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Ten years of Visegrad Cooperation in the European Union. A critical evaluation

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Abstract: This article analyzes V4 cooperation during the first ten years of EU membership of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The external dimension differs from the internal one. V4 was successful in external affairs like EU enlargement and EU neighborhood policies. In EU budget affairs, V4 was able to secure continued EU funding for the region's cohesion efforts and agricultural and rural development for the period 2014–2020. However, the picture is more varied regarding the internal dimension, especially the Europeanization of sector policies and closer coordination between V4 partners in single policy areas. V4 has had some success in technical, not overly politicized, policy areas, e.g. transportation and energy security. It is recommended that cooperation in the V4 format should go much further, in particular in monetary affairs and economic policies because of the similar economic profiles of the four members. The author concludes that V4 is too reluctant to construct a common Central European identity. This is why highly politicized issues are profoundly circumvented and cooperation has remained a formality.

In the first half of 2014 the *Journal of Common Market Studies* presented a special issue analyzing ten years of the European Union membership of eight East Central European states (ECE). The editors, Rachel Epstein and Wade Jacoby, state that EU membership of the eight, later ten, ECE countries has had an overwhelming impact on the economic field; however, the East–West divide has not yet been transcended. A second finding is that the impact of EU membership on political practice and democratic consolidation in ECE since the accession has overall been limited.¹ Likewise, *Europe–Asia Studies* assessed ECE accession to the EU. Paul Copeland comes to the conclusion that ECE states have merely been junior partners with little influence on EU affairs.²

The Visegrad Group (V4) has always been the core of the ECE states. The Visegrad format has been in place for more than twenty years. It is considered *the* Central European regional cooperation scheme by nearly all V4 politicians and many analysts. Hence, the assumption is that, under the leadership of V4 and partners, a united Central Europe could make its voice heard and its influence felt in EU affairs. In reality, this has rarely been the

¹ R. Epstein, W. Jacoby, “Eastern enlargement ten years on: transcending the East–West divide?,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* Vol. 52, No. 1, 2014, pp. 1–16, here pp. 1–3.

² P. Copeland, “Central and Eastern Europe. Negotiating influence in an enlarged European Union,” *Europe–Asia Studies* Vol. 66, No. 3, pp. 467–87, here pp. 483–4.

case. National approaches tend to prevail. V4's incoherence is the reason why the institution has had to listen to debates about the point of its mere existence ever since its inception. Furthermore, in 2014, the Bratislava based Central European Policy Institute ran a series of articles discussing whether "V4 ha[s] a future?"³ This article will first review V4 and the relevance of regional identity and cooperation, then it will separate the internal dimension of Visegrad cooperation from the external one. It will conclude with today's challenges and policy recommendations.

Visegrad Four, regional identity and cooperation

This section will briefly present Visegrad cooperation before and after 2004, then discuss Central European identity, and finally discuss the relevance of regional solidarity within the EU. The Visegrad Group was established in 1991. The aims, as stated in the Visegrad Declaration, were to fully establish democracy and freedom and a market economy, and secure integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.⁴ It had succeeded in this by 1999 and 2004. V4 can boast having strongly supported post-Mečiar Slovakia on its European and Western trajectory. The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) was founded in that period.

2004 saw a new Visegrad Declaration with EU accession of the four: the Kroměříž Declaration. V4 prime ministers agreed to "focus on regional activities and initiatives aimed at strengthening the identity of the Central European region." These are to be handled in a "flexible and open" way – hinting at the strong intergovernmental nature of the institution. Initiatives should be project oriented.⁵ This passage referred to the role of the IVF, whose annual budgets have considerably increased since (from one to seven million euros). V4 declared that it would open its format up to partners in the wider region. In terms of its agenda, V4 partners learned from past crises. They tacitly excluded nationally sensitive issues from their common agendas. Minority issues are a case in point, as are economic and monetary affairs. Hence, the focus shifted to more apolitical, technical agendas. The third and latest Visegrad Declaration, the Bratislava Declaration of 2011, reflected this change.⁶ V4 declared it would cooperate in energy and transport. It agreed to make a shared effort to secure continued EU financing in agricultural and cohesion policies. They were ultimately successful in this, with the 2014–2020 EU budget remaining stable in both areas. Finally, V4 declared it would strongly support further enlargement in Southeastern Europe and stress the importance of the EU's Eastern Partnership. These topics have indeed dominated the V4 agenda since the Bratislava Declaration.

