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Panel 6I: ***Reconsidering Enlargement***

The Visegrad Group and the European Union's 'Eastern' Dimension[*]

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ABSTRACT

The 2004 enlargement of the European Union (EU) changed the dynamics of its engagement with the former Soviet Republics which now constitute the Eastern neighbourhood. As well as manifold implications of the eastward shift of the EU border and 'acquisition of a shared neighbourhood with Russia, the enlarged EU now incorporated new member states with foreign policy concerns focused mostly on the Eastern neighbours. Four of the new member states – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – brought into the EU with them their own subregional alliance in the form of the Visegrad Group (VG). Since 2004 the 'Visegrad 4' (V4) have been attempting to develop an effective multilateral contribution to EU 'Eastern Policy' and to reform processes in the WNIS. This paper argues that while there has been some evidence of an effective VG multilateral approach, in both inputs to EU Eastern policy and modest support for broader 'Europeanisation' processes in WNIS, so far the VG has failed to achieve a lead role in EU Eastern policy and that a range of obstacles have limited the multilateral approach of the V4 in general.

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INTRODUCTION

"The Visegrad Group is ready to assist countries aspiring for EU membership by sharing and transmitting their knowledge and experience. The Visegrad Group countries are also ready to use their unique regional and historical experience and to contribute to shaping and implementing the European Union's policies towards the countries of Eastern and Southern Europe."[1]

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched by the EU in May 2004 as the framework for relations with new neighbours, looked inadequate before it had even got off the ground. ENP fell well short of what the Ukrainian 'Orange' politicians expected, was rejected by Russia and also faced a well of criticism from inside the EU. Against a background of multiple pressures for reform and development, it is hardly surprising that ENP has been in a rather fluid state so far. Following various member state interventions, such as the Germany's 'ENP Plus' proposal, and the subsequent European Commission's 2006 review of ENP, the latest proposal is for an 'Eastern Partnership' (EP) that will amongst other things, formally separate of the Southern and Eastern flanks of ENP. An important part of the story of the evolutionary character of ENP is the fact that the 2004 enlargement itself introduced an additional dynamic into the EU's Eastern policy. ENP was, of course, formulated by the pre-2004 EU, but a set of new member states with keen stakes in the EU's Eastern policy were now in position to be become players in its future development.

Despite the key fact that it was their accession that which forced the issue up the pecking order, the role and influence of Central and East European (CEE) states on EU relations with Eastern neighbours has received little attention in scholarly debates. Since May 2009 will mark the fifth anniversary of both the Eastward enlargement and launch of ENP, it is timely to reflect on the CEE influence so far. As a contribution to this research agenda, this paper article analyses the role of multilateral Visegrad Group (VG) cooperation on EU Eastern policy, a topic which has received virtually no coverage. Throughout its relatively short history the VG subregional alliance has been used as a multilateral foreign policy tool of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Prior to 2004 it was used mainly to support the EU and NATO accession endeavour. Since then, the Eastern neighbours have been a prime focus of the VG agenda for foreign policy cooperation. As with previous ones, the latest (2008/9) VG Presidency, held by Poland, stresses a number of goals for support of non-EU European states. They include greater engagement of the V4 "in the establishment of the

[1] "Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary , the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of Visegrád Group countries after their accession to the European Union, Prague, 12 May 2004".

eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy…in the negotiations on an enhanced cooperation agreement between the EU and Ukraine…Promotion of European values and human rights (Belarus, GUAM Countries)…Promotion of reform process in the candidate and potential candidate countries of the West Balkans" (Polish VG Program, 2007/8, p.2).[2]

