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# Policy Paper 1/2015

Building Common Trust –  
Recommendations for the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group

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July 2015

## Building Common Trust – Recommendations for the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group

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**Adéla Denková, Vít Dostál,  
Kryštof Kruliš, Jakub Kufčák**

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*“They have been designed (...) with a modern feel, technically speaking they can be further processed and are readily applicable, they are economical, and reflect the V4 objectives of togetherness, unity, focus...”*<sup>1</sup>. This was how the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented the winning entries in a competition to design a logo for the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group (CZ V4 PRES). Similar attributes apply to Visegrad cooperation as a whole, and the Czech Presidency is keen to strengthen them further.

When the conflict between Russia and Ukraine erupted, many predicted an acrimonious end for the Visegrad Group (V4).<sup>2</sup> Certain events during the conflict were interpreted in different ways by the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, who sent conflicting signals to Brussels, Moscow and even each other. News of the V4’s demise, however, was premature, as the Central European organisation remains intact. In fact, its **cooperation is intensifying** (e.g. in defence and security policy) and **expanding** (e.g. in the realm of the digital market).

The CZ V4 PRES, which commences on 1 July 2015, has set **well-aimed priorities coupled with a conservative programme**.<sup>3</sup> Further vigorous expansion of the group’s agenda and, above all, meetings in V4+ format – on which past presidencies (Polish, Hungarian and Slovakia alike) progressively resolved is not sought. Instead, the V4 needs to cultivate cooperation where the seeds of sound partnership have already been sown in order to enhance these ties. The CZ V4 PRES motto of “V 4 Trust”, expressing faith in one another, reflects **both the means and the end**.

In the coming year, several critical **internal, European and external trials** face Central Europe. Russia continues in its aggressive policy towards Ukraine. Europe faces a migration crisis. The fragile political stability in some countries in the Western Balkans is crumbling. Key parliamentary elections are set to take place in Poland and Slovakia. Detailed consultation will begin on the European Commission’s legislative initiatives on the digital internal market and the Energy Union, to which the V4 attaches particular importance. The Five Presidents’ Report has outlined additional plans to consolidate the euro area. The Visegrad European Union Battlegroup (V4 EU BG) will become operational and V4 countries will try to find a common position ahead of NATO’s Warsaw Summit. The CZ V4 PRES will have the task of finding a joint Central European response to these challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, “Announcement of the results of a competition to design a logo for the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group (V4)”, accessed 25 June 2015, [http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni\\_vztahy/krajane\\_v\\_zahranici/verejna\\_diplomacie/vyhlaseni\\_vysledku\\_souteze\\_o\\_logo.htm](http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/krajane_v_zahranici/verejna_diplomacie/vyhlaseni_vysledku_souteze_o_logo.htm)

<sup>2</sup> For example: Edward Lucas, “Grappling with irrelevance. The Ukraine crisis has split the Visegrád group”, *Politico*, 10 July 2014, accessed 25 June 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/grappling-with-irrelevance>.

<sup>3</sup> Visegrad Group, “2015-2016 Czech Presidency. V4 Trust – Program for the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2015 – June 2016)”, 2015, accessed 25 June 2015, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20152016-czech>.



## Recommendations

### Internal Cohesion

- **Enhance cooperation between national parliaments:** hold meetings of defence and security committee representatives in the run-up to the NATO Summit in Warsaw; continue meetings of European and foreign affairs committees.
- **Raise the V4's profile in the European Parliament:** develop a “friends of V4” group within the European Parliament; encourage them to meet through permanent representations to the EU.
- **Facilitate contact between political parties within the V4:** promote networking between political parties' expert capacities; nurture contact between political parties' youth organisations.
- **Carry on with the Think Visegrad platform:** increase awareness of the platform's activities; publicise some of its output.