Two questions should be asked in relation to a Central European identity. The first is: can Visegrad Four build on a common Central European identity? It can in some respects. V4 partners unanimously reject the experience of totalitarian rule and strongly believe in the positive roles civil society can take up. The IVF supports activities with this aim. It cannot in other respects. Historical memory in and between all four countries was often marked by

³ "A view on Central Europe I, II, III: Does the V4 have a future?," Central European Policy Institute, July 9, 14, and 16, 2014. Available online: <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/view-central-europe-does-v4-have-future>, <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/view-central-europe-does-v4-have-future-0>, and <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/view-central-europe-iii-does-v4-have-future-0> (accessed on July 29, 2014).

⁴ "Visegrad Declaration 1991," February 15, 1991. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412> (accessed on June 15, 2011).

⁵ "Visegrad Declaration 2004: Cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union," May 12, 2004. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1> (accessed on June 15, 2011).

⁶ "The Bratislava Declaration on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group," February 15, 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava> (accessed on June 15, 2011).

mutual competition or ignorance rather than cooperation.⁷ In addition, forceful actors from outside the region left their imprints. All this ceased to be the case in 1990. The fact that V4 and much of the wider region is developing into a single united European house is unprecedented. Mindsets change only slowly in this respect. The dominant narrative of contested histories is only slowly being replaced by the notion of sharing common histories.

Can Visegrad Four create a common Central European identity? Over time V4 countries can, but efforts (apart from IVF projects) have been more than reluctant so far. Only recently have V4 politicians established contacts with their Scandinavian counterparts, where a much stronger common identity exists. A glimpse at Nordic cooperation may help. The Nordic Council of Ministers established four distinct fundamental conditions and eight joint Nordic values (e.g. equality, short power distance, common work ethics, etc.) that are applicable to all members. For example, two fundamental conditions are that the Nordic countries understand each other's languages and that they have been using each other as primary frames of reference for many years.⁸ Thus a culture of joint cooperation has developed over time, from the ministerial level, through professional organizations, and today it encompasses many layers of civil society.⁹ More initiatives to promote this could be adopted in the V4 region in education and in the economy. Sharing information and acting together creates common identities over time and can help reduce dependencies from outside.

In what follows, this article will present the (ir-)relevance of regional solidarity within the EU. Geographical proximity implies that countries have similar interests. In addition to Visegrad, there is the Nordic and Benelux cooperation scheme and, in a different way, the Franco–German axis, which can form regional voting blocks in the Council of the European Union. However, “region” is only one of several variables that can explain the interests and voting behavior of a member state. In an earlier study, which analyzed EU15, Michael Kaeding and Torsten Selck observe the following patterns in the EU Council of Ministers: a “north versus south” coalition pattern and one of net contributors versus net receivers of EU subsidies.¹⁰ North versus South and contributor versus recipient may indicate that geography is a relevant variable, but the authors argue that decision-making is based more on culture and less on geography, although both factors are related: “Geographical proximity is often associated with shared cultural traits.”¹¹ Region as a variable brings mixed results. In this study Scandinavian countries showed very similar voting behaviour, but the Benelux countries did not.¹² As far as the Benelux countries are concerned, Belgium and Luxembourg follow the same lines, whereas the Netherlands come closer to British or Scandinavian patterns.¹³ Finally, France and Germany also often vote differently. Member states' interests are driven by factors that may be considered more important. The variables often overlap: big member state *versus* small member state, position as eurozone

⁷ The most revealing study in this respect is O. Gyárfášová, “Do we know each other? Public opinion surveys about the historical memory in V4,” presented in 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=164> (accessed on July 30, 2014).

