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The Visegrad Group

*Lessons from the Benelux, Nordic and Baltic Formats
for Regional Cooperation*

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Executive Summary

- This paper aims to produce lessons for the future development of the Visegrad Group format for regional cooperation, based on the examples of other similar formats and in accordance with its own distinctive features.
- It identifies several strengths of the Visegrad format: repeatedly adapting to external and internal shocks, amplifying its members' voices on an international level and helping achieve their concrete goals, especially within the European Union, fostering cooperation and (limited) integration among its members, and serving as a framework to strengthen relations with other states both within and beyond the European Union.
- The paper also outlines several weaknesses of the Visegrad Group: having recurring difficulties in finding the common ground which is vital for the format's efficacy, being perceived by many observers as a regressive and defensive actor within the European Union, and remaining largely unknown to its citizens.
- It is recommended to consider establishing an advisory parliamentary body of the Visegrad Group, as a tool to facilitate the cooperation among the Group's members, promote the Group as a democratic actor both abroad and at home, and serve as a focal point for cooperation with other international parliamentary bodies.
- Additionally, it is recommended to explore the possibility of deepening the integration among Visegrad states through a bottom-up approach to individual cooperation, to be potentially combined with institutional integration in a number of areas.
- Finally, the Three Seas Initiative is briefly assessed as an emerging format of cooperation in a broadly-defined Central Europe.

The Visegrad Group: Lessons from the Benelux, Nordic and Baltic Formats for Regional Cooperation

Policy Paper – Bisser Angelov, June 2020

While the European Union has gradually expanded to become arguably the most significant format of regional cooperation, especially in terms of economic, cultural and political power, under closer examination it becomes clear that the Union itself is home to a number of smaller scale formats for cooperation. These have served a variety of purposes, from pursuing deeper integration for economic and social benefits, through cultivating a common regional identity, to giving a louder voice to smaller countries on the international arena and, increasingly, within a growing European Union. Often such partnerships have been created with one of those goals in mind and have later developed to include others, establishing additional institutions and reforming existing ones along the way. This paper will have two goals: firstly, it will attempt to provide a condensed overview and assessment of the historic foundations, past and present institutional setups, achievements and failures, and priorities of the Benelux, Nordic and Baltic formats for regional cooperation. These have been selected based on their perceived success and the relevance they hold as examples for the Visegrad Group. The second goal of the paper will be to examine the Group in greater detail and attempt to generate lessons from the other three formats which could be successfully applied to it, in order to convert its significant potential into tangible benefits for its members and the Group as a whole.

The Benelux Union

The members of the Benelux Union have a long shared history, although much of it before the 20th century was antagonistic rather than cooperative. (Valtchev, 2018) This changed with the turn of the century and the two world wars as Belgium and Luxembourg moved towards an economic union in 1921 (Valtchev, 2018) and further with the signing of the Monetary Agreement by the three governments in exile in 1943, followed by the signing of the Customs Agreement in 1944 – often considered as the beginning of Benelux. (Cogen, The Benelux Union, 2015) What followed was a series of rapid agreements and treaties which expanded economic cooperation, especially by liberalising movement of capital (1954) and labour (1956), alongside the establishment of a number of administrative councils in the 1940s and the Inter-parliamentary Consultative Council in 1955, culminating with the Benelux Economic Union Treaty signed in 1958, for a period of 50 years. Throughout that time, the Union continued to deepen its integration and institutionalise it through the establishment of a number of bodies. As the treaty inspired, a new one was signed in 2008 which gave the union a new name – Benelux Union – and set a number of priorities for further cooperation.

The Benelux Union has a complex institutional setup. Its main political body is the **Committee of Ministers**, composed of one minister from each member state, according to the matter under discussion; it typically convenes every 2 months in the MFA constellation, as well as in other compositions as necessary. (Valtchev, 2018) It decides by unanimity and is responsible for adopting the budget, the multiannual framework, the annual working programme, the annual report and overall guidelines. (Cogen, 2015) The Committee can use four legal instruments: it can adopt decisions which are immediately binding for the governments, conclude additional treaties between the three states which then have to be approved by their parliaments, make non-binding recommendations, and issue directives to the other bodies. (*ibid.*) The **Benelux Council**, composed of high-ranking civil servants from the three states, creates specialised work groups and commissions, advises the Committee of Ministers and prepares and implements its decisions. The **Benelux Parliament**, composed

of 21 Dutch, 21 Belgium and 7 Luxembourgish members of the national parliaments, provides recommendations and aims to make proposed measures easier to pass in national parliaments; the work of its plenary sessions is prepared by seven permanent committees. It also serves as a point of contact with other inter-parliamentary institutions, e.g. the Nordic Council and Baltic Assembly. (*ibid.*) The **Secretariat General**, the only body whose members work full-time for Benelux, has power of initiative in drafting the annual budget and proposing a working programme. It also assists the Council, the Committee of Ministers and the Court. Finally, the **Court of Justice**, composed of 9 judges – three from the highest court of each member state – and 3 advocates general, arbitrates on the interpretation and implementation of Union norms and, less often, on disputes between Benelux and its civil servants.

