



**PROSPECTS AND PERSPECTIVES FOR
THE VISEGRAD FOUR COOPERATION.
A BIRD'S EYE VIEW**

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PROSPECTS AND PERSPECTIVES FOR THE VISEGRAD FOUR COOPERATION. A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

BENCE KOCSEV – ÁGNES VASS

The evaluation of the Visegrad Four Cooperation (V4), especially in the current debates, is often two-sided: while on the one hand it is criticised for being branded mainly by Poland and Hungary to serve their political priorities on the European level, on the other hand, it is perceived as one of the most significant regional cooperations within the European Union (EU) and the broader Eastern and Southeast European neighbourhood of the Union. Whereas there are arguments highlighting that the biggest achievement of the V4 is that it has maintained its existence over the past decades, and celebrates its 30th anniversary this year,¹ in our understanding, the cooperation itself and the idea behind it is more far-reaching.

Apparently, summarizing and interpreting the last three decades of the cooperation in a short paper like this one is neither possible nor sound. Therefore, the rather modest aim of this article is to provide a specific understanding of the V4, by briefly pointing out processes that contributed to the redefinition of the role of the cooperation. Against this background, and in a very tentative way, we also seek to place this understanding within the broader discussion on the concept of Central Europe. It should, however, also be noted that the following pages serve simply as a discussion basis and hence this effort is not meant to be a comprehensive review of any of the issues touched upon in this paper. Instead, its sole aim is to highlight some current developments, which could be elaborated in further studies. Therefore, with this brief assessment, we would like to initiate a debate on the role and place of the V4 and thereby stimulate the overall thinking on this particular cooperation on the occasion of its anniversary. First, however, the positioning of the current paper within the broader scholarship on the V4 needs a brief reflection.

Academic analyses, forecasts and predictions on the Visegrad alliance of Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia are as old as the cooperation itself and could be divided into two periods. The research on the pre- and post-accession period of these countries nevertheless applies divergent foci and analyses different economic, political, and social processes. The literature on the period before the admission of these countries to the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is divided between two main understandings: while some of the studies highlight the successes of the cooperation during the Euro-Atlantic integration processes, others, analysing the cooperation from the perspective of regionalism, put emphasis on the low degrees of formality, lack of institutionalisation of the cooperation,

¹ Andrej Matisák: Visegrád má 30. Čo dosiahol? *Pravda.sk*. 15 February 2021. <<https://bit.ly/3sJnD20>> Accessed: 15 February 2021.

and the weak convergence between the member states.² Regarding the post-accession cooperation, the majority of the research is focusing on the achievements the V4 gained in the fields of foreign policy (most notably within the context of the enlargement policy of the EU) while also shedding some light on those areas where the joint engagement of these four countries was successful or where hurdles emerged.³

One of the many findings that seems to be outlined from these bodies of literature is that the V4 is rather a loose partnership in which the willingness to cooperate is largely shaped by the individual national interests of the participating countries. Against this backdrop, the common argument put forward in the research on the V4 is that while in certain cases these countries are being cooperative, once the common interests are not clearly defined or even missing, the cooperation shows a great amount of incoherence. Apparently, the decisive factor in this regard is how the individual countries evaluate the particular challenges they have to face with: once they perceive them as relevant or even as a threat they show great ability to jointly act but neglecting increased cooperation otherwise. After emphasising some characteristic features of the V4, the following paper highlights two critical junctures from the last decades, namely the 2008 financial and the 2015 migration crisis that have triggered different reactions from the participating countries. While the latter one caused closer cooperation within the V4 alliance, the former one has not led to the same effect. However, regardless of the fact whether they eventually resulted in enhanced cooperation or not, they were both significant in shaping the development of the cooperation, and, hence, in redefining its strategic priorities and position. Moreover, in our understanding, both events (as well as their mid-term political and economic reverberations) were instrumental in broadening the room for manoeuvre for the V4 while also yielded immediate reactions from political and non-political actors either in the form of intense criticism or keen appreciation.

THE CONCEPT OF CENTRAL EUROPE

As our purpose in this treatise is to briefly showcase certain perspectives for analysing the cooperation, we are only tangentially interested in how the V4 is being able to mould and shape certain concepts and visions on Central Europe. On the other hand, it is also clear that—at least on a certain level—the V4 can be understood as a platform (among the many) from which Central Europe could redefine itself. While most of the concepts on Central Europe are either reflecting major power aspirations or simply neglecting the agency of

² See, e.g.: Marta Pachocka: Understanding the Visegrad Group States' Response to the Migrant and Refugee Crises 2014+ in the European Union. *Yearbook of Polish European Studies*. 2016/19. 101–133., or Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski–Roland Benedikter: Europe's Migration Predicament: The European Union's Refugees' Relocation Scheme versus the Defiant Central Eastern European Visegrád Group. *European Political Science*. 2018/1. 40–53.