The paper looks at two main questions. First, at which levels and in what dimensions has the VG multilateral approach towards the EU's Eastern neighbours been evident? Second, if reality is not matching rhetoric and the VG could be deemed to be operating below potential in this domain, then what factors have so far hindered it? The paper is organised as follows. First there is a brief review of the VG's origins and evolution. Second, a discussion of why EU Eastern policy became a prime focus of the VG foreign policy cooperation agenda after 2004. Third, what so far has been the content of VG multilateral contributions to EU Eastern policy and to the Europeanisation of WNIS more broadly?[3] The final section discusses some problems of the multilateral approach which have been limiting the role of the VG to date. Some include factors beyond the control of the V4 while others reflect some weaknesses of the VG multilateral concept. Finally, before moving to the main discussion, it is worth emphasising that the case of the VG also provides insights into two other fields of interest. First, into evolving governance mechanisms in the EU of 27 in which decision-making "now depends greatly on national influence and strategic alliance building among members" (Kempe, 2008, 7). Second, into how effectively the VG is consolidating its post-enlargement role as a subregional alliance within the EU aiming for not only effective internal cooperation but also a foreign policy cooperation role to replace its original mission as a device to support V4 EU and NATO entry.

2. THE VISEGRAD GROUP: ORIGINS, AIM AND EVOLUTION

The VG is best described as framework for both internally and externally oriented subregional cooperation between its four Central European member states. In existence since 1990, and with the cooperation well embedded into the Visegrad 4 (V4) government structures, and, one even might say, norms, the VG can be considered a permanent feature of the European political landscape. The inaugural VG meeting took place in Bratislava in April 1990. Instigated by Vaclav Havel, the Presidents of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland held informal discussions around the themes of "the 'coordination of policies' and synchronisation

[2] The VG Presidency rotates on an annual basis. Hungary will take over in 2009, followed by Slovakia in 2010.

[3] Europeanisation is defined in this case as the support and promotion of reforms leading to the establishment of EU standards and the process of developing new and enhancing existing dimensions of 'cross-border connectivity' between the WNIS and other European states.

of steps' on the road to Europe" (Cottey, 1999, 70). After a few months lull, VG Presidents, Foreign Ministers and Parliamentarians met in Budapest on 15 February 1991 for the signing of the original Visegrad Declaration. While VG cooperation was in many respects an autonomous process launched by the first post-communist leaderships of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, it did have external drivers. The realities and uncertainties of the external economic and political dimensions of the impending transformation meant that the then Visegrad 3 (V3) simply had "no alternative to cooperation" (Vaduchova, 1993).

The core mission of VG cooperation concerned the two key foreign policy objectives of the time – dissolution of the Soviet-era security and integration structures and accession to the EU and NATO. The V3 effectively pursued common policies around these goals and by 1992 the VG brand was well established within and outside the region. Yet 1992 also saw developments that brought about the onset of decline of the VG. The division of Czechoslovakia, the advent of CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement), a tendency for competition to replace cooperation in EU relations and Slovakia's progressive loss of ground in the EU and NATO enlargement process all undermined the VG. The period 1993-98 is usually characterised as, at best, a time of dormant VG cooperation. A major relaunch occurred in 1998 following governmental changes in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Also at this time, the EU pre-accession process had now reached the membership negotiation stage and was generating issues of common interest that fuelled political cooperation for pragmatic reasons - for example, the need to maximise Slovakia's chances of joining the EU at the same time as the other Visegrad states. Significant steps forward in formalising the VG cooperation framework were taken in May 1999 following a review of the main principles and procedures of the subregional alliance. Henceforth there would be two regular meetings per year of Prime Ministers plus regular meetings at various other governmental levels, and a rotating Presidency of the VG to coordinate cooperation and compile the annual VG 'work plan'. The International Visegrad Fund (IVF), which is the sole VG permanent institution, was founded in 2000 as an instrument to develop civic dimensions of cooperation and strengthen public awareness. The IVF has funded an array of projects to support those aims.[4]

Following completion of EU accession negotiations, there was a debate on the future role and even viability of the VG in which officials, experts and even the media participated. After some 13 years of cooperation, the "fulfilment of the intentions set out in the (February 1991) Visegrad Declaration put the participating countries before the question of how to go on" (Czech VG Presidency Report 2004). Despite the negativity generated by high-profile VG disputes and tensions during 2002 and 2003 the outcome of the reflection process was