⁸ As cited in P. Luif, *Die Zusammenarbeit in Mitteleuropa als Element der österreichischen EU-Politik*, Vienna: Bundesministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft, Umwelt und Wasserwirtschaft, 2007, p. 13. Available online: <https://is.cuni.cz/studium/predmety/index.php?do=download&did=40045&kod=JMB223> (accessed on July 30, 2014).

⁹ This is also well documented and analysed. An overview over Nordic-cooperation, listed by topic (some fifty), is available at http://www.norden.org/en/publications/publication_topics_view (accessed on August 8, 2014).

¹⁰ M. Kaeding, T. Selck, “Mapping out political Europe: coalition patterns in EU decision-making,” *International Political Science Review* Vol. 26, 2005, pp. 271–90, here: 280–1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 281.

¹³ This is also supported by the 2007 study “Network capital and cooperation patterns in the working groups of the Council of the EU” by D. Naurin, as cited in P. Luif, “Forum on ‘Central Europe’: Austria and Central Europe,” *Perspectives* Vol. 18, No. 2, 2010, pp. 95–109, here p. 106.

member *versus* non-member, EU budget net contributor *versus* net recipient, old member state *versus* new member state, North *versus* South (*versus* East), exposed/crisis ridden/pro growth *versus* safe/growing/pro austerity; finally, and rising in importance, there are thematic coalitions.¹⁴ Domestic considerations have an impact: within coalition governments (e.g. Germany's position is more centrist in the current center-right–center-left government constellation as compared to the previous center-right–liberal coalition), within parties (e.g. the position of Prime Minister Cameron within his own party), and in the context of national and European elections (e.g. the pro-growth rhetoric of French President Hollande or Italian Prime Minister Renzi). In conclusion: next to regional markers, other aspects will always bear some importance when making rational decisions from a member state perspective. One can also state that a strong regional identity and a long and successful history of previous regional cooperation are factors that lend significance to a regional cooperation scheme.

External *versus* internal: two dimensions of Visegrad cooperation

Visegrad has a distinct external dimension. The Visegrad agenda has been very strong on the issues of EU enlargement and the Eastern Partnership.¹⁵ At the core of V4 is the deep conviction that authoritarian rule can be overcome peacefully. Democracy and rule of law can be established and consolidated, and civil society is the driving force in this process. V4 considers itself a role model for political and economic transformation and integration into European and Atlantic structures. Hence, V4's experience should be shared with neighbors who are not yet members of the club. It is perhaps the single most important success of the new, i.e. Central European, member states that Eastern and Southeastern Europe have come much more into the focus of EU politics compared to the period before 2004. V4 states are an active interest group in the two geographical areas. They make sure that both policy areas stay on the EU agenda. This is a rational, interest-driven behavior, which can be explained by geographical proximity and linked to former, security and economic interests. Currently V4's performance in this respect is overshadowed by a different take on Russia between Poland and the three others, as well as variations on how to handle the Ukrainian crisis. EU budget affairs are the second great success story of Visegrad interest representation in the EU. When negotiating the 2014–2020 EU budget, the Visegrad partners were successful in establishing a large and thus influential “friends of cohesion” group that argued for the continuation of cohesion funding and the Common Agricultural Policy. The outcome is that regional and