³ See: Martin Dangerfield: The Visegrad Group in the Expanded European Union. From Preaccession to Postaccession Co-operation. *East European Politics and Societies*. 2008/3. 630–667.; Martin Dangerfield: The Contribution of the Visegrad Group to the EU's Eastern Policy: Rhetoric or Reality. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2009/10. 1735–1755.; Tomáš Strážay: Visegrad 2008: A Dynamic Platform with Added Value for the EU. *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2008*. Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association. 95–103.; Tomáš Strážay: Visegrad and Its 'Soft Power': The V4 Developments of 2009 Reviewed and Priorities of the Upcoming Period Outlined. *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2009*. Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association. 122–132.

the smaller states of the region, by taking the potentials of the V4 countries into account, a new conceptualization of Central Europe could emerge. In this regard, the V4 cooperation has proven to be a very dynamic lens through which actors from both within and outside the wider region have begun to reconsider the position and function of Central Europe.⁴

As it is thoroughly scrutinised in a number of publications, ideas and plans dealing with and conceptualizing Central Europe date back to the 19th century and have preoccupied thinkers and politicians ever since.⁵ Looking at these rather heterogeneous concepts of the region, it becomes immediately clear that it is easier to define Central Europe by what it is not than by what it actually is, and, due to the conceptual and geographical elasticity of the region, it is rather difficult to find common ground on what the term exactly means. Disentangling the conceptual confusion is particularly difficult, since both in academic and everyday contexts Central Europe is more often than not linked to the greater region of Eastern Europe.⁶

What becomes nevertheless evident from the plethora of concepts aiming to describe Central Europe is that the perception of this region (like the image of every other one) is greatly influenced by the geographical situation, the historical period, and positions on the basis of which one looks at it. Accordingly, narratives stemming from actors disseminating major power visions usually portray the region as a kind of buffer zone for imperial projects, while others, seeking to counterbalance these ideas, underline the necessity of an independent Central Europe, a vision whose realisation has often been hindered by political conditions.

During World War I, Friedrich Naumann's *Mitteleuropa*, envisioning a German cultural and economic dominance in the region—and often (mistakenly) understood as a manifestation of German imperialism—found particularly serious resonance both within and outside Central Europe.⁷ In response, major power concepts, imagining the region as a defensive zone which could help to contain German *Drang nach Osten* desires, were proliferated shortly after the war. Restraining Germany was, however, not only the concern

⁴ Cf. with Rick Fawn: The elusive defined? Visegrad co-operation as the contemporary contours of central Europe. *Geopolitics*. 2001/1.47–68., and Michal Kořan: The Visegrad Group on the Threshold of Its Third Decade: A Central European Hub? In: *Regional and International Relations of Central Europe*, edited by Zlatko Šabič–Petr Drulák. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012. 201–218.

⁵ For more about the early concepts see, e.g., Arnold Suppan: Der Begriff "Mitteleuropa" im Kontext der geopolitischen Veränderungen seit Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts. *Mitteilungen der Österreichischen geographischen Gesellschaft*. 1990/132. 192–213.

⁶ Stefan Troebst: Historical meso-regions and transregionalism. *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, edited by Matthias Middell. Routledge, Abingdon, 2019. 170-171; Idem: Geschichtsregion: Historisch-mesoregionale Konzeptionen in den Kulturwissenschaften. *Europäische Geschichte Online (EGO)*, <<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/troebsts-2010-de>> Accessed: 15 March 2021; Robin Okey: Central Europe / Eastern Europe: Behind the Definitions. *Past & Present*. 1992/137. 102–133.