In terms of achievements of the Benelux Union, the one which stands out through its history is the successful promotion of European integration by “testing” planned steps of integration within the Benelux format first. This goal has been inherent to the project since its inception and continues to be a key goal of Benelux, as demonstrated by Article 2 of the Benelux Union Treaty of 2008 which explicitly states its role as “precursor within the EU”. (Benelux Union, 2008) In that regard, Benelux’ implementation of a custom union, followed by an economic union with coordinated economic, trade and financial policies as well as free movement of capital, labour, goods and services have to be seen as major successes, as all of these steps have later been implemented at the European level. (Cogen, *The Benelux Union*, 2015) While the “wish to remain a driver of European integration” is still part of the 2017-2020 Benelux Programme (Benelux Union, 2017) its goals have had to evolve in order to remain ahead of the EU. The latest Programme has put sustainability and digitalisation at the front, envisioning both of them at a crucial intersection between security (in its broadest sense) and economic development. (*ibid.*) The Programme also lists a number of policy areas in which integration will be pursued, including the labour market, transport, single market, tax fraud prevention, justice and disaster response. Progress is made through a number of specific projects, defined by the Annual Plans; on average 130 of them are implemented yearly. (Valtchev, 2018) Examples of recent successes include the strong integration of the Benelux labour market, which as of 2017 housed 37% of the cross-border workers of the EU, as well as of the healthcare system, which has led to over 200 000 patients per year using healthcare in a bordering country. (Benelux Union, 2017) Another recent success can be seen in protection, as police officers have gained access to each other’s database, frequently conduct common trainings, have communication with other countries’ police departments and are able to continue pursuits and conduct investigations across borders; such a level of integration is being pursued within other public response units, including fire protection and emergency medical services.

While Benelux has achieved many of its previous goals and keeps setting ambitious new ones, some scholars claim to have noticed cracks appearing within the project. They argue that while Benelux had an important role in spearheading the European integration project, it was later eclipsed by the EU as it could no longer provide additional value, declining in relevance. (Blockmans, 2017) A revival of Benelux is seen in the 1990s in the form of a platform for political cooperation instead of an increasingly integrated union; however, it is claimed that this initiative is also failing because of a widening disaccord between the Netherlands’ vision of a minimalist European Union based purely on pragmatism and the Belgian desire for a federalist European Union as an extension of Belgium’s own political and administrative structures. In addition to this, Belgium and Luxembourg are said to be natural proponents of the institutionalisation of the EU because its institutions are strongly concentrated in the two countries and, as a result, boost their economies; however, such a consideration also positions the two as competitors who are fighting to increase the EU’s presence in their own capital, thus

destabilising the Benelux Union itself. The conclusion is that as European integration has progressed and the Benelux states have diverged in their support for the European project, Benelux itself has been reduced from an increasingly integrated union to only a geographic, economic and cultural grouping. (*ibid.*) Of course, in light of the tangible successes which the union has achieved in recent years as noted above, such an argument is difficult to accept fully. However, it does provide an interesting perspective in terms of potential difficulties which could arise within a regional union, even in one as old and integrated as Benelux.

Nordic Cooperation

The roots of Nordic cooperation lie deep. The region settled into a peaceful co-existence of five independent states in the early 19th century – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. (Archer & Joenniemi, 2003) The Scandinavist movement of the mid-19th century was critical for developing a pan-nationalism in the form of “nordism” and leading to the foundation of a number of Nordic and Scandinavian associations, followed by a gradual formalisation of political cooperation between the five states from the early 20th century. (Strang, 2016) This bottom-up process of establishing cooperation is key to understanding the Nordic union, as it has become the norm for its continuous integration as well. Still, the establishment of a defence union proved fruitless both before and after WW2; so too did the attempts to create an economic or customs union throughout the 50s and 60s. However, an inter-parliamentary body was established in 1952 in the form of the Nordic Council, followed by an agreement on a common labour market, a convention on social security and a Nordic passport union being signed within a decade. All of this culminated in the signing of the Helsinki Treaty in 1962, establishing cooperation in the economic, social, cultural and legal areas, as well as in environmental protection, transportation and communication. A distinctive factor in the history of Nordic cooperation is the fact that its members are not all in the European Union and, what is more, those who are have joined it at different times.

One of the two main bodies of the Nordic regional partnership is the **Nordic Council** – a parliamentary assembly which is composed of 87 deputies, 20 each from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, and 7 from Iceland. The members are elected by the party groups in the national parliaments. The Council’s annual budget is around €4.5 million. It gathers twice a year – for one ordinary and one theme session – and has the power to initiate proposals and give advice to the members’ governments on matters relating to cooperation between some or all of them. Government representatives also attend the Council’s meetings. The Council’s executive body is the Presidium, consisting of the President and a number of members of the Council; it is elected every autumn. The other main body for Nordic cooperation is the **Nordic Council of Ministers**, established in 1971. Its yearly budget is around €125 million. It exists in a number of compositions – currently 11. In its Prime Minister composition it meets annually, as well as before other meetings such as EU summits; additionally, meetings in its other compositions are held as necessary. The Council of Ministers takes decisions regarding the cooperation among the Nordic states and between the Nordic States and the Nordic Council. Its decisions are taken by unanimity and are binding on each country, unless they require parliamentary approval according to the constitution of a member state. In that case the decision is not binding for any state before it is approved by all parliaments. (Cogen, 2015) While Nordic cooperation is formally led by the prime ministers, *de facto* this role is delegated to the Ministers of Nordic Cooperation of each state, who further delegate this role to

the Nordic Committee for Cooperation which meets 8 to 10 times per year.¹ In addition to these two bodies, Nordic cooperation in specific areas is led by separate institutions. Perhaps most notably, Nordic cooperation in the field of finances is led by several financial institutions. These are the **Nordic Environment Finance Corporation** (NEFCO), which focuses on projects aiming to reduce environmental pollution in Eastern European states bordering the Nordic region; the **Nordic Development Fund** (NDF), which was established to fund projects for social and economic development in developing countries and pivoted its purpose in 2009 towards funding climate-related projects; the **Nordic Project Fund** (NOPEF) which funds the expansion of small- and medium-sized Nordic enterprises which offer green solutions; and the **Nordic Investment Bank** (NIB). A separate entity was also established in 2009 to serve as a comprehensive framework for Nordic Defence Cooperation, known as the **NORDEFECO**, which convenes twice a year at the political level (Ministers of Defence) and twice a year at the highest military level (Chiefs of Defence). Separate political and military committees steer respectively the policy coordination and Armed Forces cooperation.

