Security-related Cooperation among the V4 States

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Abstract: *The need for security and defence cooperation is a significant driver bringing together many nation-state groupings. Today, the renewal and strengthening of this cooperation is a pressing concern for all such alliances around the world. This cooperation is rooted in the history that initially highlighted its potential, but it also encompasses contemporary relationships formed under the influence of enormous challenges and pressures. Finally it draws on the past successes and failures of the group in question. The aim of this study is to trace the beginnings of the security--related cooperation of the Visegrad countries and locate the point of coordination of their respective security policies. My methodology is based on an analysis and synthesis of key source materials, making use of different types of analytical approaches. In order to identify the factors that connected the V4 states, I have applied a comparative method. My conclusion highlights important areas of security-related cooperation ranging from the coordination of energy policies to military and defence matters and social protection including the fight against extremism, radicalism and hybrid threats.*

Keywords: *security cooperation, V4, defence, Central Europe, security challenges, Ukraine*

The V4 states have had to wrestle with a number of ideological, procedural and substantive issues in their security policies. They have also needed to respond to a changing security environment, which has been dominated by indirect rather than direct threats. In this context, the most critical concerns have included migration, potential human rights abuses, economic instability and the rise

of radicalism and extremism. At the same time, this territory – long known as a *cordon sanitaire*[1] – has become a transit zone from the East, requiring the Schengen area to establish new security guarantees. These issues have, however, not been the only focus of security policy documents. There has also been a need for institutional changes concerning state decision-making powers and the options of individual actorss as well as the extent of their participation in security and defence.

This study aims to locate the starting point of the security-related cooperation among the Visegrad Group states, or more precisely, the beginnings of their coordinated/common security policy. My methodology involves the analysis and synthesis of key materials. To this end, I apply various kinds of analytical approaches and compare the situation across the states. Comparing the security policies of the four Central European states also reveals the limitations of this method. These limits stem from a predetermined (retrospective) view of the security and defence aspects of this cooperation. As such, this comparison does not cover all issues informing the contemporary sectoral understanding of security. I have drawn especially on primary documents concerning Visegrad Group, and these are supplemented by accessible scholarly publications (Eichler 2011; Dančák et al. 2011; Šuplata et al. 2013; Denková et al. 2017; Bienczyk--Missala et al. 2017). These works highlight and critically assess developments in individual V4 countries from various perspectives.

The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary are small or medium--sized post-Communist countries. This fact influences their vital interests as well as their ability to promote and protect those interests. As a non-institutional form of cooperation, the V4 group has offered a unique opportunity for these four Central European countries to coordinate their plans and interests on a wider regional basis. This cooperative strategy has been key to relationships within the group as well as its greater visibility across the wider European region. Acting alone, these states only had limited options to pursue their interests at international level and their ability to ensure their safety was restricted.

Historical experiences leading to cooperation

In the 1990s, each of the V4 states attempted to forge a new identity in the international environment that emerged after the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. As we have seen, the four countries did not become NATO members at the same time; Slovakia's acceptance was delayed until 2004, while the other three states joined NATO in 1999. The Slovak delay was largely due to the insufficient development of the country especially when it came to com-

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1   This term describes a space that creates a territorial barrier between empires or ideological blocs.

pliance with democratic criteria (Asmus 2002). All of the Visegrad countries, however, acquired EU membership in May 2004.