⁷ Friedrich Naumann: *Mitteleuropa*. Reimer, Berlin, 1915. For more about the concepts often labelled as liberal imperialist and developed in the late Wilhelminian period see: Dirk van Laak: *Über alles in der Welt. Deutscher Imperialismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. C. H. Beck, München, 2005. 70–101.; Wolfgang J. Mommsen: *Imperialismustheorien. Ein Überblick über die neueren Imperialismusinterpretationen*. Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1980; *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, edited by Wolfgang J. Mommsen–Jürgen Osterhammel. Unwin Hyman, London, 1987.

of geopoliticians as Central European thinkers started to develop their own ideas too. Obviously, these ideas did not echo imperial space-making practices but conceptualised and endorsed a nation-state based Central Europe instead.⁸

Given the territorial rearrangement of the region concomitant to the Paris Peace treaties of 1919–1920, the interwar period gave a new impetus for conceptual debates. Despite the many (and mainly) academic inquiries that tried sketch a refined picture on the place of Central Europe,⁹ in political terms, the region was still seen either as a potential expansion area or as a buffer zone. The Soviet geopolitical concepts during the interwar period and beyond illustrate this approach well, as they had seen the region as a defensive zone in the event of possible clashes with Germany and later with the West.¹⁰ The bipolar Cold War context—in which Central Europe was simply regarded as an attachment of the realm dominated by the Soviet Union—even rendered the region as a separate spatio-political category invisible.¹¹ Though with different emphases, perceptions that consider Central Europe as a defensive fringe prevailed even after 1989/1990. In the direct aftermath of the Cold War, and from a Western point of view, the region was perceived as a protective zone and the V4 was even considered as a *cordon sanitaire* that, on the one hand, would ensure a certain extent of stability for the region itself, but, on the other hand, could also protect Western Europe from potential threats coming from the East.¹²

Clearly, such a region, at the intersection of various imperial projects and strategic lines, with no or minimal self-advocacy, can only passively participate in any economic, social, and political processes. Against this background, it is also not surprising that many have even interpreted regional success stories of the region, like the 1989 regime changes,

⁸ A well-known example of these efforts is Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's idea on the region which, on a substantial level, was developed vis á vis Naumann's concept. In the tradition of previous Czech thinkers (like František Palacký), Masaryk conceived Central Europe as a zone of independent Slav national states which was guaranteed a free, democratic development. About the concept, see: Tomáš Masaryk: *The New Europe: The Slav Standpoint*. Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1918.

⁹ For more about the concepts dealing with (East-)Central Europe like the ones of Oskar Halecki, Marcell Handelsman, Jaroslav Bidlo, or István Bibó, to name but a few, see: Romsics Ignác, Közép- és/vagy Kelet-Európa? *Korunk*. 2016/7. 74–89.

¹⁰ Dimitri Trenin: *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization*. Washington, DC. 2002. 61.

¹¹ At the same time, it should also be noted that a number of ideas and concepts were developed with the ultimate aim to deconstruct this bipolar metanarrative of the Cold War in which Central Europe as a separate region was practically ceased to exist. An internationally well-recognised example of the endeavours was provided by the Hungarian medievalist Jenő Szűcs in the early 1980s. Inspired by Oskar Halecki and István Bibó, and by enriching Immanuel Wallerstein's core-periphery-semi-periphery model with a grounded historical and sociological inquiry, his essay on the three historical regions of Europe became particularly popular as it also conveyed a serious political message that questioned the legitimacy of the Eastern Bloc by defining (East) Central Europe as a separate region having a specific path of development. Even more politically motivated, the essays of Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, Czesław Miłosz, György Konrád, and many others further sparked the debate on the region and gave serious impulses to intellectual movements on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Jenő Szűcs: Vázlat Európa három történelmi régiójáról. *Történelmi Szemle*. 1981/3. 313–359.; György Konrád: Is the Dream of Central Europe Still Alive? *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Culture*. 1985/5. 105–121.; Milan Kundera: The Tragedy of Central Europe. *The New York Review of Books*. 1984/April. 33–38.

¹² András Inotai–Magdolna Sass: Economic Integration of the Visegrad Countries. *Eastern European Economics*. 193/6. 6.

exclusively as the victory of the Western economic (neoliberal market economy), political (liberal democracy), and institutional (North Atlantic and European integration) system. This interpretation that regards these political upheavals simply as rectifying revolutions, designed only to enable those behind the Iron Curtain to catch up with the rest of Europe, overlooks the novelties these political processes may have yielded.¹³

In contrast, from a different vantage point, a much more positive image of Central Europe could emerge, which considers these small countries as active agents of political, economic, and social processes. In this, in the following paragraphs we opt for a different understanding that profoundly challenges this rather simplistic view on the region and argue that, in a sense, the V4 cooperation could play an important role in overcoming earlier preconceptions of Central Europe.