### Energy

- **Coordinate the position on the Energy Union project:** find maximum possible consensus among V4 countries (and, where appropriate, other countries from Central and Eastern Europe) on issues related to the internal market in energy and infrastructure; bolster the group's image as a constructive counterweight to other interest groups within the EU.
- **Make headway in interconnecting gas markets:** work on ironing out the differences in legislation and regulatory rules that currently prevent closer integration; resolve financing of the North-South Gas Corridor.
- **Communicate with neighbouring countries:** engage in intensive communication with Germany, whose policies will be vital to the integration of the European energy sector; hold consultations with other key partners, such as Austria and Ukraine.



### Digital Agenda

- **Actively promote the adoption of the European Commission's digital single market strategy:** strive for the most ambitious measures at EU level to eliminate barriers to online trade; mutually coordinate the implementation of directives adopted under this strategy.
- **Promote an innovation-friendly regulatory environment:** eliminate administrative barriers to the establishment and funding of start-ups; continue linking the V4 start-up scene with centres of innovative enterprise across the world by tapping into events such as We4Startups in Silicon Valley in April 2015.
- **Safeguard the availability of eGovernment services:** in particular with a view to the user-friendliness of the public services on offer and, where suitable, with a view to the availability of such services to persons from other countries.

### Defence Cooperation

- **Set up a permanent Visegrad brigade** and advocate regular political exercises (POLEX); incorporate this brigade's exercises into the V4 Joint Training and Exercise Strategy.
- **Lay the foundations for a regional approach to air defence:** conclude all bilateral cross-border agreements by the Warsaw Summit and draw up a concept for Visegrad joint airspace protection.
- **Adopt a common V4 position on the update of the European Security Strategy,** especially with regard to the potential deployment of EU Battlegroups; discuss the possibility of applying Article 44 of the EU Treaty in a Visegrad context.
- **Establish a common position for the NATO Summit in Warsaw:** reach V4 consensus on the Warsaw Initiative on NATO's Strategic Adaptation.



### Eastern Partnership

- **Highlight reform support for Ukraine:** through both the International Visegrad Fund and national government activities (e.g. by staging V4 Road Shows).
- **Become involved in the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy:** seek to influence the debate on how this policy should be configured in the future, following completion of the public consultation procedure, in a bid to accentuate the differing approach between the EU's southern and eastern neighbourhoods.
- **Discuss the further development of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine:** refrain from scathing statements on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, especially at the time of the Polish and Slovak elections; discuss a common position for the period following the expiry of Minsk II Agreement deadlines.

### Other Issues

- **Not expanding V4+ meetings:** primarily focus on maintaining existing V4+ formats; apply a bottom-up approach to further partnerships.
- **Intensify V4+Germany cooperation:** aside from the energy sector, concentrate on working together on policy geared towards countries of the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans; communicate with the emerging German foreign-policy elite, who could hold key posts in the wake of the 2017 federal elections.
- **Identify common interests relating to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which is currently under negotiation:** e.g. in terms of energy diversification by securing alternative imports from the USA, or the application of the TTIP as a means of updating existing bilateral investment protection agreements with the USA; promote these interests by joining forces in negotiations with the USA and in the course of internal dialogue on this treaty within the EU.



### Internal Cohesion

While, naturally, the V4 does not agree on everything, differences of opinion are not enough in themselves to trigger automatic conflicts within the group. In fact, the V4 has developed an **art of disagreement** steeped in mutual respect and understanding.<sup>4</sup> In those cases where Visegrad schisms have escalated to the highest political level, this has usually been prompted by internal political or intra-party demand in one of the participating countries. The V4 benefits from an extensive and ever expanding network of stakeholders who are consistently and intensively in contact with each other. The V4's most prized asset is its sound mutual "familiarity". Communication is currently being concentrated in primarily executive areas, as this is crucial for implementing joint projects and for coordinating positions. The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) contributes significantly to the cooperation of the non-governmental and non-profit sector. Visegrad think-tanks covering foreign, security and European policy are also closely linked. In recent years, interparliamentary cooperation has been consolidated and the Visegrad public-service television platform has been launched.