History shows us that the process of democratisation is not easy and democracies – even when they are liberal – may be threatened by crises in the same way as other systems (Husenicová 2017). With this in mind, it is worth tracing factors that may have fostered the V4's cooperation. Common historical features of these states include the following:

- Respect for authorities that promote humanistic, patriotic and at times even nationalist values as the basis for state power[2] (Baar 2001)
- An ability to choose leaders based not on their political status or populist rhetoric but rather on their sense of responsibility and respect for moral standards in political life. Due to this political pragmatism, all of the V4 states have had leaders who, instead of maximising their own power, strived to uphold the highest moral standards (Waisová-Piknerová 2012). (In contrast, the last decade has seen the political leadership in these countries veer in the opposite direction, confirming the thesis that there are 20-year cycles at work)[3]
- An ability to preserve national cultures, languages and religious preferences and expand national objectives despite centuries of forced assimilation (Gonionskij 1967).
- A perception of their security environment as a space integral to national and civil identity but also one that should not be endangered by subjugating minority groups (domestic ethnic, cultural and religious minorities). At the same time, traces of the old Versailles system remain in some links between the states in the region (for example, in the relations between the Hungarians and the Slovaks, the Czechs and the Slovaks, and the Poles and the Lithuanians).
- Persistent support from the majority of the population for a West European value system. These values have often been challenged by pan-Slavism and conflicts in East –West relations (Rupnik 1992). Central Europe has always been exposed to these tensions with frequent pressure on the region to adapt to the ambitions of stronger actors.
- Doubts about the effectiveness of regional security given past involvement with other Central European states in the Warsaw Pact organisa-

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2 As recent political developments make clear, there has been a renaissance of nationalist thinking in the region. In individual states, political leaders (for example, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, Miloš Zeman and Robert Fico) have rejected European unity on issues such as the migration crisis. In some cases, their actions have led to de-Europeanisation.

3 According to this theory, every 20 years a new generation comes of age in the absence of sufficient altruistic and socially progressive role models. This generation may catalyse opposition movements and conflicts to which established political elites will usually respond with panic and non-transparency. Rather than acting as a stabilising force, these elites display increased intolerance, instability and self- -centredness as it becomes clear they will not stay in power for long (Geertz 1973).

tion (Horemuž 2009). This participation had the same effect on all V4 countries, and they each also felt the negative impact of the Communist ideology, as seen in the suppression of civil society.

- Experience of subjugation to a central power that ruled through violence, coercion and fear. As such, tradition is not the basis for the relationships among the V4 states. Rather, their common background has helped them cooperate while respecting the inevitable disparities in their political development. These disparities are seen as integral to liberal democracy, the common ideology of these states.

- A state rhetoric that draws not only on abstractions (identity, patriotism, collective memory and the protection of territory and values) but on norms whch have arisen from the adoption, implementation and reform of national security strategies (Lasicová – Ušiak 2012). These norms take different forms depending on whether they have been adopted by the state and its political bodies/institutions or by NGOs and civil movements. Norms of the second kind have particular importance since they show the direct influence of civil initiatives on the quality of the security environment.

In outlining these common experiences of the V4 countries, I have sought to expose a phenomenon that remains insufficiently researched: the role of sectoral cooperation in regional (multi-state) integration. After the collapse of the USSR and the Soviet bloc, institutional systems of cooperation among the Central European states also fell apart. The participation of these states in the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and the Central European Initiative (CEI) enabled them to pursue economic and political integration (CEFTA 2006 – Středoevropská zóna volného 2009). At the same time, their membership of Partnership for Peace gave rise to a project that lacked official status but was nevertheless implemented by the Visegrad countries with their typical enthusiasm for anything new. The project also marked the beginning of research in the area of security. At the outset, this Visegrad initiative relied on an Anglo-centric approach and terminology, which were not always well suited to Central Europe. These countries, thus, began to focus increasingly on their distinct Central European mindset, assessing how best to adapt this to present conditions. At the same time, an analysis of these states' motives and catalysts for cooperation highlights certain differences (for example, in the perception of the presence and origins of threats, depictions of historical events and views on the issue of national minorities). Such divergences were clear despite these states' proximity and a number of shared experiences. Today these tensions tend to surface at the level of culture and national psychology (Eichler 2011: 53) rather than any actual security threats. (Their role as latent threats cannot, however, be ruled out.) Acknowledging and overcoming past mistakes may

help these states reconcile their differences and establish a common idea of cooperation.