THE V4 AS A SUB-REGIONAL COOPERATION WITHIN THE EU

It is a commonplace that regional cooperation formats could serve as an essential tool in stabilizing the political and economic situation of a particular area. Besides, they have the potential to influence the image of the region they are located in. Hence, a number of institutionalised or even un-institutionalised sub-regional cooperations promoting political, economic, or social cooperation can be found within other European or international organisations or institutions, such as the Council of Europe, the EU, or the NATO. The main aim of these cooperations—and the V4, one of the most pivotal sub-regional partnerships within the EU, is no exception from this—is to support the possible convergence of different national positions on policy matters that are similarly important for all of them or in questions of common concern. In this way, another purpose of these subregional cooperations is to brand their common position and communicate it in the relevant fora. Against this background, the V4's main function is to combine the weight of the Central European member states' positions in order to multiply their impact outside the group and most importantly within the EU.

With regard to the nature of these formats, Martin Dangerfield managed to differentiate three kinds of sub-regionalisms: (1) *pioneering* (when the cooperation is revolving around one main issue and the members influence the integration on meta-level; (2) *substituting* (when the regional cooperation occurs as an alternative to a larger integration project); and (3) *complementary* (when states cooperate with each other in order to integrate into a larger cooperation—this is common in a pre-accession process to the EU).¹⁴ In analysing the past thirty years of the V4, it becomes apparent that with the Euro-Atlantic integration the Visegrad Cooperation, as a sub-regional partnership, has already fulfilled the complementary stage

¹³ See e.g. Jürgen Habermas: *Die nachholende Revolution. Kleine Politische Schriften VII*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1990. and idem: What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left. *New Left Review* 1990/5. 3–21. In contrast to this approach see: Ferenc Mészáros: 1989 újraértelmezése. *Magyar Tudomány*. 2010/10. 1215–1225. and—for a macro perspective—the collective volume on the global relevance of the Central and Eastern European events: *1989 in Global Perspective*, edited by Ulf Engel–Frank Hadler–Matthias Middell. Leipzig University Press, Leipzig, 2015.

¹⁴ Martin Dangerfield: Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans: Stabilisation Device or Integration Policy? *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 2004/2. 203–241.

and is now functioning along the first and second categories outlined by Dangerfield, i.e. their operational framework can mainly be described by the pioneering and substituting categories. While being primarily a flexible formation the V4 has proven to be a visible intergovernmental partnership that functions as an alternative platform within the larger European integration based on the issues that are considered as relevant by its member states.

From an institutional context, the Visegrad Cooperation is characterized by a rather loose partnership that maintains no permanent council or secretariat for the coordination of certain policy fields, like it is the case within other sub-regional European cooperations such as the Nordic Council¹⁵ or the Benelux Union.¹⁶ Instead, the agenda and the programme are determined by one of the member states fulfilling the presidency, an annually (from July to June) rotating role being responsible for setting the priorities and organising meetings between the partner countries at all levels. Nevertheless, it is also important to add, that the V4 also functions as a platform of choices as member states are not obliged “to work through Visegrad or to achieve consensus, but can use it when beneficial.”¹⁷

After the end of the Cold War, sub-regional initiatives for cooperation were motivated mainly by security concerns. The founding document of the Visegrad Cooperation similarly highlighted the security aspect of the partnership, and likewise the importance of ensuring friendly and good relations among the states involved. The cooperation, however, was also propelled by further ambitions, like to transform negative connotations attached to the region into positive ones as well as to realize a smooth return into the West, including the accession into its key institutions, such as the EU or NATO.¹⁸

Based on the idea that Central Europe belongs essentially to the West and was artificially separated from it by the Iron Curtain,¹⁹ the “Return to Europe” discourse became the leitmotif of the policies of the Central European states. Hence, upon the change of the political conditions (and, as a matter of fact, even before the political watershed of 1989/1990), countries of the later Visegrad Group started to pave their ways towards the Euro-Atlantic integration. Striving to be integrated into the Western community and thus to catch up with the core, to use Immanuel Wallerstein’s term, these democracies increasingly sought to match their political and economic structures, values, and eventually their identities with the Western ones.

While the initial aims of the V4 cooperation were closely tied with the Euro-Atlantic integration, in the decades after their accession to the EU and the NATO, a number of factors emerged that blurred this initially clear picture, and provided new objectives for

¹⁵ The Nordic Council is the official body of the inter-parliamentary cooperation launched in 1952. It operates with 87 members delegated from the national parliaments of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Island, Greenland and Aland. The Council is run by a Presidium. The President, Vice-President, and members of the Presidium are elected at the Ordinary Session of the Council being held every autumn. The operative work of the Nordic Council is led by a Secretary General seated in Copenhagen.