In order to understand the successes of Nordic cooperation, it is important to underline their sources. Firstly, the region has managed to achieve a strong cultural identity based on shared values for democracy and a strong welfare state, common political landscape and three mutually intelligible languages being spoken by virtually everyone – Norwegian, Danish and Swedish. Secondly, Nordic countries have a remarkably decentralised political structure with strong local governments and where even voluntary associations have considerable political influence. (Strang, 2016) Thirdly, formal integration has often been difficult to achieve. These three factors have led to a unique bottom-up approach which has been based on the creation of new or expansion of existing forms of cooperation in highly specific areas, often through semi-independent institutions. (Olesen & Strang, 2016) Some examples from the last three decades include the Nordic Research Council, established in 2005 and with an annual budget of around €15 million; the Nordic TV and Film Fund, established in 1990 and with a €4 million budget; Nordic Energy Research Institute, established in 1999 and with a €1 million budget; and a number of Nordic offices, institutes and culture centres spread throughout the region, which receive budgets in the range of a €0.3 to €2 million per year. (Cogen, 2015) Such institutions have undoubtedly helped in strengthening informal Nordic cooperation, visible in the organisation of political parties, labour unions, sports clubs, voluntary associations and many other formations which all engage in some form of Nordic cooperation. (*ibid.*) The Nordic partnership has also produced successes on an international level, as some of its regional initiatives have expanded abroad, such as the Nord Pool power exchange and the Nordic swan ecolabel. Perhaps most importantly, Nordic cooperation has strengthened the so-called *Nordic Model* of governance based on strong democracy, a universal welfare state, social and gender equality and international solidarity, benefiting its citizens and promoting the model worldwide through its own success.

That being said, Nordic cooperation has also faced failures. As stated above, attempts at increasing formal integration have often been unsuccessful. Its current format is also sometimes criticised, specifically in that its parliamentary assembly's powers are too limited and its main tool, the recommendation, is often ignored, turning this body into a glorified wining and dining club. (Cogen, 2015) That being said, the assembly is also the most popular body so perhaps its budget is worth it in terms of promotion of Nordic cooperation. Another criticism targets the Council of Minister's operation based on unanimity, claiming that it is

¹ As per the official website of Nordic Cooperation. Accessed April 17, 2020. Available at: <https://www.norden.org/en/information/about-nordic-committee-co-operation-nsk>.

slow and inefficient. Alternative principles of operation are being explored. For example, NORDEFECO doesn't require unanimity to take decisions but allows countries to participate and invest in it only to the extent that they want to. Finally, Nordic cooperation faced an existential issue in the 90s, following Finland and Sweden's accession into the EU, which turned interest away from regional cooperation. (*ibid.*) However, the Nordic partnership proved resistant largely thanks to its foundation on a common identity, which was left unaffected by this change, and also through a successful pivot towards a partnership based on social and cultural integration, and on the development of sustainable solutions both internally and abroad – areas in which it could remain ahead of the European Union and provide significant added value, while promoting the Nordic brand. These are the objectives of Nordic Cooperation outlined in its work plan for 2020-2024².

Baltic Cooperation

Like the Benelux and Nordic partnerships, the Baltic one is based on roots much deeper than its formal institutions. It can be traced back to the Treaty on Concord and Cooperation signed by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in 1934 with the purpose of coordinating the countries' foreign policy and serving as a platform for political and diplomatic cooperation in international matters. (Cogen, 2015) The modern basis of the partnership is found in the cooperation of the three countries' independence movements of the late 1980s. (Baltic Assembly) In May of 1989 the Baltic Parliamentary Group was established to represent the Baltics as a single entity at the USSR Congress of People's Deputies. (*ibid.*) In July the Baltic Council was formed as a decision-making body for the Baltic independence movement which started an intensive diplomatic effort both within the USSR and the West; its most memorable act was the organisation of the Baltic Chain, an event symbolising the essence of Baltic union. Key points in the development of formalised Baltic cooperation were the establishment of the Baltic Assembly, the parliamentary body of the union, in 1991 and of the Baltic Council of Ministers in 1994. A major milestone in the alliance was the 2004 entry of the Baltic States in NATO and the EU which was followed by long discussions on the future of Baltic cooperation and led to reforms of its format and agenda in the period of 2005-2007. (Baltic Assembly)

The **Baltic Assembly** is one of the main bodies of Baltic cooperation. It consists of one national delegation per member state; those have 12 to 16 members each, elected by and from the national parliamentarians. (Cogen, 2015) Regular sessions are held once per year, with the option of having additional extraordinary ones. Members of the Assembly have power to initiate proposals which are then evaluated by the standing committees. (Baltic Assembly) There are currently six such committees, specialised in specific areas, with the possibility of creating *ad hoc* ones if necessary. In addition, interest groups can be formed within the Assembly in order to stimulate cross-national cooperation on specific issues. Those have to include at least 3 members from each national delegation. The Assembly makes the final decision by a unanimous choice in each national delegation has one vote. Adopted documents are submitted to the **Council of Ministers** (CoM), which is the other main body of Baltic cooperation. It convenes in two main formats. First, the Prime Ministers' council which meets annually and provides guidance for Baltic cooperation. Second, the Council of the foreign affairs ministers, also known as the "Cooperation Council" which approves the priorities and adopts the annual action plan for the CoM, as well as preparing the meetings of the Prime

² As per the official website of Nordic Cooperation. Accessed April 18, 2020. Available at: <https://www.norden.org/en/declaration/our-vision-2030>.