[4] Each VG member contributes an equal (25%) share of the IVF budget. The current annual budget is 5 million Euro.

positive.[5] A new framework document for cooperation was duly completed during the 2003/4 Czech Presidency of the VG and signed in May 2004. It confirmed that "(t)he cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries will continue to focus on regional activities and initiatives aimed at strengthening the identity of the Central European region. In this context, their cooperation will be based on concrete projects and will maintain its flexible and open character" (2004 VG Declaration, 1). Four dimensions of cooperation were specified: cooperation within the VG area itself; cooperation within the EU; cooperation with other partners (including individual countries and other subregional structures); cooperation within NATO and other international organisations. Along with the general purposes of the post-enlargement VG, the 'new' 2004 guidelines specifically highlighted cooperation towards the new EU Eastern neighbours as a key mission. Accordingly, the (first post-enlargement) VG work plan of the Polish 2004/5 VG Presidency contained five main priorities including "participation in the formation and implementation of the Union's New neighbourhood policy" (Polish VG Program 2004/5). Results came early, according to the Report of that Polish Presidency which recorded that VG countries' support for democratic transition in Ukraine was "the first manifestation of undertakings by the new member states addressed to a direct neighbour of the EU" (Polish VG Presidency Report 2005).[6]

2. THE V4 FOREIGN POLICY COOPERATION AGENDA BEYOND EU ACCESSION

Despite measures to stimulate intra-VG cooperation after 1999, the overriding image of the VG in the 1991-2004 period was of an entity focused on serving the Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions of the V4. Completion of these objectives created room for multilateral approaches where shared foreign policy interests were either already in place or would come to the fore in the context of the expanded EU and NATO. The commitment to retain external cooperation as an important sphere of the V4 subregional alliance's role would have been rather unsustainable without genuine and substantial shared interests. It was rather obvious where any VG external cooperation in the post-accession period could be oriented. As Missiroli put it: "all (new CEE members) have a strong interest in the formulation of those external policies of the enlarged union that might affect their immediate vicinity. After all, most of them will become the new external frontier of the EU. The permeability and safety of the Eastern borders and all common 'direct neighbourhood' policies will become vital interests and shape their behaviour on CFSP and other issues. The condition of national minorities, cross-border trade and visa regulations, energy and environmental issues, Balkan stability, relations with

[5] See Dangerfield (2008a)

[6] Whilst the Polish intervention, together with Lithuania, in the tense period after the 2004 Ukrainian Presidential election played a crucial role this was not of course a Visegrad exercise. At pure VG level the main events at the political level during the 2004/5 period were a meeting of V4 foreign ministers with the Ukrainian foreign minister in Vilnius on 21/4/05 (Polish VG Presidency Report 2005, 1).

Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and, of course, Russia will be priority issues" (Missiroli, 2005, 129).

Foreign policy scholars/analysts within the V4 countries recognised that the VG could play a useful role in the CEE members foreign policy and various contributions that recommended this direction for the VG no doubt helped push it forward. Gromadzki et al wrote: "In addition to assistance provided by the EU, Visegrad countries should consider using their own resources to maintain and expand cooperation and encourage people-to-people contacts in their respective countries and Ukraine. This could take place bilaterally or through joint efforts, for instance through the International Visegrad Fund" (Gromadzki et al, 2004, 16). From a Hungarian perspective, the need to take the VG more seriously and enthusiastically than in the past was stressed because, inter alia, of the need for Hungary to prove "that it has the ability to implement a neighbourhood policy in a partnership. If it were to fail in this endeavour, it would not be more than a mere observer of the Eastern and Balkan neighbourhood policy" (Hamberger, 2006, 104). In addition, while mindful of obstacles to success, a view from Prague stated that "the Eastern policy seems a hopeful candidate for replacing enlargement-related matters as the main vehicle of these (the V4 – author's insertion) countries foreign policy cooperation" (Kratochvil and Temets, 2007, 10). Though not specifically discussing the question of a VG role, criticism of ENP from within the new member states pointed to the need for a significant Central European intervention. The EU's Eastern policy had been badly blighted because it was a product of the EU15 but had to serve the enlarged EU and the interests and perspectives of the new members too. Duleba, from a Slovak perspective, wrote that "the enlargement of 2004 changed the EU as an international actor per se. The EU-25/27 simply cannot have the same foreign policy as the EU15 had. The EU's relations with its direct neighbours cannot be of the same nature as its relations with its indirect ones" Duleba (2007, 1). EU Eastern policy and its flagship framework, the ENP, needed the input of the new member states not only because of their greater expertise when it came to the WNIS but also because those new members actually bordering the Eastern neighbours would feel the main effects of an inadequate EU policy. Additionally, apart from the standard argument that ENP was deficient because non-European countries are included in the same policy as *neighbours in Europe*, Duleba stressed that Eastern Europe needs a single and consistent value-based EU policy rather than the fragmented approach which differentiates three-ways between Russia, Ukraine/Moldova and Belarus.