Over the last three decades, we have, thus, seen the development of an initiative that aims to share common values while transforming collective and cooperative security. These goals were also reflected in the early security policies of the Visegrad states. The current security policies of all these countries call for the peaceful settlement of disputes by non-military means and the management of all future conflicts and crises in line with the principles of international law. Contemporary strategies are also guided by principles of conflict prevention, crisis management, smart defence and pooling and sharing. They are based on collaboration and international cooperation. In this context, security-related cooperation falls into two main areas: military and non-military.

A second key influence on the V4 states' security policies is clearly the doctrines of transnational organisations, as seen in transnational security policies. The V3's original foreign and security policy goal – joining the UN and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – was pursued on the basis that after the Soviet bloc collapsed, these states would be transformed into democracies and proceed to reinforce their democratic institutions during the transition period. Since the UN and OSCE were inclusive security organisations, membership did not require the fulfilment of any particular criteria. After these states joined the EU and NATO, another set of goals was achieved. In reflecting on this accession, some transnational organisations saw an affirmation of their plan to extend membership through a tactical enlargement that would reinforce collective defence. Several of them even drew on the notion of enhanced cooperative security to introduce tasks enabling cooperation with non-member states with similar interests to those members (Biava et al. 2011). Since this time, other changes on the agenda have included strengthening counter-terrorism strategies especially on cyber-terrorism; establishing tools to address and eliminate social threats such as extremism and nationalism; improving energy security; promoting the idea of enhanced security through crisis management; increasing the focus on deterrence and last but not least, advocating for reform and transformation, and thus, the establishment of effective NATO/EU armed forces. These are currently also the main goals of the security policies of the V4 states.

The V4 as a platform for security cooperation

After the collapse of the USSR, stabilising the Central European area became a crucial goal. This was also a driving force behind the cooperation among Central European states. On 15 February 1991, just ten days before the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the CSFR, Poland and Hungary (the V3) signed a joint declaration on the coordination of their plans to join the European

Communities and NATO. The V3 initiative was intended to establish security guarantors for the new environment, with an emphasis on a system that would be qualitatively different to the one under the Warsaw Pact (Ondrejcsák 2016). As an approach that was the very opposite of its predecessor, this cooperation with the European Communities and the North Atlantic Alliance instilled new hope. While there was still some mistrust of Western powers based on historical experience, the alternatives for the Central European countries were seen as either inefficient or harmful. During their transition, these states were keenly aware of their difficult position as post-Communist nations encountering democratic Europe. In order to defend their essential interests, they, thus, opted for a coordinated approach based on their geographic proximity, shared historical experience, preferred values and cultural affinities (Šoth 2010). This regional coordination would eventually prove these states' ability to cooperate to Western Europe as the unity and strength of the region appealed to both the European Communities and NATO. Additionally, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, these countries needed to create a space where they belonged even if this was only in the informal setting of the V3 (Šoth 2010: 12). The meeting that determined the V3 cooperation took place at a historically significant location; it was the same site where Czech, Polish and Hungarian kings had met in 1335 to discuss their countries' common problems. The first joint V3 declaration included reflections on these origins as well as the states' common history and cultural proximity. It also set out clear strategic objectives for this cooperation, including not just the establishment of parliamentary democracies, liberal market economies and respect for human rights but the restoration of freedom and sovereignty and joint efforts to integrate into Western structures (Visegrad Group 1991). In 1993, following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and its transformation into separate Czech and Slovak states, the group became the V4. Since that time, its cooperation has mainly occurred through consultations of various kinds including annual summits at the highest level, twice yearly meetings of prime ministers and meetings between particular ministers as required (Visegrad Group 1999). These meetings are seen as opportunities to harmonise state actions, exchange experiences and define common protocols. Traditionally prime ministerial meetings have had the greatest impact.