Ministers. (Cogen, 2015) The CoM also works with a number of expert committees of senior officials focused on specific areas. Decisions of the CoM are taken by consensus and, as long as they are within constitutional requirements of all three member states, are binding.

Undoubtedly the greatest success of Baltic cooperation has been the achievement of the main goals of the Baltic States', i.e. becoming independent and expelling foreign troops from their territories in the 1990s and entering NATO and the EU in the 2000s. What should also be underlined is the partnership's flexibility, as it has managed to successfully reorient itself after both achievements, in terms of finding new common goals and fruitful formats of cooperation to attain them. A key component in these successes has been the cooperation with other regional partnerships which has been made much easier by the existence of the Baltic Assembly and Baltic Council of Ministers as representative bodies of the alliance. Specifically the Benelux Union and Nordic Council have been close partners since the inception of Baltic cooperation, serving as the inspiration for its institutional organisation and subsequently as its main partners on the international arena. (Baltic Assembly) Conferences between the three partnerships' parliamentary bodies have been occurring semi-regularly since 2001. (Baltic Assembly) Meetings at the highest executive level of the three groups have also been held regularly in order to coordinate common goals and actions, e.g. towards the development of a digital single market. (Vahtla, 2017) It is perhaps no coincidence that in this field, in which the states from the Nordic and Benelux partnerships are clear leaders, the Baltic States have become the most developed members of the former Eastern Bloc. (European Commission, 2019) In addition to this, deep cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic partnerships has developed in many areas. This cooperation, called the NB8 format (Nordic-Baltic 8), is presided over by one member state at a time, on a rotating basis. The presidency is currently held by Estonia for 2020. One practical example of the NB8 cooperation is the fact that the Baltic States have become members and shareholders of the Nordic Investment Bank since 2005. (NIB, 2020) Another success of the Baltic partnership is its relation with GUAM (the Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova format). The Baltic Assembly is the most consistent international partner of the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly³, this time in the role of the more Westernised partner, offering guidance to other former USSR states. This strong relationship has given the Baltic States certain leverage in the context of the EU Eastern Partnership.

The Baltic Assembly has developed a comprehensive programme for its short-term goals, both as a single body and in the framework of the various partnerships it holds with other international bodies. (Baltic Assembly, 2019) On its own, its priorities are in the field of defence and security, energy and transport connections, and regional networks for research and education; in the context of its cooperation with the Baltic CoM, it will additionally focus on cyber cooperation, climate change and the environment, and culture and healthcare. The Baltic Assembly has also outlined separate sets of priorities for working with the Nordic Council and the Benelux Assembly, both of which target climate change and the environment, defence and security, energy, transport and infrastructure, and energy, with some additional areas for each partnership. Its priorities with regards to cooperation with the GUAM Assembly lie in security cooperation (especially in terms of organised crime, human trafficking, conflict resolution and cybersecurity), employee social security and informal labour, energy, enhancing democracy, exchanging EU membership campaign practices and education.

³ As per the official website of the GUAM Organisation for Democracy and Development. Accessed April 20, 2020. Available at: <https://guam-organization.org/en/guam-and-baltic-assembly/>.

Visegrad Group

While the members of the Visegrad Group (V4 for short) have a long history of interaction, the roots of their partnership as independent states are rather recent. The alliance can trace its history to the April 1990 Bratislava meeting on potential future cooperation, convened by Czechoslovakia's Václav Havel and attended by Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia and Italy, which was followed by the establishment of the Group on February 1991. (Fawn, 2013) While frequent, if not systematic, meetings at various ministerial levels led to certain successes in its first years, the leadership of Czechia and Slovakia under PM Klaus and PM Mečiar quickly turned to individual priorities rather than cooperation, leading many outside observers to pronounce the Group dead by the mid-90s; however, following changes in leadership, Visegrad II launched in 1999. (ibid.) The 2004 EU entry of the V4 members was also thought by many to signal the end of the Group, however, it only represented a change in its goals, as EU membership provided a number of new areas in which common action would be needed, alongside a rekindled desire for cooperation within the Group, with other (regional) states and with international organisation, as per the Kroměříž Guidelines of 2004⁴. (Bauerová, 2018)

In terms of institutional setup, the official website of the Visegrad Group claims that cooperation is not institutionalised in any manner, however, this statement could be considered partly inaccurate. Visegrad cooperation has certain set practices such as regularised meetings at the presidential, (prime) ministerial and other levels, alongside a rotating V4 presidency which prepares a presidency programme and ends with an annual assessment report; the programme itself has also grown considerably, from the few paragraphs of the first one in 2000/01 until the last three which have ranged from 30 to 41 pages. So while there is no secretariat or interparliamentary body, the Group operates in a substantially formalised framework. This setup has been praised for its flexibility, as it has allowed the Group to scale down to just procedural meetings or work in the so-called 3+1 or 2+2 formats in times of misalignment while keeping the door open for cooperation to increase when its members' views and goals realign, as has happened multiple times. (Cabada, 2018)