A key consequence of the Eastward enlargement was that the EU "arguably emerged as a stronger and more self-conscious reform-promotion actor with relevant implications for its external policies" (Solonenko, 2008, 25). The development of the VG as a foreign policy actor that would work by supporting a certain direction of reform in EU Eastern neighbours certainly reflected EU-isation of foreign policy making in the V4. Yet certain key instincts of

current VG foreign policy cooperation became embedded after the VG revived in 1998. Experience-sharing, for example, became regular practice, including "exchange of information related to the process of negotiations with the EU and the state of the preparation of V4 member countries for membership. To this end, consultations of negotiators with the EU have been agreed and are regularly held" (Czech VG Presidency Report 2000, 1). Furthermore, a key theme of post-1998 VG cooperation was assistance to the process of Slovak 'catch-up' of Slovakia in Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly for NATO membership (including both practical preparation tasks and V3 political backing/lobbying on behalf of Slovakia). This helped lock assistance to slow-lane post-communist countries into the portfolio of VG tasks. In sum, the current mode of VG engagement with the WNIS (and aspiring EU/NATO entrants generally) came out of a clear synergy of the V4's own experience of transition and EU pre-accession, a decade-long tradition of using the VG for experience-sharing and know-how transfer and the EU-isation of the V4's character as a foreign policy actor.

Finally, although the post-enlargement context gave strong momentum to the VG's ambition to play a lead role in EU Eastern policy, the VG had already made significant moves in that direction. Continuity rather than change was more the order of the day. Scrutiny of the content of various VG Declarations and published work-plans during the 1999-2004 period reveals that support for and assistance to the WNIS was already clearly on the VG radar.[7] For example during its 2002/3 VG Presidency Slovakia "organised a meeting of the State Secretaries of the V4 countries and Ukraine on 8-9 July 2002 in Košice. The main subject of the discussion was the cooperation between the V4 and Ukraine in a wider context of European integration. The State Secretaries exchanged their views on co-operation in the format of V4 and Ukraine, on the Schengen border issues, including visa regime and cross-border co-operation" (Slovak VG Presidency Report 2003').

Clearly, then, the VG focus on WNIS was well-established prior to EU entry and was evident not only in VG declarations, but also in the form of political dialogue and some modest but useful concrete assistance. In the immediate post-enlargement period several things came together to stimulate upgrading and further operationalisation of the VG focus on WNIS. First, and especially important, was the Orange Revolution. This gave the clearest green light so far for a 'European choice' for Ukraine and created a much firmer political footing for active engagement with the country. Second, the introduction of ENP brought into play a large scale EU policy to target both in its strategic and operational dimensions. ENP was already ripe for reform and open to influence as to how it could develop in the future. Thirdly,

[7] Also verifying that this is a 'real' agenda for the VG based on solid foreign policy priorities, rather than an outcome of a post-enlargement search for a role.

no longer pre-occupied with EU accession, VG states could participate in and attempt to steer the EU's Eastern policy/ENP as equal partners and also above-average stakeholders in this dimension of EU affairs**.** The next section examines the substance of the VG multilateral approach.