Two lessons have been learnt from the fatalistic responses to the failure to demonstrate Visegrad cohesion more assertively in the face of Russia's aggressive policy in Eastern Europe. First, the **inflated expectations** placed on the Visegrad Group show that the V4 has earned itself a good reputation. Numerous journalists and experts have identified Central Europe (ergo, the V4) as a coherent entity, which intrinsically needs to pursue identical strategic goals in relation to Russia. The Visegrad Group was expected to deliver a uniform response, but this was not forthcoming. Secondly – and this is linked to the first point – it became apparent just how scant the **knowledge** of some experts, journalists and politicians was **with regard to the internal functioning of the group**, its stated objectives, agendas and the logical constraints of its cooperation. To consolidate intra-Visegrad cohesion, the group needs to build on these lessons, especially considering the **two parliamentary elections to be held in V4 countries** during the CZ V4 PRES. In Poland, in particular, there could be a transformation of foreign policy that is moderate in fact but high in rhetoric, requiring more intensive communication between all Visegrad capitals.

The upkeep of existing networking infrastructure should be combined with **greater interparliamentary cooperation**. Meetings of parliamentary presidencies and European and foreign affairs committees – especially as the NATO Summit in Warsaw draws closer – should be complemented by a joint session of V4 countries' MPs and senators specialising in defence and security policy. The **"friends of V4" group in the European Parliament** should continue its activities. More generally, **contact between political parties** across the political spectrum should be enhanced, e.g. through expert meetings or get-togethers of parties' youth organisations.

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<sup>4</sup> Michal Kořan, "The Visegrad Group on the Threshold of Its Third Decade: A Central European Hub?", in *Regional and International Relations of Central Europe*, ed. Zlatko Šabič and Petr Drulák, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 205.



### Energy

Energy and the related climate policy are among the core areas of Visegrad cooperation. Emphasis is placed on **energy security and gas interconnection**, which are also issues in the domain of special working parties. Last year, the V4 proved that it had the credentials to act as a coordinator in the preparation of the EU climate and energy package, which triggered stronger rumbles of concern within the EU about the impact climate policy would have on industry's competitiveness. V4 countries have also found common ground in their emphasis on equal access to all technologies, including nuclear power. The coordination of positions on the proposed **European Energy Union**, the materialisation of which will occupy the group throughout the CZ V4 PRES, appears to be a natural choice at this juncture.

The V4 will struggle to find a common position on some of the European Commission's upcoming proposals, as we saw in the run-up to the spring European Council in 2015. Although all of the countries eventually threw their weight behind the Energy Union project, Hungary made it clear that it was reluctant, for example, to increase transparency in **relations with external gas suppliers**, i.e. especially with Russia. This falls foul of the position maintained by Warsaw, which espouses close cooperation between Member States in relation to Moscow. Poland, for its part, is warier than the Czech Republic and Slovakia about the **transition to low-carbon energy**, and the parliamentary elections in autumn will do little to alter this. This could be reflected in negotiations on the review of the emission trading scheme or the assessment of the after-effects of this year's United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, which, early next year, will influence the debate on the further direction of the EU's climate policy.

In this light, the CZ V4 PRES will be tasked with finding maximum possible consensus among all four countries and, where appropriate, other countries from the EU's Eastern wing. The **V4's image as a constructive player** able – despite certain differing priorities – to play a part in achieving EU compromise should be boosted. For example, in the **interconnection of gas markets**, the V4 has the potential to serve as a prime example of regional energy integration, a factor that plays a key role in the formation of the Energy Union. However, progress needs to be made in ironing out legislative and regulatory differences that inhibit closer integration, and financing of the North-South Gas Corridor needs to be resolved. It is also essential to identify effective pathways to **resources and routes for gas transmission** to and within the EU. This task includes communication between the V4 and neighbouring countries (e.g. Austria, as one of the North-South Corridor countries, and Ukraine, whose role in the transmission of natural gas will evolve over the next few years). With Germany playing a particularly vital role in the **integration of European electrical power**, the V4's voice should be heard loud and clear in Berlin.