The success of the Visegrad Group has to be measured according to the goals it has set. Its continued existence can be counted as an achievement in itself and should not be taken for granted, considering the multiple "perceived deaths" mentioned above. The Group's original goals of entering NATO and the EU have also been achieved. Since then, the V4 has pivoted its role and has become a platform for the coordination of its members' positions on key issues with the purpose of having a single, louder, voice in EU negotiations. The Group has been overall successful at this. One example is the launching of the Eastern Partnership – as Czechia had long wanted to modernise the European Neighbourhood Policy, it used the V4 first to formulate a new proposal, the product of a trans-national collaboration of V4 think tanks, NGOs and policymakers between 2006 and 2008, and then to gather support for that proposal from the Baltic States, Germany and Austria before putting it on the table. (Schneider, 2008) The Czech proposal was followed by one from Poland and Sweden which was endorsed by the European Commission in late 2008 (Neuman, 2015) leading to the launch of the Eastern Partnership at the Prague summit of 2009. During the same period, while Czechia held the EU presidency, it managed to partially achieve another shared goal of the V4 – improving the energy security of the CEE region. While the V4 didn't succeed in creating a common

⁴ Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412>, on the official website of the Visegrad Group, alongside the Kroměříž Declaration, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/declaration-of-prime>.

European external energy plan, to accompany the internal one, it managed to secure European funding for a number of energy projects to enhance the region's interconnectivity. (Neuman, 2016) Similarly, the V4 managed to promote its priorities in the area of transport infrastructure and achieve a more balanced approach for its planning and funding on an EU level, instead of one based on population density. (Fawn, 2013) During its own EU presidency, Hungary managed to successfully promote the EU Framework for National Roma Integration which was particularly important for the V4 states. (Bauerová, 2018) Looking at such achievements, it is clear that the V4 as a format has allowed its members to be policy influencers in the EU, especially while they hold the EU presidency, on the condition that they share a common view on the issue at hand. What is more, the Group can even serve to successfully promote national interests on the European level as long as one V4 member can convince the others that their priorities align, as was the case with the Czech proposals for the EaP and energy policy.

Another success of the Group has been the V4+ format, which brings additional actors as temporary partners. The format was of particular use for the Visegrad states' timely entry in Schengen, as it was used first in a V4+Benelux composition in 2002-03, leading to the signing of the Schengen Agreement in 2003; (Bauerová, 2018) later it was used again to prevent a delay in the countries' entry, through a V4+ meeting with the Portuguese PM Jose Socrates just before Portugal assumed the EU presidency. (Fawn, 2013) The V4+ format was later, in 2010, expanded in the form of supplementary mini-summits, which have been held regularly by the V4 before European summits in order to coordinate their policy with and promote it to other European Member States from the CEE region.

The V4 has also been successful in other areas of cooperation. The platform was an important driver of the establishment and 2016 deployment of the Visegrad Battlegroup, which can serve as an example of increased cooperation of the V4 in the sphere of defence; what is, more the group was redeployed again in the second half of 2019, showing that this cooperation can continue over the long run. (Ušiak, 2018) Of course, credit should also be given to the EU for its support of this initiative. Another area of success has been education and research, thanks to the one institution of the V4 – the International Visegrad Fund. It has proven valuable in helping policy-makers understand the role of the V4 itself and fostering academic cooperation within the Group (Fawn, 2013), as well as strengthening cooperation with neighbouring countries e.g. through the Visegrad scholarship for students aimed especially at Ukraine and Russia after the establishment of the Eastern Partnership (Bauerová, 2018) and even helping in cultivating academic relations with countries as distant as China. (Zuokui, 2016) Finally, the Visegrad Group, through its established relations with non-EU member states in the CEE region and especially Ukraine, as well as its own successful experience with transitioning from a communist regime to a liberal democracy, has managed to leverage a strong position within the EU with regards to the Eastern Partnership. (Fawn, 2013; Bauerová, 2018)

Having listed some of the successes of the Visegrad Group, it is important to examine its failures as well, in order to identify potential areas to improve. The Group's ability to influence EU policy hinges on alignment within the V4, however, the latter is often difficult to achieve. Some analysts have even said that we cannot see disagreement as an anomaly when it has been a regular feature of the Group since its inception. (Bauerová, 2018) The view that the V4 states are as much partners as they are fierce competitors who often struggle to find common ground is also not uncommon. (Kuźelewska, Bartnicki, & Skarzyński, 2015; Bauerová, 2018; Zuokui, 2016) Typically, the V4 itself should be the platform to achieve such alignment, however, the question has to be posed if the flexibility of the format makes it too tempting to avoid difficult areas of cooperation instead of forcing the members to find compromises; and, if that