¹⁶ The Benelux Union is a political-economic union and intergovernmental cooperation established between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg. At the beginning, it was mainly functioned as a customs union. In 1958, in The Hague, the Benelux Economic Union Treaty was signed and entered into force two years later.

¹⁷ Rick Fawn: Visegrad: The Study and the Celebration. Europe-Asia Studies. 2008/4. 684.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See the aforementioned opus of Milan Kundera.

the cooperation. Most notably, upon the radical changes in the world economy, culminating in the 2008 financial crisis, new political contexts emerged and have eventually found widespread resonance in the V4 countries. Whereas the prospective advantages of the Euro-Atlantic integrations previously outweighed the potential pitfalls of the accession, a few years later, the financial crisis and its severe political and economic ramifications substantially changed this picture. It seemed, that for some V4 members, former institutional structures have—to a certain extent—failed as frameworks for managing the mounting problems of these societies.²⁰ Eventually, the fear of re-peripheralization (i.e. concerns that a multi-speed Europe might emerge)²¹ in the aftermath of the crisis forced these countries to undertake efforts to reposition themselves within the global political and economic processes.²² Certainly, the V4 was far from being able to pursue unified policies in this regard. While Poland or Hungary sought to develop ties with countries outside the Euro-Atlantic sphere, for its part, Slovakia enhanced its partnership with the EU and joined the Eurozone in the direct aftermath of the crisis. It should, however, also be underlined that the opening of new political and/or economic avenues in some of these countries did not entail the abandonment of their Western relations. What this new approach could thus showcase is that certain V4 countries managed to broke with former reflexes, as it turned out that the foreign policy of these countries should not be limited to a mutually exclusive choice between the West and the East.²³

Besides the crumbling post-Cold War frameworks, another impulse for the V4 countries to rethink their position, both within and outside Europe, was the migration crisis that has led to a major identity redefinition and has significantly shaped the ways how the cooperation currently functions. While the relatively low degree of institutionalisation and the lack of political governance has made the group relatively unnoticeable on the European level in the 2000's, this has considerably changed during the refugee crisis in 2015 when the “revolt” of the V4 against the migration and refugee policy represented by the EU has quickly enhanced their visibility. The member states emphasized their disagreement with the EU regarding the relocation system, and the prime ministers of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia issued a joint statement declaring their rejection of the compulsory quota

²⁰ Cf. with James Mark: The End of Alternative Spaces of Globalization? Transformations from the 1980s to the 2010s. In: *Between East and South. Spaces of Interaction in the Globalizing Economy of the Cold War*, edited by Anna Calori et al. De Gruyter, Berlin, 2019. 217–231.

²¹ Multi-speed Europe is a term used to describe differentiated integration of EU member states. The concept is based on the idea that member states will be able to cooperate or opt out in various initiatives, depending on their willingness of cooperation. This could mean that the “core” countries should lead the EU integration, while other states outside of the core can follow them later. Slovakia expressed his willingness to be part of the core, while in Czechia the core was equalled with the Eurozone. Poland and Hungary, on the other hand, clearly rejected this idea.

²² Erika Nagy–Judit Timár–Gábor Nagy–Gábor Velkey: The Everyday Practices of the Reproduction of Peripherality and Marginality in Hungary. in: *Understanding Geographies of Polarization and Peripheralization: Perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, edited by Thilo Lang et. al. Palgrave Macmillan, Bakingstoke, 2015. 135–155.

²³ See, e.g., the discussion on the new book of the former Austrian politicians and diplomats, Emil Brix and Erhard Busek: Die Bedeutung der Visegrád-Gruppe für die EU. Aus dem neuen Buch von Emil Brix und Erhard Busek. <<http://magazine.erstestiftung.org/de/bedeutung-visegrad-fuer-eu/>> Accessed: 15 April 2021.

system and refugee redistribution.²⁴ Although this case is mentioned as a good example of the stronger cooperation within the V4, the position of individual countries was not that uniform as it is commonly perceived. The Hungarian and Polish rhetoric drew the most attention, however, Slovakia had the hardest stance in this matter.²⁵ While in the incipient stage Poland accepted the EU's decision, Hungary and Slovakia later filed a lawsuit against the Council of Europe.²⁶ It is also important to add that not only Central European states, but some of the Western European EU members were against the quota system. This case, however, can be understood as a turning point as the V4 managed to formulate and present a common statement that increased their visibility and influence. Moreover, this moment seems to confirm a development that has started already a while ago: given the qualitatively new situation in international politics and economics, those countries that in the past were keen to return to the West, now are able to confront with its values and priorities. During the migration crisis, the migrants and refugees were understood as an 'external other', a reference point for developing new elements of the cooperation. The launch of the joint Visegrad police unit to strengthen the protection of the Hungarian borders on its Southern border is a good example of this new and enhanced engagement. According to the Hungarian defence minister "the Visegrad countries give a common response to a common challenge" and by setting up a joint police unit the security of the whole Schengen area will be ensured.²⁷