The year 2004 was a milestone for the V4 cooperation since it marked the point when all these states had joined the EU and NATO. As such, the initial aim of their cooperation had been achieved. From a security perspective, 2007 was similarly important as the year when these countries became part of the Schengen zone. This change meant the V4 were able to benefit from the free movement of persons, goods and services, but it also shifted the EU's external boundaries to the borders of these Central European states. As such, the adoption of major border protection measures became essential, thereby fulfilling one of the V4's post-2004 strategic priorities that had been stipulated in a prime

ministerial declaration in Kroměříž (Visegrad Group 2004). Significantly, it was also around this time that these countries began to realise their responsibilities as states that had completed the integration process, becoming mindful of the duty to share their experiences with potential NATO and EU members. Buoyed by this new awareness of their responsibilities, these states identified the Eastern Partnership and European Neighbourhood Policy as tools and goals for the V4's work within the EU as part of a larger project of establishing peace and stability in Europe (Pulišová 2010: 109). Both the Eastern Partnership and subsequent EU enlargement to the South-East and East were initiated by the Czech Republic during its 2009 EU Council presidency in line with the interests of the V4 states.

Generally speaking, most analysts agree that integration into NATO and the EU (Paulech – Urbanovská 2014) has been the Visegrad Group's major achievement. Some also cite the creation of the group's only institutional body, International Visegrad Fund, which provides scholarships, grants and various support options (Rosputinský 2012). After the achievement of the group's fundamental goal in 2004, the cooperation became to stagnate, but this did not mean it ceased to function altogether. In fact, it seemed the group was merely waiting for a new call to action, and this came in the form of the global economic and gas crisis of 2009. Under these conditions, the V4 states began to rediscover their motivation, and since 2010, they have revived their cooperation.

Clearly, NATO and EU membership remain important influences on the V4's cooperation. These states have been particularly aware of their responsibility for enlarging the security environments to which they belong. They have also been conscious of the need to gradually adapt to transnational doctrines such as the European security strategy and its 2008 update and the 2010 NATO strategic plan. At an important meeting of V4 prime ministers in Bratislava in 2011, the group's security and defence cooperation was taken to the next level. The prime ministers agreed to take a proactive approach to the suppression of significant threats including extremism, terrorism, cyberterrorism, the traffic in human beings and drugs, illegal migration, climate change and poverty. This focus reflected not only the agenda of transnational organisations but also a specifically Central European framework and set of state interests. One key driver was the V4 countries' simultaneous membership of NATO and the EU, which has led to the need to ensure complementarity and to eliminate duplications based on security and defence commitments to the two organisations (Visegrad Group 2011). Even before their accession, these states were conscious of their responsibilities for creating international peace and security in South-East and East Europe, as can be seen from their contribution to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission in the 1990s. Later, as NATO and EU member states, they joined various missions including EULEX in Kosovo, EUMM in Georgia and EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

All these states are also fully aware of their responsibility for self-defence, however in practical terms, common goals in this area have been more difficult to achieve. Awareness of NATO defence guarantees and a broader trend of decreased defence spending have turned these states into "freeloaders" (Poland remains the only exception among the V4). In this context, the establishment and deployment of the Visegrad EU Battlegroup in the first half of 2016 may be seen as a significant success. This move has been perceived by foreign partners as an attempt by the V4 to assume responsibility for self-defence. The Visegrad Group's ability to create its own military structure is seen as a sign of these states' general interoperability and willingness to participate in common actions (Šuplata et al. 2013). This joint initiative will be relaunched in 2019. In addition, during the 2014–2015 Slovak presidency, the V4 adopted an action plan about defence cooperation. This plan established a framework for defence cooperation with a particular focus on reinforcing common defence planning and protecting air space. It also highlighted the possibility of creating a permanent V4 defence modular force (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic 2015).