is the case, could a different format lead to more cooperation? The Visegrad Group also has an image problem – in recent years the project has been presented in Western Europe, largely due to its stance during the migration crisis and the controversial constitutional moves of Hungary and Poland, as a regressive one, more focused on blocking European progress than contributing constructively. (Cabada, 2018) True or not, this view has been adopted by many observers of and participants in the policy process – according to the EU Coalition Explorer survey of people working in think tanks, governments, politics and media throughout the EU, Visegrad members hold 3 of the bottom 4 positions when it comes to commitment to deeper EU integration, as visible in Fig. 1 and 2 of the Annex. (ECFR, 2018) To be sure, the survey has some methodological shortcomings, such as the overrepresentation of members of think tanks and governments compared to other politics-related professionals (80% vs. 20%) as well as overrepresentation of professionals in the field of foreign policy who accounted for 47% of all professional respondents. That being said, it provides valuable insights into many facets of professional and public opinions on EU coalition building. It reveals a substantial divide within the whole V4 between public preference for decision-making at the European level rather than the regional or national (respectively 63% versus 18% and 12%) and governmental preference for decision-making at the regional and national level instead of the European (respectively 28% and 23% versus 42%), shown in Fig. 3 of the Annex. Preference for decision-making at the national level is detrimental to the V4 format, as the Group is most useful at the regional and European level. Looking at individual countries, it becomes clear that this divide between public and governmental preferences is much stronger in Hungary and Poland than it is in Czechia and Slovakia, also shown in Fig. 3 of the Annex. In another section of the survey, professionals ranked the most disappointing coalition partners of their own country. In Czechia, 25% of respondents claimed either Poland or Hungary as their most disappointing partner; in Slovakia this number was 28%. Neither Czechia nor Slovakia were seen as particularly disappointing partners by Hungarian and Polish respondents. While these results shouldn't be overstated, they can be seen as a sign of a gap within the V4 that has to be bridged in order to avoid further operation in the weaker 2+2 format. Finally, analysts have also argued that a Visegrad regional identity is sorely lacking among the people (Cabada, 2018) and public surveys show that the majority of Visegrad citizens are not aware of the “Visegrad Group”, shown in Fig. 4, Annex. (Fawn, 2013; Gyárfašová & Mesežnikov, 2016) That being said, it is not evident what these numbers should be compared to, as some international organisations are vastly more popular than others, e.g. the EU compared to the OECD or OSCE.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The European Union has become the home of multiple regional partnerships with varying goals and institutional setups. As a younger one, the Visegrad Group has the opportunity to look at how other formats have developed and take lessons in order to maximise its own potential as a regional power which, in a European Union which continues to expand within the CEE and Balkan regions, is undoubtedly high. There is ample evidence to show that the V4 has the capacity to influence European policy, strengthen regional cooperation and integration both within and beyond its borders and promote its own “brand” as long as it works as a united bloc, however, given its the multiple near-death experiences this capacity should not be taken for granted. The Group should consider establishing a parliamentary body. While it would be a bold departure from its rejection of institutions, this could provide a number of important benefits. Firstly, studies show that international parliamentary bodies, even when they have only advisory (i.e. very limited) powers, help in finding potential areas for cooperation and subsequently in finding compromise positions within those areas; (Verdoes, 2019) both key

requirements for the maximisation of the Group's potential. Secondly, such a body would help in reducing the considerable gap between public and government preference for decision-making at the national, regional or EU level, as it would allow representation of a wider spectrum of elected parties, even if only in an advisory role. Thirdly, as seen from the Nordic Council, such a body is very effective as the face of a cooperation format and can boost its popularity among citizens. What is more, it gives democratic legitimacy to the format (*ibid.*) which could improve the V4's image not only at home but also abroad, alleviating another notable issue. Fourthly, when looking at the strong cooperation between the Benelux, Nordic, Baltic and GUAM parliamentary bodies, it is clear that those can serve as an efficient platform for cultivating international cooperation. The V4 would also benefit from the examples of over 30 such international parliamentary bodies which exist worldwide as of 2014, (*ibid.*) allowing the Group to assess their various specificities and design a format which would suit it best.

Other than establishing such a body, there is little to be recommended to strengthen the V4's role in international institutions, as its main limitation lies within the coordination of the Group's members, not its format. However, there is ample opportunity to deepen integration within the V4. In addition to educating the public on Visegrad cooperation, this could include a bottom-up approach to building a common identity, following the Nordic partnership's example. It would be based on expanding the IVF further and promoting informal cooperation of voluntary associations, sports clubs, schools, etc. A more ambitious form of integration could be inspired by the Benelux union in the form of building a framework for shared crisis response, integrating justice and home affairs and perhaps even establishing a framework to boost labour market integration. While this would require a mentality shift in this region which has become infamous for its inner competitiveness, it could lead to social and economic benefits for its citizens and therefore merits to be examined.

Finally, it is important to keep track of supplementary or, depending on the view, alternative projects appearing in the region. This occurrence can be attributed to multiple factors. For one, unlike the other partnerships explored in this paper the V4 doesn't encapsulate a whole region and there are multiple CEE states which have wanted to join it at various points of its history. Additionally, the Group's relatively informal approach to cooperation and lack of common identity have made it easier for its members to seek other partnerships, especially in times of disagreement, to serve as a supplement and/or provide leverage to that member within the V4 itself. Perhaps the most notable supplementary partnership has been the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) which includes the Visegrad Four, the three Baltic States, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. The TSI, launched by Poland and Croatia in 2016, outlined its initial priority as developing the transport and energy infrastructure connecting its member states via a North-South axis in order to bring more balance to a European infrastructure which, due to the gravity of the more developed West, has a core-periphery dynamic; the overarching goal is to boost its members' economies, increase trade and cooperation, attract foreign investment and provide energy security. (Górka, 2018) The TSI isn't inherently incompatible with the Visegrad project, especially in light of its innate weakness of having to find common ground in a group of 12 states with much more diverse interests than the V4. Still, it could change the dynamic within the V4 by giving Poland leverage. Observers have noted that Poland appears to be the natural leader of the TSI, drawing comparisons with the early 20th century Intermarium project. (Górka, 2018; Kurečić, 2018) What is more, the TSI has received the support of the USA, as Donald Trump attended its second summit in Warsaw in 2017; this support gives further leverage to Poland, especially in the context of a post-Brexit EU where Poland is now one of the closest EU allies of the USA. Furthermore, the TSI could potentially impact the EU by fostering an inner union of post-Eastern Bloc states in opposition to the "EU