Given these changes, some depicted the cooperation in rather unfavourable terms and even argued that after 2015, the Visegrad Cooperation represents a substantially new form of sub-regional cooperation, which can be best described as an opportunistic sub-regionalism aiming at influencing the EU decision making process.²⁸ This can be understood as an evolution of the cooperation into a hybrid stage, meaning, that the normative conformity that motivated these countries during the pre-accession period to synchronise their political attitude, values, and identity with the Western member states of the EU, is still on the agenda but with less significance. The identification with the West became partial in the sense that only some of the values and principles represented by the West are accepted, while some of them are evaluated as less important and are communicated in their political discourse in a dismissive manner.²⁹

Upon celebrating the 30th anniversary of the V4 cooperation, it is interesting to see how the discourse about the partnership developed in individual states. While it is unquestionable

²⁴ Joint Statement of the Heads of Government of the Visegrad Group Countries. Prague, 4 September 2015. <<https://bit.ly/31PYjLR>> Accessed: 31 March 2021.

²⁵ Davide Lerner: Why Slovakia won't embrace migration. *Politico.eu*, 16 August 2016. <<https://politi.co/3fLbkP2>> Accessed: 5 April 2021.

²⁶ The Court of Justice of the EU issued a formal opinion in July 2017, and in September, the case was dismissed.

²⁷ V4 cooperation is exemplary. Prime Minister's Office. 20 October 2015. <<https://bit.ly/3umapsu>> Accessed: 1 March 2021.

²⁸ Claudia Maria Bedea-Victor Osei Kwadwo: Opportunistic sub-regionalism: the dialectics of EU-Central-Eastern European Relations. *Journal of European Integration*. 4 June 2020. <<https://bit.ly/3fNJeTk>> Accessed: 29 March 2021.

²⁹ Aliaksei Kazharski: The End of 'Central Europe'? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four. *Geopolitics*. 2017/2018/4. 1-27.

that the V4 has become more visible on the European level during the migration crisis, it is also important to add, that the position of individual states also changed concomitant to current political developments in the individual countries. For instance, while Slovakia represented a hard-line disagreement regarding the quotas and resettlement, after winning the elections at home, the Slovak prime minister expressed a more European approach that also softened his previous statement regarding the migration issues.³⁰ Also, the Czech head of government (together with his Slovak counterpart) highlighted in a TV show that for their countries the main priority is the European Union and that the V4 cannot serve as an alternative.³¹ While in Poland and Hungary the V4 is understood as a brand that makes it possible to multiply their efforts in certain European issues the approach of Slovakia and Czechia is more ambiguous and careful.³² In this regard we can say—that whereas for Hungary and Poland is important to maintain and develop the hybrid form of the cooperation (meaning that the conformity with the West is only partial)—for Slovakia and Czechia the cooperation is important mainly because of its internal function: strengthening cooperation between the local actors. As the Slovak minister for European and Foreign Affairs concluded, it is not a good option to create a political block from the V4 that differentiates itself within the EU, the primary emphasis should be on the better integration into the EU.³³

THE V4'S IMPACT ON THE BROADER REGION

Although political agendas in the V4 countries are often divergent and frictions stemming from the different political backgrounds are having the potential to derail common policy initiatives, these countries have nevertheless proved to be effective in jointly shaping certain EU policies. They, for instance, have been playing an important role in the integration of new member states and are also influential in moulding the enlargement policies of the EU towards the Western Balkans.³⁴ Besides, the Visegrád Four Plus (V4+) format, bringing further Central European partners together to cope with selected issues, showed attractiveness within the larger East and Central European region. Given their relative efficiency in certain foreign policy issues related to their closer neighbourhood, the question automatically arises whether they are also able to shape broader processes.

As it was briefly touched upon, as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis, Visegrad countries have started to be increasingly gazing beyond their existing political and economic

³⁰ Andrej Matišák: Fico v Berlíne: Únia je náš životný priestor. *Pravda.sk*. 3 April 2017. <<https://bit.ly/2Plj8q5>> Accessed: 4 April 2021.