Another important V4 initiative has occurred in the area of energy security with plans to establish an effective distribution network among the states through the North–South Corridor. The link between Hungary and Slovakia has already been established while completion of the one between Slovakia and Poland is expected in 2018/2019 (ČTK 2015; EUSTREAM 2016). The V4 countries have been trying to promote this project at a European level.

The overall concept of V4 security cooperation is based on an affiliation to the Central European region.[4] These states have been able to reach a consensus on their vital and strategic interests, but it has been more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve cooperation in other areas. Many initiatives are triggered by a top-down system whereby membership of international organisations pushes the V4 to fulfil obligations, and this requires them to cooperate on security and defence. The states have chosen to apply a "soft power" philosophy and they therefore try to advance their external interests by non-military means. The low level of institutionalisation of their activities allows them to respond flexibly to new prompts and challenges. It also means they can introduce effective new forms of coordination (Gizicki 2012: 9), reignite existing cooperation with new energy and projects (Dančák et al. 2011: 36-37) or even create spaces to launch new regional initiatives in line with their priorities and ongoing activities (Strážay 2015).

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4 Some voices have advocated for V4 enlargement, but so far this idea has not taken hold (Terem-Lenč 2011).

Successes and failures of V4 security cooperation

So far, I have outlined key aspects of the V4's cooperation around defence and security. It is also important, however, to identify the main successes and failures of this cooperation. The establishment of the CEFTA in 1992 was one of the V4's first successes (Pavlovič 2001: 9), and in more recent years, several other formats of security-related cooperation have emerged as a result of the long-term efforts of the V4 countries. A number of declarations have also been adopted in support of these endeavours. (See, for example, the Budapest Declaration/Framework for Enhanced Defence Planning and the Action Plan for V4 Defence Cooperation, probably the most important document adopted during the 2014 Slovak presidency.)

One critical contributor to these developments has been the limitation or even absence of bilateral tensions within the V4 group. Today these states enjoy good relations and have even managed to overcome certain historical conflicts.[5] Although some minor bilateral disagreements persist, they have almost no impact on the group's operation (Strážay 2011: 26). To the contrary, the V4 group's internal cohesion was well evidenced in 2007 when its members became part of the Schengen zone (Strážay 2011: 28). Since then, these states have established an even stronger collective voice within the EU.

In this regard, regular meetings of working groups on defence cooperation and project preparation have been particularly important. Probably the most successful of these are the regular meetings of military specialists along with chiefs of general staff, state secretaries and defence ministers. While it is true that not all concluded agreements and project proposals have been taken forward politically (Strážay 2011), the V4 have had a significant impact on military cooperation. As we have seen, one key accomplishment was the establishment of the V4 EU Battlegroup and its deployment in the first half of 2016. The Battlegroup has three main components: Force Headquarters (the group's hub) and the operations and strategic resources units. This initiative is based in Krakow, Poland (Šuplata et al. 2013). More than 3,700 soldiers have been involved with the majority coming from Poland (1,800) followed by the Czech Republic (728), Hungary (640) and finally Slovakia (560) (actual numbers have varied slightly based on the capacities and options of individual states) (Český rozhlas 2015). The success of this project is clear not only from the deployment, which extended for an entire half year but from the decision of the V4 countries to repeat these operations in 2019.

Since this initiative took place, there has been joint work on military training and defence planning, two unavoidable parts of any military and security cooperation. Current agreements require regular military training at least

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5   The historical conflict between Slovakia and Hungary is one of the most important examples.

once a year in the form of large-scale manoeuvres together with smaller exercises several times a year where possible. Joint work on defence planning relates especially to the exchange of information among all involved parties. This cooperation is still not fully effective (Naď et al. 2016). It is particularly important for ensuring the V4 group's coordination and readiness to handle potential military threats.