¹⁴ A typology set up by Julie Smith is strategic alliances (Benelux, Nordic, and Visegrad cooperation, France-Germany, Weimar Triangle) and tactical coalitions (bilateralism, Big Three and Big Six, thematic coalitions). See J. Smith, “Working together in Europe: the need for bilateral and small group cooperation in the enlarged Union,” in A. Agh, A. Ferencz, eds, *Overcoming the EU crisis: EU perspectives after the Eastern enlargement*, Budapest: Together for Europe Research Centre and Foundation, 2007, pp. 264–88, here pp. 275–83. Kaeding and Selck established an alternative typology of cooperation schemes: coalition patterns are power-based or ideology-based or interest-based. They find (analyzing voting behavior in EU15) that the interest-based pattern is by far the most important one. The behavior of a member state is linked to a concrete policy area and voting is issue-specific. See Kaeding and Selck op. cit., pp. 280–2.

¹⁵ The two policy areas are also the subject of intensive research. Three in-depth analyses are: M. Nič, I. Gyarmati, J. Vlkovský, T. Żornaczuk, “The Visegrad Group: exploring a new agenda for the Western Balkans,” Central European Policy Institute, 2012. Available online: <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/visegrad-group-exploring-new-agenda-western-balkans> (accessed on April 30, 2013); T. Strážay, “Visegrad Four and the Western Balkans: a group perspective,” *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* Vol. 4, 2012, pp. 52–64; C. Walsch, “Fostering EU enlargement. Is the Visegrad Group a credible advocate?,” *Andrássy Universität Budapest Donau-Institut Working Paper Series*, No. 29, 2014. Available online: <http://www.andrassyuni.eu/upload/File/Donau%20Institut/Working%20Papers/29DIWPWalschFosteringEUenlargementfinal.pdf> (accessed on July 30, 2014).

agricultural development is well funded, at least for another six years (and, when counting the fade-out phase, until 2022).

In part, the internal dimension shows a different picture. The topics of V4 governance, areas of cooperation, and missed chances due to non-cooperation over important sector policies will be discussed in the next paragraphs. Governance: V4 operates in a highly intergovernmental mode without any institutions on its own.¹⁶ This means that the four national governments decide the V4 agenda. The foreign ministries have a coordinating role. A rotating one-year presidency is in place. V4 presidency reports throughout the preceding years show that attention to common issues is gradually on the rise.¹⁷ Administrative and thematic continuities, which sometimes overarch several presidencies, are now well-established. This is the heart of V4 governance.

Areas of cooperation: as mentioned earlier, the less political agendas, i.e. infrastructure development in transport and energy, are by far the two most important areas. Transport touches on old economic dependencies from Germany and the former Soviet Union. For this reason well-established East–West routes exist between the individual Central European states and their big neighbors to the West and the East. The intra-Visegrad north-south infrastructure is lacking and is now slowly being established or ameliorated. Energy is linked to the exposure and dependency of Central and East European member states on Russian gas supplies. Gas pipelines between V4 and other gas importing states in the region are being interconnected and linked to liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in the Baltic and Adriatic Sea. In some cases a reverse flow system is established.¹⁸ Action in both fields is linked to EU transport corridors and EU energy policy. Hence, one of the reasons for the relative success of the two policy areas is European Union co-funding of the new cross-border infrastructures.

Non-cooperation over important sector policies: there is no attempt at a “Visegradization” (i.e. a strong coordination) of sector policies. The opportunity to continually coordinate common planning, consultation, and action in a number of economically relevant policy areas has never been taken up by the Visegrad partners. The failure to coordinate action in adopting the euro is the most obvious example. Even more important – and hardly discussed in public – is the entire area of economic and competition policies, and labor and taxation related legislation.¹⁹ This is the single greatest failure of regional cooperation in Central Europe within the framework of Visegrad cooperation. All four Visegrad countries have similar economic profiles. Foreign direct investment (FDI) and foreign-owned multinational companies (MNC) dominate economic performance and innovation in each of the four countries. Under the label of competition, offering skilled and – by European standards – cheap labor, the four have been competing against each other ever since the huge FDI inflows started twenty years ago. Would it not be in the interests of each V4 member, as Anita Sobják suggested in 2012, to develop common strategies on FDI and

¹⁶ Bratislava based IVF was established as an institution on its own, but its mission is distinctively oriented towards civil society initiated projects, and thus must be separated from governmental administration.