³¹ Speciál k rozdělení ČSFR z vily Tugendhat. 25 August 2017. *Czech Television*. <<https://bit.ly/3usNnAm>> Accessed: 28 March 2021.

³² Škodí nám Visegrád? Tridsať rokov spolupráce je v slepej uličke. <<https://bit.ly/3dAO2IY>> Accessed: 27 March 2021.

³³ Aký je slovenský záujem vo Visegráde? <<https://bit.ly/3wxHPX5>> Accessed: 31 March 2021.

³⁴ From the abundant literature on this issue see, e.g., Alexander Duleba: The EU's Eastern Policy: Central European Contribution. <http://www.pssi.cz/files/documents/pass/policypaper_press.pdf> Accessed: 08 April 2021; Martin Dangerfield: The contribution of the Visegrád Group to the European Union's 'Eastern' Policy: Rhetoric or reality? In: *The European Union, Russia and the Shared Neighbourhood*, edited by Jackie Gower–Graham Timmins. Routledge, 2011. 51–72.; Csaba Törő–Eamonn Butler–Károly Grúber: Visegrád: The Evolving Pattern of Coordination and Partnership After EU Enlargement, *Europe-Asia Studies* 2013/3. 364–393.

integrations and began to diversify and develop the global dimension of their foreign and economic policies. In this context, V4 countries joined global endeavours articulated by actors like China whose aim to (re-)build relationships on a new footing in a historically more or less familiar area as well as the attached projects (like the “One Belt, One Road” and “16+1” initiatives) became increasingly attractive in the region.³⁵ Furthermore, in specific areas, the V4 countries started to renew their ties with countries they once had intensive relations with.³⁶ Hoping that these partnerships—developed mostly during the Cold War decades—could successfully be converted into new type of relationships, V4 countries approached many of their former partners in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.³⁷

Although the cooperation with regions outside the Euro-Atlantic realm substantially elevated in the V4 agenda, this does not mean that either a coordinated and consistent common approach towards these regions has been adopted or the revived interests and the mushrooming number of economic cooperation projects would have substantially changed the economic landscape of any of these countries. In fact, what becomes clear by looking at these relations is rather the opposite: despite the more active stance, the economic diversification efforts, and the substantially increased trade volumes, the overall foreign trade structure of the V4 countries did not change that significantly.³⁸ Having said that,

³⁵ On the Cold War interactions between the socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe and the People’s Republic of China, see: Beyond the Kremlin’s reach? Eastern Europe and China in the Cold War era, edited by Jan Zofka–Péter Vámos–Sören Urbansky. *Cold War History*. 2018/3. For recent developments see, e.g., Xiao Fang: The Belt and Road initiative. *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*. 2015/3. 3-14.; István Tarrósy–Zoltán Vörös: Chinese Interest Towards the Visegrád Four? In: *Chances and Challenges for the Danube Region: A 100 Years After the First World War*, edited by István Tarrósy–Susan Milford. Publikon Books, Pécs. 2014. 65-84.; Richard Q. Turcsányi–Tamás Matura–Rudolf Fürst The Visegrad countries’ political relations with China: goals, results and prospects. In: *Chinese investments and financial engagement in Visegrad countries: myth or reality?* Institute of World Economics Centre for Economic and Regional Studies Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 2014. 127-141.

³⁶ For recent assessments from the surging field of East–South relations, see: James Mark–Tobias Rupprecht: The Socialist Camp in Global History: From Absentee to Victim to Co-Producer. In: *The Practice of Global History – European Perspectives*, edited by Matthias Middell. Bloomsbury, London, 2019. 81–113; David Engerman: The Second World’s Third World. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. 2011/1, 183–211; James Mark–Quinn Slobodian: Eastern Europe. In: *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, edited by Martin Thomas–Andrew Thompson. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018. 351–372; *Alternative Globalisations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, edited by James Mark–Artemy Kalinovsky–Steffi Marung. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2019.