3. VISEGRAD GROUP COOPERATION TOWARDS EU EASTERN NEIGHBOURS

An obvious route for the VG to attempt to wield influence is for them to act collectively, where possible, at the political level.[8] The V4 have issued numerous 'Joint Declarations' affirming their support for WNIS' attempts to further advance their relations with the EU.[9] These have been both statements of general support and affirmation of V4 positions on specific aspects of EU engagement with the WNIS. For example on the need to increase the size of EU financial commitments overall, to address the imbalance between the resources allocated to the Eastern and Southern dimensions of ENP respectively and so on.

When it came to following up declarations with serious attempts at collective VG inputs to EU Eastern policy/ENP, there was little evidence of this until after 2006. That is, until after the release of Germany's 'ENP-Plus' proposal in July 2006 and shortly afterwards in September, reactions from Lithuania and Poland. The Polish and Lithuanian governments "issued non-papers demanding strategies beyond the current ENP. Both governments differentiate between 'European neighbours' requiring an institutional perspective and 'neighbours of Europe' which do not".(Kempe, 2008, 10). These interventions and the ensuing European Commission *Communication on Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy* of December 2006 marked the onset of more visible and intensive collective VG focus on EU Eastern policy. On 22 January 2007 the V4 stressed their determination "to contribute to the strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy… (and) intend to prepare detailed proposals for reinforcement of the ENP in coming weeks" (VG Joint Statement ENP, 2007). Collective action was actually already in evidence at this time. During the negotiations on the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) Regulation a "Non-paper of the V4 countries promoting the Eastern Dimension of the ENP was presented in January 2007, with the Czech Republic and Poland most active, while

[8] It should be remembered that there is no expectation that VG is somehow a platform in which the individual VG members' positions on specific issues of any kind will automatically be harmonised. There is a clear, accepted understanding that sensitive, contentious topics in intra-VG politics, such as national minorities, for example, are never brought to the Visegrad table. The VG agenda automatically gravitates to areas where the need and will to cooperate/coordinate is strong and conducive to collective undertakings. A key advantage of the VG (and something which is arguably not found elsewhere in the EU) is that it does provide a set of formal mechanisms through which common positions and interests – where they exist - can come to the fore, be agreed and then collectively pursued.

[9] This can be ascertained by the many statements to this effect contained in the various official VG documents, including Declarations, Programmes of the individual VG presidencies and so on.

at the same time some of the 'old' member states preferred to focus on the South" (Řiháčková, 31). The V4 proceeded to compile a more substantial document which they presented at GAERC (General Affairs and External Relations Council) in April 2007. ***The Visegrad Group Contribution to the Discussion on the Strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy*** ran to six pages and covered a range of issues. It made a clear distinction between Mediterranean and Eastern dimensions of ENP and stressed key differences between them in historical relations to the EU and expectations of it. This 'non-paper' called for strengthening of the Eastern dimension in three ways. First it argued for "dedication of more attention and resources". Second, whilst not openly calling for an accession perspective for Eastern neighbours there and then, the motivational power of indulging EU entry ambitions was stressed and "(m)embership aspirations of any European country should be regarded as legitimate" (Visegrad Group Contribution 2007, 2). Third, regional cooperation between the EU and the Eastern neighbours was endorsed, with large-scale sectoral cooperation (echoing the German ENP-Plus proposal) a key goal of the regional approach. Increased funds were also recommended for the 'Governance Facility' included in the ENPI: "the V4 countries would prefer to increase this facility. We do not believe that the envisioned amount is sufficient to encourage difficult reforms and reward good performers" (Visegrad Group Contribution 2007, 4).