¹⁷ Presidency reports are available online at the group’s official website under <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports>. The current president is Slovakia. The program is available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20142015-slovak> (accessed on August 8, 2014).

¹⁸ R. Kaszab, A. Sobják, K. Takáč, V. Tejbal, “Once in a lifetime: opportunities for Visegrad in EU energy infrastructure plans,” Central European Policy Institute, 2013. Available online: <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/once-lifetime-opportunities-visegrad-eu-energy-infrastructure-plans> (accessed on July 30, 2014). It also has to be said that cooperation in energy varies greatly from energy sector to energy sector. Only recently efforts have been made to better coordinate nuclear energy policies. See <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20142015-slovak> (accessed on August 8, 2014).

¹⁹ In terms of a conceptualisation of the economy, the most obvious choice would be a strong market oriented framework (as ECE is deeply involved in the Single Market), buffered by a strong commitment to social and labour standards. The continental western European social market economy models could serve as examples.

MNC in V4?²⁰ Would coordinating legislation on taxation and labor not have a positive impact?

The continued East–West divide mentioned in the introduction can be related to a scenario that stresses competition rather than cooperation. Gergő Medve-Bálint writes, building on the conclusions of Béla Greskovits and Dorothee Bohle: "Especially among the Visegrad countries, which [...] were structurally most similar to each other, a fierce 'bidding war' for foreign investments was developing."²¹ He also concludes that investments by MNC in the region have heightened the global competitiveness of these companies and led to a high degree of interdependence between western and eastern Europe.²² Employees in V4, whose salaries are still considerably lagging behind West or South European standards, pay the price for the all too competitive edge in the economic policies of the V4 states. These are easily missed opportunities to foster convergence with western European economies and living standards. MNC lobbies would certainly oppose such action, but even the old EU member state governments (e.g. German, French, British, Italian, Austrian, and Dutch, where most European FDIs come from) and in particular the European Commission have a deep interest in an EU that converges faster rather than slower. These West European governments would not seriously oppose the idea that remuneration discrepancies should decrease within the EU. This is linked to several other aspects that pose threats to most new member states, including V4. Exchanging thoughts and information on all bread and butter policies would help to make the economy whiter and help eradicate pockets of tax evasion at all levels.²³ Cooperation on company taxation would prevent the infamous race to the bottom, which MNC exploit.²⁴ Such action would boost the tax base of the emerging middle classes, the societal group that all new member states aspire to broaden. Cooperation and coordination would definitely help formalize labor practices, which is a crucial issue, and set regional standards and reference points. Such action may have the side effect of labor migration being better handled (the painful fact is that it is not the bottom, but rather the middle and top segments that are willing to migrate), which has posed a serious problem for Poland and Hungary recently. Such action may also help better deal with the marginalized bottom 25 per cent of the population of V4, who struggle to survive economically every day and who live at the risk of poverty or social exclusion (15 million citizens in V4) or in severe poverty (9 million out of the 15 million).²⁵

²⁰ A. Sobják, "Rethinking the future of the Visegrad Group at a time of heated debate on the future of the EU," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* Vol. 4, 2012, pp. 122–39, here p. 132. See also C. Walsch, "Ein „mitteleuropäisches Jahr“ für Ungarn. Synergien der ungarischen Präsidentschaften in den regionalen Kooperationsforen Visegrád-Gruppe und Zentraleuropäische Initiative im Jahr 2013," *Andrássy Universität Budapest Donau-Institut Working Paper Series* No. 24, 2013, here pp. 26–7. Available online: <http://www.andrassyuni.eu/upload/File/Donau%20Institut/Working%20Papers/24DIWPWalschEinmitteleuropischesJahrfinal.pdf> (accessed on July 30, 2014).