Cooperation around air space protection is another significant topic as well as one of the long-term priorities of the V4. This discussion dates back to 2000 when the states tried to harmonise and unify the guidelines on supersonic aircrafts, an essential measure for the effective use of these planes (Podaný 2015; Juhászová et al. 2012). That process proved difficult, and in addition to the large national investment costs associated with modernisation (an investment that is still required in the case of Slovakia), certain state interests have interfered with the decision-making process. As such, this area of cooperation has not been very successful to date.

The above initiatives have received considerable support from international organisations, including the EU in the case of the V4 EU Battlegroup. In addition, NATO is behind another successful project, the NATO Counter-Intelligence Centre of Excellence in Krakow. It should be noted that this project has been a major challenge for the V4 countries as well as an opportunity. Since the 2016 Polish parliamentary elections, some tensions have erupted between Poland and other participating countries, especially as regards the nomination of personnel. There has also been a reluctance to reach agreement on the centre's operations (Pravda 2015).

Putting the NATO centre aside, however, the V4 has been an effective means of supporting staff nominations. A long tradition exists of group consultations and support for candidates originating from one of the V4 countries, and this approach is particularly important in the area of security. While this process is not easy and the states sometimes fail to achieve a consensus, these consultations have been very significant for the coordination of the V4's external affairs.

Cooperation around education is another crucial area of work, albeit one with many shortcomings. Despite the education platform established for the Visegrad states under a 2013 agreement (Visegrad Group Military Education Platform – VIGMILEP), this concept has yet to be put into practice. The Baltic Defence Academy may be a positive example of cooperation in this area. In contrast, the VIGMILEP has been frustrated by the preferences of individual countries, which are unwilling to abandon their established approach in favour of a transnational education institution. Financial and personnel issues are additional obstacles (Gawron – Tabor 2015). Furthermore, decision-making in this area is affected by the fact that the soldiers and defence ministry staff of individual countries are trained by NATO and the EU. For the time being, implementing this kind of cooperation at V4 level, thus, remains difficult.

Several initiatives related to common defence spending have been more outright failures. These include joint efforts to upgrade V4 helicopters and acquire mobile 3D radars (Naď et al. 2016). Despite expectations of financial savings and other economic benefits, these projects have been compromised by various national interests and interest groups linked to individual states that ultimately slowed or completely hindered any progress. Meanwhile, the V4 states have continued their efforts to cooperate concerning arms, technological issues and the exchange of information and experiences as well as the coordination of a common stance on security. Moreover, V4 units have been deployed within several operations and missions. These include Czech and Slovak battalions within the KFOR mission in Kosovo, Slovak and Hungarian contingents within UNFICYP in Cyprus and the joint involvement of Poland and Slovakia in Iraq (Naď et al. 2010). These initiatives are still in operation as they have proven to be relatively effective both economically and organisationally.