core”, leading to a two-speed European Union, however, such a development is currently only hypothetical and relies on many factors. The opposite development, in which the TSI helps its member states in catching up to Western Europe, strengthening the EU in the process, is also a possibility and one which merits to be pursued. In any case, the TSI established its secretariat in March 2020. (TSI, 2020) It is clear that this format for cooperation is developing and institutionalising. “Towards what?” remains an open question for the time being.



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Annex

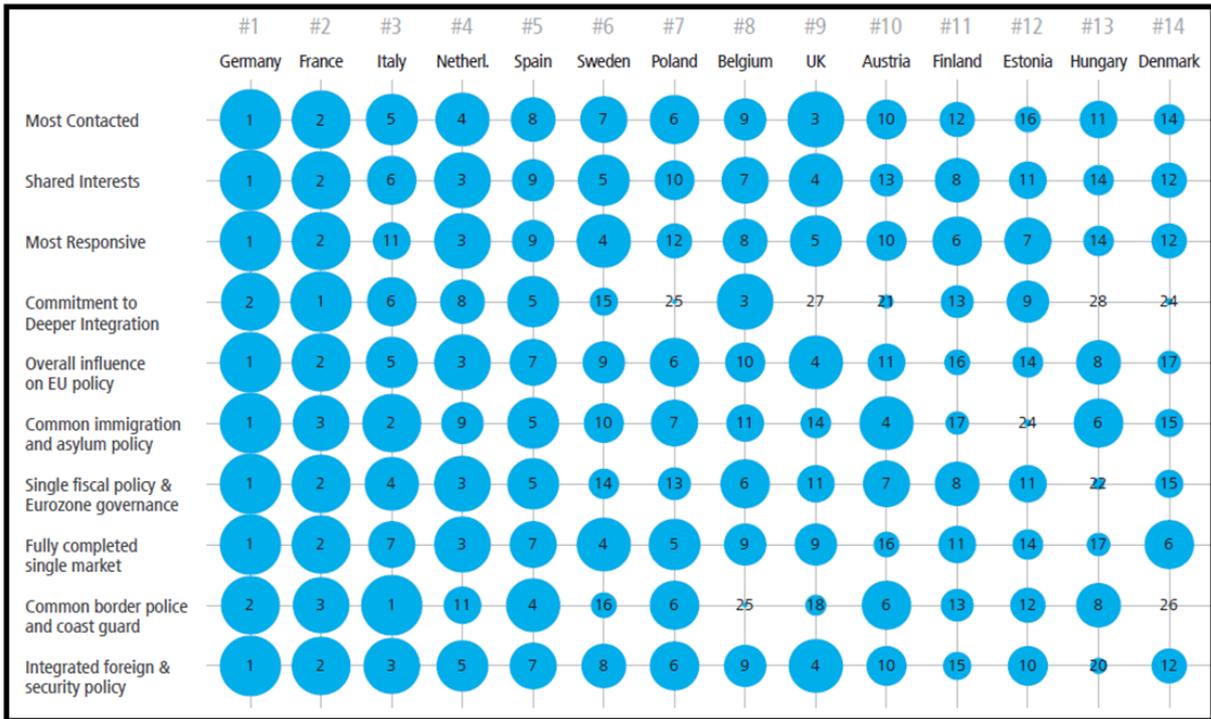
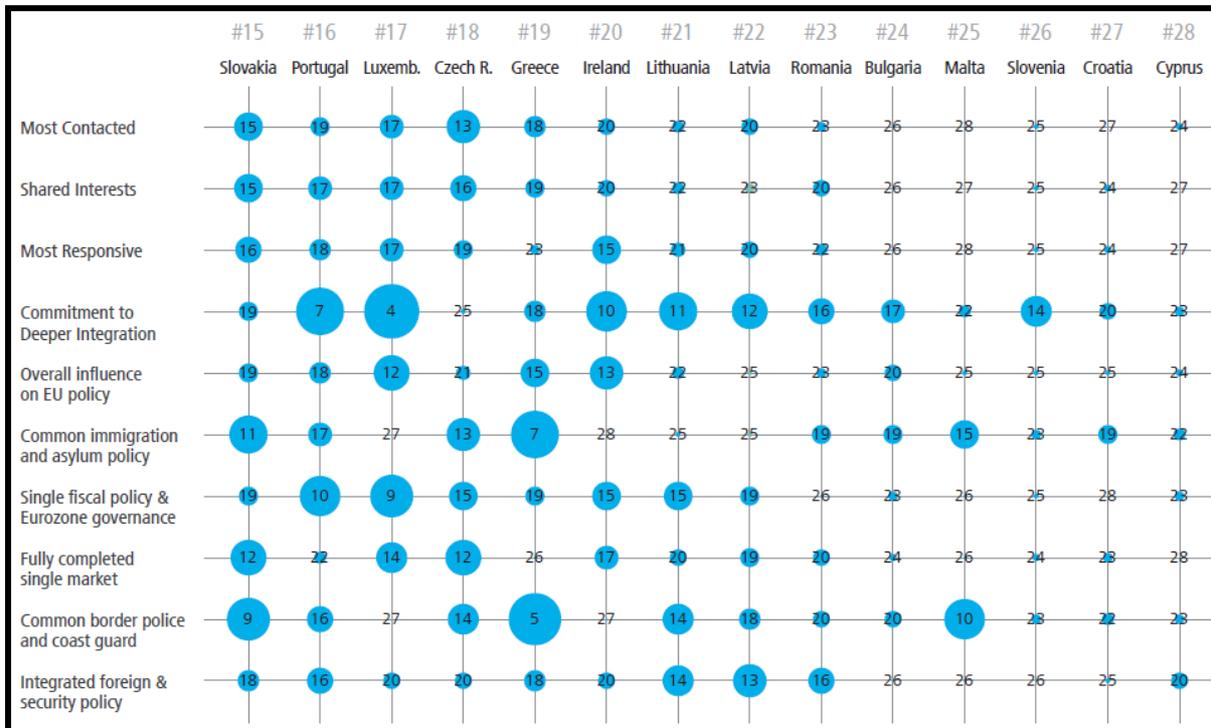