²¹ G. Medve-Bálint, "The role of the EU in shaping FDI flows to East Central Europe," *Journal of Common Market Studies* Vol. 52, No. 1, 2014, pp. 35–51, here p. 43.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²³ Recently there have been V4 moves to deal with the issues of finance and the economy more intensively. The current Slovak presidency is keen to tackle the issues of information and cyber security, of tax fraud and tax evasion, and more generally of industrial policy. See section „3. Competitiveness, Finance and Economy“ of the programme; available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20142015-slovak> (accessed on August 8, 2014).

²⁴ E.g. Hungary has established strategic partnerships with 45 MNCs. The deal is that the MNC secures (ideally long-term) employment and the host country grants company tax breaks. Whether this practice is in the interests of the country is open to debate and depends on the conditions. The recent example of Nokia, which is now moving away from Hungary, shows that strategic partners do not feel obliged to stay when more lucrative opportunities arise elsewhere.

²⁵ The figures are from 2012. V4 countries differ greatly in this respect. In Hungary, one third of the population is „at the risk of poverty or social exclusion.“ One fourth of the population lives in „severely materially deprived,“ i.e. lives in severe poverty. Comparing the figures from 2008 and 2012 the numbers have risen in

The at least moderate improvement of life chances of these millions of V4 citizens (nearly all Roma, but also innumerable non-Roma in all four V4 states) are the ultimate test case of the success of the European integration of the Visegrad states. Yet, national pathways have been the traditional and preferred avenues for dealing with economic governance and questions of society.

In conclusion: strong coordination of sector policies among V4 partners would heighten the role and impact the group has within the EU. The self-interest of national politicians and the strong nationalistic tradition in the Central European region are the main reason why the internal dimension of V4 cooperation, i.e. the closer coordination of sector policies, has thus far remained in a dwarf-like state. Having experienced Soviet type foreign domination, the “full restitution of state independence” was the right strategy after the regime change.²⁶ In a time of Europeanization and globalization, interdependence has replaced independence, and thus solutions need to be found that transcend the national.

Conclusions: challenges and policy recommendations

In terms of structure, one feature of V4 is the size of Poland. Poland’s population outweighs the other three by one and a half. Poland has links with Germany and France through the Weimar triangle. Visegrad Four should be careful not to change the established team. Central European influence in the EU depends entirely on V4 and the unity of the four V4 members.²⁷ V4 has been successful with the Visegrad Four Plus (V4+) format, which brings together more Central European partners in selected policy areas. V4 should build on this success and make V4+ more attractive and perhaps more permanent for partners from the Baltic to the Black Sea, including Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia. Depending on the policy area, every single country in the region is in principle ready to make partnerships in the V4+ format. Germany should be a strategic partner of the V4.²⁸ This choice may be the most rational one because of the economic interdependence and concurring approaches to economic governance in the EU.²⁹ As a group V4 is on a par with Germany, but there is a great power discrepancy in bilateral affairs. ECE and German combined action can help to exercise influence in the Council of Ministers, where from November 2014 voting rules will change at the expense of small member states.³⁰

both categories. In Poland the figures are 26 percent and 13 percent. The numbers have decreased. In Slovakia the figures are 20 percent for those who live at the risk of poverty or social exclusion and ten percent who live in severe poverty. In the Czech Republic the figures are 15 percent and seven percent. In these two countries neither a decrease nor an increase has been observed. Data as provided by European Union (ed), *Sustainable development in the European Union. Key messages. 2013 edition* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union 2013), chapter “Social inclusion”, pp. 97-130, here p. 106 and p. 116. Abruflbar unter http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-02-13-237/EN/KS-02-13-237-EN.PDF (10. Juni 2014)

²⁶ “Visegrad Declaration 1991,” op. cit.