Opportunities for future security cooperation

The Central European states, and the countries of the Visegrad Group in particular, went through a transition period in the early 1990s. They later became the first of the post-Communist republics to accede to the North Atlantic Alliance, a collective security organisation and the European Union, an economic group of Western countries with some elements of a security and defence policy. As members of these two organisations, the V4 countries are usually not called on to protect their territory alone but can take advantage of NATO collective defence programmes and EU policies on defence, foreign security, energy and many other matters (Strážay 2015). This does not mean, however, that the V4 countries should abandon cooperation in a narrower regional format. Several examples exist of relatively successful security and defence cooperation based on a regional approach, including the Baltic, Nordic and Benelux groups.
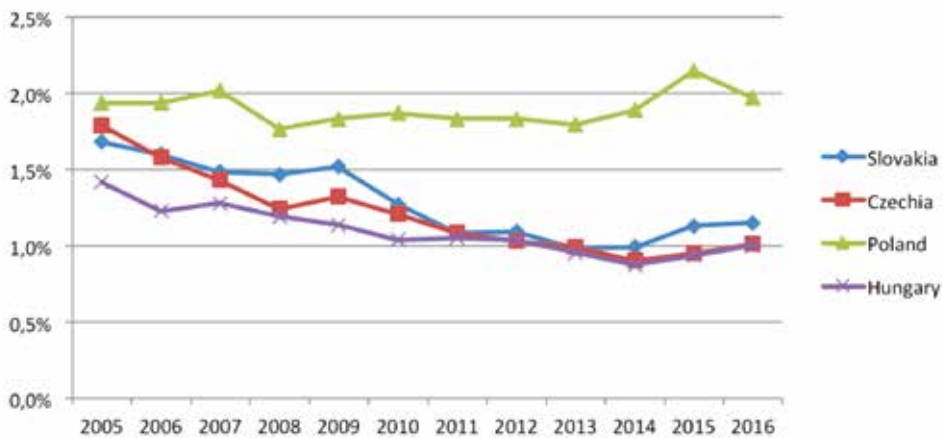
Given the common challenges that the V4 countries are facing, it is worth considering the main opportunities that have emerged for them in response. A security challenge describes a potential disruption of security. States may choose to respond in a range of ways, and it will depend on the individual country and the measures it adopts whether the challenge affects it positively or negatively. These challenges, thus, provide the V4 countries with various openings for cooperation.

The V4 countries have all recorded a decline in defence spending, with the exception of Poland and in recent years also Slovakia. (In the Slovak case, however, the increase in the defence budget has been only minimal.) This trend is evident from a comparison of defence spending in these states as a proportion of their GDP (see Table 1). Moreover, aside from Poland, each of the V4 countries

has maintained a defence budget significantly below 2% of GDP, the limit they agreed on when entering NATO.

This situation puts pressure on the V4 to be more pragmatic about defence spending. In fact, the states may save money by pursuing joint purchases and common procurement. The first step here could be to collaborate on defence planning and coordination given the potential for research and development in these two areas. The defence industry in all of these countries has considerable potential, and effective allocation of resources to a joint programme could bring the desired savings (Majer et al. 2015). This should not mean, however, that the money saved is distributed to other sectors; rather, any savings should help make up needed funds in the area of defence and security. Joint deployments offer another possibility for savings. The creation of the V4 EU Battlegroup realised this idea in practice. It has far greater potential, however, and could be applied, for example, to EU operations in international crisis management situations or in protecting NATO's eastern borders (Naď et al. 2016).

Table 1 Defence spending as a proportion of GDP before, during and after the financial crisis (year/percentage of GDP spent on defence in individual states)

Source: SIPRI 2018

The crisis in Ukraine has led countries to rethink their approach to situations that do not create a military conflict in their immediate proximity, as described in their strategic documents. They have been pressed to reflect on an adequate response. A similar impulse can be seen when it comes to defining the source of the conflict. On the one hand, the V4 countries have issued a joint declaration on their non-recognition of Crimea and condemnation of the illegal annexation (Visegrad Group 2014a). On the other, the foreign security policies and practices of individual states reveal significant discrepancies in their attitudes as well as

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internal tensions (Slovakia and the Czech Republic are the most striking examples). The Russian Federation's increasing assertiveness and its use of hybrid threats have exposed such states to the effects of information warfare. In this context, the first efforts at a coordinated V4 response can be seen in the NATO Counter-Intelligence Centre of Excellence, which was established in Krakow. This centre was set up to respond to precisely these kinds of threats, but as we have observed, major staff changes have compromised its efficiency (Pravda 2015). While there is still great potential for a V4 response to this challenge, for now the states have agreed only on its presence and not on its source. This significantly undermines their ability to proceed.

In this regard, one key driver of the V4's cooperation has been the joint visit by the foreign ministers of these states to Kiev in 2014 when they decided to help Ukraine make necessary reforms (CEID 2017). Even so, it remains to be seen if Ukraine will become a stable partner for the V4. The crisis in the country has also created opportunities to protect the eastern border of the EU and NATO in the Baltic countries. In this context, the V4 group is currently actively promoting the strengthening of the Baltic region, and its gradual dispatch of military units to protect this border signals the acceleration of this project. This has also added to the pressure to reinforce defence-related cooperation between the V4 and the Baltic states.