Fig. 1 (above) and 2 (below) provide an overall ranking of the “EU coalition potential” of all EU member states and further show the composites of this “coalition potential” each with a separate ranking from 1st to 28th. (ECFR, 2018)



	All EU members	Treaty-based group of countries	Informal group of countries	Only national level
V4 Professionals Perception of Government Preference (average)	42%	14%	14%	23%
V4 Public Preference (average)	63%	9%	9%	12%
Polish Professionals Perception of Government Preference	39%	9%	14%	28%
Polish Public Preference	64%	8%	9%	13%
Hungarian Professionals Perception of Government Preference	29%	11%	20%	33%
Hungarian Public Preference	65%	11%	9%	9%
Czech Professionals Perception of Government Preference	54%	15%	14%	14%
Czech Public Preference	57%	8%	9%	13%
Slovak Professionals Perception of Government Preference	46%	26%	9%	14%
Slovak Public Preference	59%	13%	8%	11%

Fig. 3 Public response to the question: “In the EU, who should mainly be responsible for the following policy projects?” Sample represents the citizens of the V4 Group as a whole and of its individual states.

Professional response to the question: “Which level of decision-making would your government prefer for the following list of European policy projects?” Sample represents the politics-related professionals of the V4 Group as a whole and of its individual states. Source: (ECFR, 2018)

Note: Additional information is available in the original dataset, including the answers to these questions for 18 separate policy areas. Presented here are the averages for all of these areas combined.

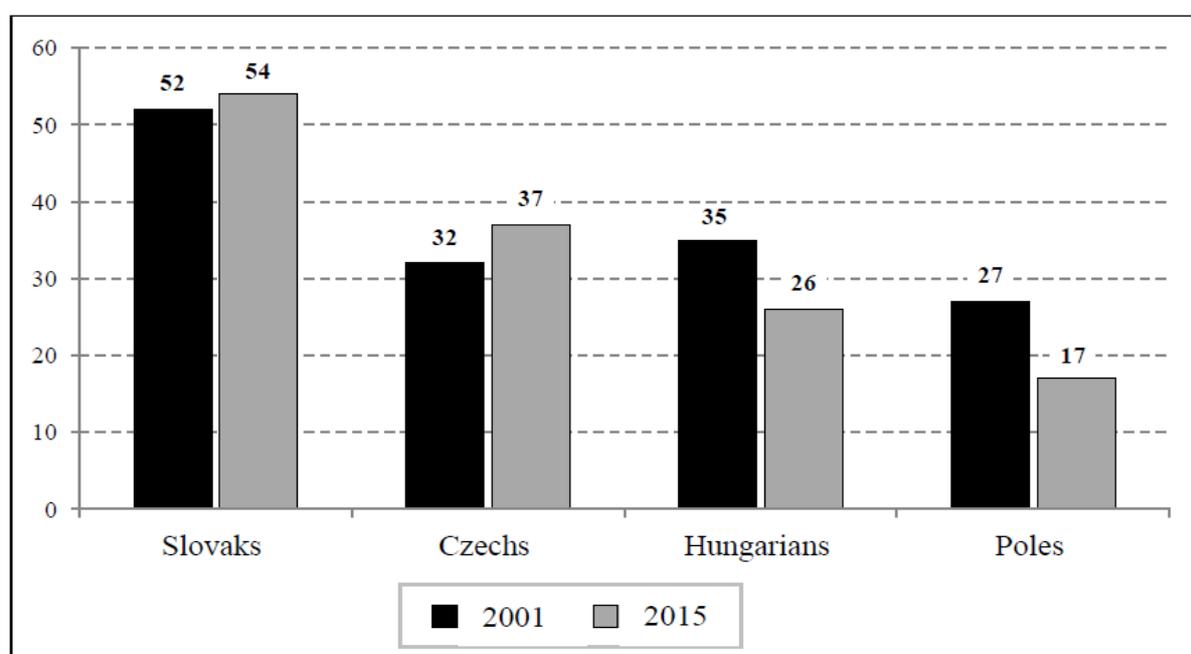


Fig. 4 Public response to the question “Have you heard about a group of countries, called Visegrad Four?” Source: (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2016)