²⁷ E. Lucas, “Visegrád: nice but not necessary,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 2013. Available online: <http://cepa.org/content/visegr%C3%A1d-nice-not-necessary> (accessed on July 30, 2014).

²⁸ The aforementioned report, “Central Europe fit for the future”, (here pp. 5 and 7) argues in favor of stronger ties in the region, in particular with Austria, Germany, and the Baltic states.

²⁹ Like-minded members in EU economic governance, however, also include many other northern EU member states, most importantly Great Britain and the Netherlands, but also mid-range countries like the Scandinavian countries or Austria.

³⁰ Under current rules EU-28 has 345 votes. A qualified majority requires 255. ECE10 (i.e. the “new member states”) have 101 votes together and thus have veto power. The new rules say that a qualified majority is reached, when at least 55 per cent of the members (i.e. 16 of 28), who represent at least 65 per cent of the population, agree on a proposal. Hence, the blocking minority must be 12 or more countries or must be a group of countries who represent 35 per cent or more of EU’s overall population. All the ECE countries and Germany could form this kind of minority group together.

Concerning policies, the top priority should be to continue “business as usual” in transport and energy, and in enlargement and eastern neighborhood policies. Intensifying cooperation in other non-political areas (e.g. the climate and environment) is highly recommended.³¹ Much of the joint action in the more technical policy areas can partially draw on EU funding, a carrot that should be taken up. Defense and security issues (e.g. the Visegrad Battle Group) should certainly remain on the agenda, despite the recent discrepancy between the Polish and the Hungarian prime ministers on this issue.³² Finally, a strong point was made in the previous section about the potential for further Visegradization and Europeanization of important sector policies. A comment from the *Economist* one year after EU accession shall serve to remind us of the purpose of this: “[S]ince those aims [i.e. NATO and EU membership] were achieved a year ago, Visegrad has been falling, if not quite apart, then at least into insignificance.”³³ It may be that by 2016, on the organization’s 25th anniversary, a new Visegrad Declaration will have announced the like-minded steps of an ever closer Visegrad Group that wishes to demonstrate a higher cooperation profile.

In governance, administrative continuity is the key issue. Extending policies in the manner mentioned above would certainly require some overhaul of the current V4 institutional set-up. At the heart of any efficient organization lies the establishment of institutional structures with dense and reliable administrative processes. It may also be worth extending some institutional linkages and best-practices to spill over into V4 structures. For instance, the regional formats and the macroregional format could generally be better linked and coordinated. Cooperation in the Central European Initiative or in the Danube Region Strategy (the Baltic Region Strategy in the case of Poland) may be of use in Visegrad and *vice versa*. A creative idea could be having a lead country in a particular policy area, e.g. Poland for security and defense affairs, or Hungary for water and environment issues. In an earlier contribution, I suggested that a lead country function could be established in relation to the Visegrad Group’s approach to EU enlargement, taking account of the strengths of the country and building on bilateral experiences – for example, the Czech Republic could take the lead in educational exchange and human rights, Slovakia in state-building and public policy issues, Hungary in environment and/or transport, and Poland in security and defense.³⁴

Finally, concerning V4 identity, V4 politicians may find it worth contemplating steps that lead to a more robust and deeper knowledge of each others’ societies.³⁵ Regular meetings between top politicians barely achieve a trickle-down effect. The IVF projects mainly benefit elites in education and culture. The current state of society-to-society relations gives the impression that each V4 state has far greater connections with Germany (and Austria, in the cases of Hungary and Slovakia) or Britain than with the other V4 states. It is only through

³¹ Many contributors to the Central European Policy Institute’s “A view on Central Europe I, II, III: Does the V4 have a future?” debate come to similar conclusions. As does R. Fawn, “Visegrad: fit for purpose?,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* Vol. 46, No. 3, 2013, pp. 339–49.