### Eastern Partnership

V4 countries have been among the most prominent champions of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) project ever since it was launched. Starting in spring 2010, annual meetings have been held by the foreign ministers of the V4 and EaP partner countries. They are also attended by high-level EU representatives specialising in this area. The IVF has spearheaded numerous specialised programmes devoted to Eastern Europe, to which other countries (Sweden and the Netherlands) began to donate over time. In this respect, the V4 has been instrumental in **keeping the EaP brand at the top of the EU agenda.**

Even so, the latest developments in Eastern Europe have put a halt to the necessary development of these initiatives. In fact, for the first time the **declaration** released after the most recent meeting of V4 and EaP foreign ministers **did not mention support or the importance of the European perspective** for partner countries, despite the fact that this had been a fixture of previous statements. The common position on the Eastern Neighbourhood within the V4 has always relied on a search for a common denominator, reached by the individual countries despite their differing goals and experience. Despite this, the V4 still always came up with a more generous offer than that which could have been achieved on the EU platform. Today, this rule of thumb applies less than ever before.

Politicians in V4 countries have failed to find a uniform interpretation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. With Russia's increasing agitation and growing pressure on certain countries (especially Slovakia and Hungary), combined with the imminent Polish and Slovak parliamentary elections, the **rhetorical differences between the Visegrad Group's capitals could yet become more pronounced.**

Despite the different approaches taken since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the V4 has come up with a proactive agenda: support for **reform efforts in Ukraine.** The V4 and the IVF should continue along this path. Nevertheless, discussions within the V4 should shy away from knotty themes, such as the implementation of Minsk II, the consequences of likely non-compliance with that agreement, and the continuation of sanctions against Russia after January 2016.



### Digital Agenda

The Slovak V4 Presidency incorporated building a digital economy among the group's priorities and spelt out its intrinsic value as a source of comparative benefits for the region. The CZ V4 PRES should continue this trend and make the digital agenda a fixed component of cooperation. The great potential that exists here was borne out in March 2015, when consensus was reached on the common non-paper “The V4 Contribution on the Digital Single Market”,<sup>5</sup> which succeeded in setting specific priorities in this area. The EU's **Digital Single Market Strategy**, released in early May, specified the steps the European Commission wanted to take to set the digitisation process in motion. It is in the V4's interests to effectively promote this strategy, with the adoption of relevant EU legislative instruments devised, for example, to **simplify cross-border e-commerce** and/or to modernise copyright and personal data protection. In this respect, there is every indication that the Visegrad Group will find allies among other states from the like-minded group for the Single Market.

Besides establishing common ground at EU level, the digital agenda also offers other opportunities for cooperation. One example is activity encouraging a **link between the V4 start-up scene and centres of innovative enterprise across the world**, which can build on events such as We4Startups in Silicon Valley in April 2015. V4 cooperation in pushing for an innovation-friendly regulatory environment could help to further the development of the digital economy. V4 countries could **coordinate on the implementation of EU directives** in pursuit of the digital strategy in order to facilitate cross-border e-commerce between them as much as possible. According to the European Commission's DESI 2015 index, there is plenty of scope for improvement among V4 countries (with the partial exception of Poland) in eGovernment and the provision of digital public services. In this light, the common objective should be to **learn from the good practices** in place in more successful states. Other areas that require attention are the user-friendliness of the public services on offer and, where suitable, the availability of such services to persons from other countries.

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<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Administration and Digitization of Poland, “The V4 Contribution on the Digital Single Market”, 13 March 2015, [https://mac.gov.pl/files/the\\_v4\\_contribution\\_on\\_digital\\_single\\_market.pdf](https://mac.gov.pl/files/the_v4_contribution_on_digital_single_market.pdf).



### Defence Cooperation

Although security and defence cooperation has long been part of the Visegrad agenda, the V4 has frequently fallen short of planned ambitions. With this in mind, the CZ V4 PRES should primarily produce practical results that will move cooperation beyond the current key project, which remains the joint **Visegrad EU Battlegroup** (V4 EU BG).