³⁷ For a general overview, see, e.g., Stefan Cibian: Central and East ern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa: Prospects for Sustained Re-engagement. *Chatham House Research Paper*. May 2017 <<https://bit.ly/3tlv3sC> > Accessed: 15 April 2021. For case studies with regard to Hungary, see, e.g., László Kozár–György Neszmélyi: Economic Relations Between Hungary and the ASEAN Region. Highlighting a Special Business Opportunity in Vietnam. *Polgári Szemle*. 2018/4–6. 255–269; István Tarrósy–Zoltán Vörös: Hungary’s global opening to an inter-polar world. *Politeja*. 2014/28. 139-162; István Tarrósy: Hungarian foreign policy towards Africa during communism and in the post–Soviet era. *Twentieth Century Communism: Journal of International History*. 2018/15. 92–111.; István Tarrósy–Péter Morenth: Hungarian Africa Policy. *African Studies Quarterly*. 2013/1–2 77–96. On the Czech–African relations, see: Kateřina Ženková Rudincová: Sub-Saharan Africa in the Czech Foreign Policy: Approaching Africa as a Partner. In: *Czech Foreign Policy in 2017: Analysis*, edited by Alica Kizeková et al. Institute of International Relations, Prague. 204–220.

³⁸ With regard to Africa, see, e.g., Oskar Chmiel: The Engagement of Visegrád Countries in EU–Africa Relations. Bonn, German Development Institute, 2018. <<https://www.die-gdi.de/en/discussion-paper/article/the-engagement-of-visegrad-countries-in-eu-africa-relations/> > Accessed: 07 April 2021.

it should immediately be added that China and some other (chiefly East Asian) countries are being exceptions from this rough statement, as they have been able to offer a number of opportunities for economic cooperation—substantially reflected in the trade turnovers with and in the foreign direct investment inflows from these countries.³⁹

Up until today, V4 policies towards regions outside the Euro-Atlantic area are rather ambiguous as they often declare the intention of greater commitment to a joint approach but, more often than not, they fail to realize these either due to the divergent interest of the individual member countries or given the lack of institutional settings that could facilitate such cooperation. In contrast to the much more diversified dynamics in the bilateral relations between the V4 countries and the emerging economies in the East and the South, multilateral attempts can only be seen as a complementary foreign policy platform that has not yet managed to effectively translate the positions of the participating countries into collective actions.⁴⁰ It seems thus obvious, that in order to make the V4 as a more effective cooperation vis-à-vis its global partners, it should work jointly within a cooperative framework defined by long-term interests rather than by individual efforts to deal with these actors.

What is nevertheless important in this regard is that despite the often crumbling front toward global partners, V4 countries started to demonstrate that they have their own priorities and ambitions. Hence, they are able to react to global changes and are also capable to reinterpret their position in a multipolar world order. This capability of the V4 countries could be particularly useful during the current pandemic when global positions are being increasingly (re-)negotiated, transformed and a multitude of actors are aiming at remaking the global order. By giving more visibility to and branding the Visegrad cooperation in the global arena, they could also demonstrate that this alliance is not just playing an important role in the security and sovereignty strategies of the participating countries, but, to a certain extent, is able to shape common efforts in the pursuit of the political and economic self-reliance of the region.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What the above sketched V4 engagement could demonstrate is a new perception of Central Europe that takes the intra-EU and global engagement of these countries into account. This, in turn, could erode the image of Central Europe as a passive subject of geopolitical strategies and imperial experiments and as region having no or limited self-advocacy. One might thus argue, that the changes of the last two decades opened up multiple rooms for manoeuvre for the V4 countries, which, with varying intensity, further enhanced the visibility of the cooperation.

At the same time, these developments have also ramifications for the broader Central European region and neighbourhood too. In more practical terms and taking into consideration that right now the V4 is the only regional cooperation within the EU that maintains

³⁹ V4 Goes Global: Exploring Opportunities and Obstacles in the Visegrad Countries' Cooperation with Brazil, India, China and South Africa, edited by Partyk Kugiel, *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*. 2016/5. <<https://www.ceeol.com/search/book-detail?id=565893> > Accessed: 1 April 2021.

⁴⁰ Kugiel 2016

a dialogue with the Western Balkan countries, the cooperation can actively contribute to the future development of neighbouring regions such as the Eastern Partnership countries. The cooperation model that has been represented by the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland in the last thirty years can serve as a good example for regions that also have found themselves during their history in a buffer zone position. The aforementioned hybrid format of the cooperation and its loose character makes it possible to maintain flexibility and a certain level of informativity that leave more room for manoeuvre while the cooperation itself allows to synchronise and in some cases multiply the aims of the participating countries. This kind of cooperation can serve as an inspiration for other countries, and, in parallel, can form the character and identity of the broader Central European region as well. Hence, what the current V4 cooperation could yield is the construction of a new perception of Central Europe that challenges the simplifying narratives and is able to define itself from a qualitatively new perspective.