In recent times, attitudes to the EU have been a divisive rather than a unifying force within the V4 group. So far these states have agreed not to accept a multi--speed Europe,[6] and Poland has even declared that such a scenario would lead to the disintegration of the EU (Hendrych et al. 2017). The predominant opinion among the V4 has been that the role of individual EU member states should be reinforced within the union. They have also agreed on the need to protect state freedoms and values and the Schengen zone (Denková et al. 2017). Nevertheless, while there remain opportunities for V4 cooperation, tensions have emerged within the group, especially when it comes to voting on the migration crisis and the implementation of economic sanctions against Russia. In both these cases, the V4 states have failed to arrange any actions or meetings to coordinate their steps (Rácz 2014: 3; Bolečeková – Olejarová 2016). Clearly the EU continues to exert an enormous influence on the V4's security including their defence, domestic security, responses to terrorism and energy security. The motives for V4 cooperation are, thus, significant,[7] but whether this translates into action will depend on the importance of the interests at stake. At the moment it seems that the V4's vital interests could restart their cooperation.

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6   In fact there is some disagreement within the V4 on this issue: Slovakia and perhaps also the Czech Republic have had a more positive response to the creation of an EU "core" which they see as a step towards EU integration. In contrast, Hungary and Poland are opposed to these developments.

7   This cooperation might extend to at least to creating new strategic documents or recommendations to the EU or advocating state interests at EU level.

The increasing power of nationalism and the rise of extremism are obvious in all of the V4 countries. Extremist groups communicate with one another, offer mutual support and coordinate their activities (Bienczyk – Missala et al. 2017). Their programmes focus on undermining of democracy and state participation in transnational organisations including by contesting membership of Euro-Atlantic institutions and affiliations to the West (Mesežnikov – Kocúr 2015). These pressures have produced splits and conflicts within the V4 group, a situation similar to the one after 2004 when the V4 achieved their first major success. As we have seen, these states have often focused lately on advancing their own interests. Much will turn on whether they favour conflict and a reluctance to collaborate over initiating cooperation.

The analysis and comparison in this study have at least partly confirmed that the main motive for security-related cooperation is identifying the common features of the states concerned. These traits may be uncovered by addressing these countries' security concerns. Currently the V4 share a number of characteristics, however their positions differ on several issues. Suchdisparities stem primarily from their different perceptions of threats. Political theory tells us that though the presence of a threat is an objective fact, the perception of risks results from a subjective decision-making process. At the national level, this is a process undertaken by politicians. It would seem, then, that the V4 countries have the same awareness of the threats being posed but different positions on the nature and extent of the risks. Furthermore, we need to highlight the roles of the EU and NATO in managing security: while the EU plays an important part in coordinating the elimination of threats in the realm of non-military security, NATO coordinates military responses. It is also true that many of the V4's past successes were attached to more ambitious endeavours. This does not mean, however, that the V4 cannot be an effective security and defence subsystem within NATO and the EU. Indeed, far from opposing this initiative, NATO and the EU have given it their support.

Today the V4 states are involved in many security and defence initiatives and activities, but this question of risk perception remains crucial to their quest for common interests and connections. From a historical perspective, we can see that the V4's cooperation culminated some years ago and since then it has waxed and waned at various times; even so, it has retained the potential to be decisive especially at times of crisis. It is strongly presumed that the V4 cooperation will survive despite the current problems. While this cooperation may attenuate slightly or even stagnate, the informal nature of the group enables it to overcome these periods without any serious damage to its operation. Moreover, the V4 states can relaunch their cooperation when vital and strategic interests are at stake, as we have seen several times in the past.

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