Apart from the adoption of one strategic document, the vital V4 Joint Training and Exercise Strategy, the outgoing Slovak Presidency generally dragged its feet. It thus looks as though the Czech and, subsequently, the Polish Presidencies will be more forward-looking as both countries have spent a long time consulting their defence priorities. The CZ V4 PRES's main task will be to set up a joint permanent Visegrad brigade to ensure an **enduring Visegrad military structure** is in place once the V4 EU BG is relieved of standby duty in mid-2016. If the Czech Republic succeeds in this task alone, it could be said to have been a success. The spin-off effects of establishing a permanent joint unit would be considerable and could pave the way for joint acquisitions, which currently remain politically impassable. The next step would be for the V4 to agree on **regular political exercises** (POLEX) in order to align national decision-making mechanisms for the subsequent deployment of the unit in real situations. Here, however, the Czech Republic has so far failed to move forward with its initiative.

A long-standing problem that Visegrad cooperation has had to grapple with is the fact that there is no permanence to the priorities set for the development of military capacities. Whilst there were indications at one stage that ambitions extended all the way to key battle platforms (shared tracked or wheeled vehicles), today's targets are much more conservative.<sup>6</sup> It came as a surprise, then, when the **joint airspace protection project** was re-tabled, initially in the form of cross-border agreements between individual V4 countries, even though related negotiations had originally been opened more than four years ago!

The Czech Presidency, which will make headway on both of these counts, will be the best possible response to the deteriorating security situation. It will also lay the foundations for the **emerging Visegrad regional approach** to defence and bolster the Czech-Polish partnership and the Czech Republic's profile ahead of the forthcoming NATO Summit in Warsaw.

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<sup>6</sup> Compare the priorities in capacity development set out in the statement following the meeting of V4 defence ministers in Brussels in June 2013 (wheeled and tracked platforms, ammunition, military kit, counter-IED systems, unmanned systems and command and C4ISR systems) with the statement released after the V4 defence ministers' meeting in Tomášov, Slovakia in April 2015 (training and exercises, a joint logistics support group, CBRN defence, air controllers and special operations tactical training).



### Conclusion

Besides the priorities outlined above, there are numerous other areas on which the CZ V4 PRES will or should focus its attention. The diminishing importance of the **EU enlargement** policy under Juncker's Commission coupled with the volatility in Macedonia mean that the evaluation of the European Commission's autumn enlargement package will be important to the V4 as an advocate of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans. The V4 must also continue to have a voice in other EU matters, especially the future of the cohesion policy, the migration crisis, transport infrastructure and the protection of the free movement of persons.

Another interesting topic for the Visegrad Group could be the **Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)**. V4 countries may find points of reference in areas such as energy diversification achieved by securing alternative imports from the USA, or in the application of the TTIP as a means of updating existing bilateral investment protection agreements with the USA. Common interests thus identified could be advocated in both talks with the USA and in the establishment of EU priorities during internal dialogue on this treaty.

The Visegrad cooperation agenda has become much more **Europeanised** over the last decade. Of the key CZ V4 PRES topics discussed above, the digital agenda, the Eastern Partnership and energy are areas covered almost exclusively within the framework of the EU. Furthermore, the key defence cooperation project is the EU Battlegroup. Representatives of European institutions are standing guests of Visegrad meetings. V4 Prime Ministers meet ahead of the European Council and state secretaries for European affairs are engaged in extensive mutual communication. The Visegrad brand is **readily recognised in the EU and the V4 wields influence in EU negotiations**.

The expansion of the **V4+ format** over the past few presidencies has served as a vehicle to consolidate the V4's political importance and has been instrumental in efficiently forming coalitions within the EU. On the other hand, these V4+ meetings increasingly **weighed down the presidency agenda** without always yielding specific results. New V4+ formats should be bottom-up initiatives (from the heads of relevant departments or policy directors), and a clear agenda setting out defined benefits for V4 countries should be drawn up for the political level of negotiations. The quest for new opportunities for V4+ formats should rely on the joint (micro-)initiatives of Visegrad ambassadors in countries of potential interest.

Our recommendations by no means cover the entire agenda of Visegrad cooperation, which more or less encompasses all ministries. We have only presented those areas which are of crucial importance to the V4 or in which the CZ V4 PRES could make greater progress than that to which it has committed in its programme. Despite its hordes of doubters, the V4 remains a fixture in the Central European area and will be celebrating its **25th anniversary** in February.



## ASSOCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (AMO)

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