope and means that Russia would not regard it as a credible multilateral entity to deal directly with. Secondly, it can be noted that even the EU and NATO lack consistency towards and leverage over Russia, so what chance would the VG have? Thirdly, the VG does not have the natural subregional level cooperation agenda with Russia that the Nordic Council has and which explains the latter's rather extensive cooperation programmes with Russian partners. Fourthly, since Russia not part of ENP or EaP and rejects EU regulation and norms/values/model of democracy, the key VG programmes that comprise the VG's own eastern Policy (e.g. 'Visegrad + and VG EaP) are not appropriate for and would not be welcome in Russia. Fifthly, if the themes of the many of the VG's 'eastern policy' projects are not appropriate for Russia the NGO's that largely deliver the projects are distinctly not welcome since the crackdown on NGO's and requirement that those funded from outside register as 'foreign agents'. Finally, VG financial resources are very modest, already stretched and committed to the EaP countries and the West Balkans.

Any attempt to incorporate Russia in the VG agenda would, therefore involve a serious upgrade of the VG into a much more ambitious political entity. There is no intention for that to happen and in any case the limited capacity and objectively circumscribed role of the VG would restrict its potential regardless of any aspirations. It has already been noted above that Russia would not regard the VG as worthy of high level engagement, especially as Moscow prefers bilateral arrangements. Trade and economic arrangements could be considered as a possible areas where the VG could attempt some kind of cooperation but the VG has no economic integration or trade promotion instruments and bilateral intergovernmental commissions for trade, economic and scientific cooperation between Russia and the individual VG members are well established and seem to be functioning productively. Finally, because relations with Russia are such a major issue for all VG states it is no surprise that a strong preference for bilateral relations prevails. Previous VG divisions over Czech and Polish involvement in the proposed missile defence system of a few years ago and the question of whether Ukraine and Georgia should

²² See Dangerfield [2012] for detailed discussion of the obstacles to VG cooperation on Russia.

be offered NATO membership, for example, serve to illustrate why any attempt to coordinate policy on Russia would be fragile, risky and unsustainable. Thus Russia remains, for all sorts of strong reasons, a 'taboo' subject as far as VG cooperation is concerned. The likelihood that there would be VG cooperation on Russia in the future would therefore depend upon on a major change in Russia's approach to integration with EU, something which in the current context of turmoil in Ukraine and escalating Russia-EU tensions over the shared neighbourhood seems increasingly remote.²³ The best that could be said is that VG cooperation towards Russia exists in an indirect form in that the VG measures to promote closer European integration for EaP countries is an aspect, albeit minor in scale, of the wider competition with Russia over the 'shared neighbourhood'.

Conclusions

Visegrad cooperation is now nearly a quarter of a century old and has gone through some uncertain times during that period. It looked as though it would be a very short lived phenomenon after barely three years but, thanks to its actual continuation in the guise of CEFTA, revived and consolidated after 1998. EU accession looked as though it might also spell, if not the end, a major loss of significance for the VG but EU entry marked a new beginning and generated an increasing portfolio of cooperation possibilities. It is no exaggeration to say that Visegrad Cooperation has thrived during the ten years since EU accession and that nowadays the VG undoubtedly regard their 'regional alliance' as an indispensable tool for their diplomacy and a useful asset for maximising the benefits of EU membership. As well as embedded internal cooperation, and cooperation within EU, the VG has affirmed its identity as a vehicle that supports the reform and EU integration of its neighbours to the south and east and is undoubtedly a real player in this dimension of the EU's enlargement and foreign policy agenda. Though the non-policy on Russia il-

²³ VG reactions for the 2014 crisis in Ukraine are beyond the scope of this paper. In any case it can be noted that there are virtually no joint statements or declarations on the crisis on the VG website save, on 4 March 2014, a call for Russia to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine and, on 5 March 2014, a Joint Letter of V4 MFAs to High Representative Ashton and Commissioner Füle calling for the EU to advance preparations for Ukraine to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU. Both statements can be accessed via: www.visegrad.eu.

illustrates the limits of the VG as an international organisation the scope of co-operation within the current parameters has continually expanded, suggesting that its potential is still far from exhausted. VG looks set to be a recognisable and relevant brand in Europe for the foreseeable future.

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