³² See the comments of the “A view on Central Europe I, II, III: Does the V4 have a future?” debate. See also E. Lucas, “V4: grappling with irrelevance?,” Central European Policy Institute, 2014. Available online: <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/grappling-irrelevance-v4-after-its-split-ukraine> (accessed on July 30, 2014).

³³ *The Economist*, April 16, 2005.

³⁴ C. Walsch, “Ein „mitteleuropäisches Jahr“ für Ungarn. Synergien der ungarischen Präsidenschaften in den regionalen Kooperationsforen Visegrád-Gruppe und Zentraleuropäische Initiative im Jahr 2013,” *Andrássy Universität Budapest Donau-Institut Working Paper Series* No. 24, 2013, here pp. 8–9. Available online: <http://www.andrassyuni.eu/upload/File/Donau%20Institut/Working%20Papers/24DIWPWalschEinmitteleuropischesJahrfinal.pdf> (accessed on July 30, 2014). In addition the bilateral format can be of help country-wise: Slovakia may have the confidence in the EU-skeptical camps of Serbia because of its non-recognition of Kosovo, or (together with Austria, which would be the link to V4+) a particular expertise in Bosnia that has developed with past and present EU High Commissioners coming from the two countries.

³⁵ The Czech V4 presidency of 2011–2012 has thus far been the only initiative in this respect.

cooperation that deeper knowledge of each other can be fostered. Educational policies, e.g. pupil and student exchanges, coordinated curricula including the partner's language, joint history commissions are actually important and are slowly starting to operate. City and community cooperation is another important field.

The long-term effect of such action is that sensitive issues (e.g. minorities, historical perceptions, etc.) or debates on European affairs of single V4 members do not need to be painstakingly avoided and could eventually be addressed among V4 partners without immediately initiating an institutional crisis. Deeper exchange would make partners more open. V4 politicians currently do not approach sensitive issues when dealing with other. To state an example from the country the author knows best: Fidesz-led Hungary may profit from comments by her Czech, Slovak, and Polish interlocutors on issues like constitution-making, checks and balances of state institutions, media legislation and practice, and political culture in general. After all, the credibility of Visegrad Four as a whole is at stake. For example, is the Visegrad Group a credible actor and interlocutor with Western Balkan countries when it comes to EU enlargement? European Commission reports annually remind the applicant countries that independent media are a cornerstone of the EU's political acquis.³⁶ In the same reports, the Commission also reminds the confrontational political parties in Western Balkan states to move towards greater cross-party consensus.³⁷ Visegrad Four has great experience in transformation and EU approximation and could serve as a prime interlocutor. V4 countries see themselves as role models of integration. Is a confrontational Fidesz-led Hungary, which has introduced all the major legislation over the last four years, including the country's constitution a role model for EU integration? Is Fidesz-led Hungary, a country which streamlined audio-visual media and significantly curtailed all critical media, the country that points the way to a free, democratic and law-abiding Europe? It is doubtful that it is. In the interests of long-term credibility, Visegrad Four politicians would be courageous if they were to step up dialogue among each other about what the group wishes to stand for. This is the best basis for achieving, to use the influential British weekly's term once more, some "significance."

³⁶ "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2011–2012," COM(2011) 666 final, European Commission, Brussels, October 12, 2011, pp. 6–7. Available online: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/strategy_paper_2011_en.pdf (accessed on May 2, 2013); "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2012–2013," COM(2012) 600 final, European Commission, Brussels, October 10, 2012, pp. 5–6 and p. 23. Available online: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2012/package/strategy_paper_2012_en.pdf (accessed on May 2, 2013); "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2013–2014," COM(2013) 700 final, European Commission, Brussels, October 16, 2013, pp. 6–7. Available online: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/strategy_paper_2013_en.pdf (accessed on October 30, 2013).

³⁷ Ibid 2011, pp. 13–20 and 31–71. Ibid 2012, pp. 12–19 and pp. 30–73. Ibid 2013, pp. 14–15 and pp. 24–45.