The current scenario of ENP now *de facto* compartmentalised into the Mediterranean Union and Eastern Partnership (EP) respectively clearly fits with what the V4 have been endeavouring to achieve. Their role in helping to bring the EP to fruition seems rather indisputable, albeit a qualified one in that the VG itself played an endorsing/supporting rather than a leading role. Solonenko observed that the EP was "to a large extent shaped to respond to Ukraine's ambitions and aims to demonstrate the potential of the new EU member states, namely Poland and the Czech Republic, in setting (the) foreign policy agenda for the EU." As noted above the April 2007 non-paper openly advocated a distinct framework for Eastern neighbours, though this was only part, albeit a vital part of course, of the V4 preferred approach to the reformulation of the ENP. They also stressed the need to incorporate the countries covered by the Eastern dimension into more of a 'group' approach and supported "initiatives aimed at creating a multilateral component of the EU's cooperation with the Eastern neighbours" (Joint Statement VG Foreign Ministers April 2008). Two months later, the favourable reception the EP concept received in the EU (and approval in the June European Council) representing a major breakthrough in terms of VG objectives on EU policy towards the WNIS. The VG endorsed the EP proposal at the Prime Ministers' Annual Summit in Prague on 16 June 2008. It was of course notable that the EP proposal was tabled in the EU as a Polish-Swedish and not a joint VG initiative. The significance of this will be remarked upon later.

VG political cooperation has also provided an additional arena for dialogue between the V4 and specific Eastern neighbours. Meetings between top VG officials and their WNIS counterparts have occurred as separate events or as special sessions during VG summits or regular ministerial meetings. To give an example, on 10 June 2008, after meeting with the V4 Prime Ministers during a visit to Poland, Ukrainian Prime Minister Tymoshenko told a TV correspondent that she was "convinced that the union of strong prime ministers of these powerful countries will guide Ukraine. We want them to share experience, advise us and provide political assistance…I would like us as a country to join the European Union and we (the Visegrad four) will turn into a five" (One Plus One TV Report, 2008). These kinds of occasion, variously involving Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers and Sectoral Ministers are valuable in several ways. For the neighbours, they can help ameliorate feelings of exclusion by offering privileged access to dialogue with the V4 states. The new EU member states are at the same time a particularly sympathetic and receptive audience. In addition, the Eastern neighbours also get an additional platform on which to promote their European/EU credentials. These meetings also offer opportunities to identify and discuss common problems, develop cooperation agendas and identify ways in which the VG can assist the Eastern neighbours in their EU integration. Finally, together with IVF projects and bilateral contacts, they contribute to the important 'socialisation' processes identified by Solonenko (2008).

Next, a particularly important contribution involving the so-called 'V4+' facility.[10] The VG has been a forum for policy consultation and alliance-building with other member states and subregional groupings with specific interests in Eastern Europe, particularly over the last couple of years as ENP reform gathered momentum. These occasions have included the Nordic Council, the Baltic Three, Sweden and, most recently, Romania and Bulgaria. For example at a meeting in Warsaw on 26 September, the Ministers and Secretaries of State for European Affairs of the V4, Romania and Bulgaria reiterated their support for the EP. They called on the EU to "accelerate works on the EP to start its swift implementation and foster cooperation with the Eastern Partners" (Declaration of European Affairs Ministers September 2008). Most recently, a meeting convened via the VG mechanism in Warsaw on 24 November 2008 brought together Foreign Ministers of the V4, Baltic 3, Sweden, Romania and Bulgaria. It resulted in a Joint Statement showing that these ten countries would together push strongly for Council endorsement of the ensuing (3 December 2008) Commission Proposal on ENP. They "expect the Eastern Partnership to be assigned ambitious goals, including enhancing the EU support in adaptation of Eastern partners to EU legislation, norms and standards, creating a deepened free trade area, launching the process aimed at a visa-free

[10] 'V4+' refers to the principle of flexible cooperation between the V4 and any other country/group of countries or international bodies on matters of common concern..

regime with these countries as a long term goal, implementing important multilateral and regional projects" (Joint Statement Foreign Ministers of VG, Baltic 3, Bulgaria, Romania and Sweden November 2008).

Finally, on political cooperation, EU Presidencies in principle provide a major opportunity for the V4 to promote shared positions in EU affairs. The 2009 Czech Presidency provided clear evidence that was the case as far as EU Eastern policy was concerned. In April 2008 "V4 ministers stated that the Czech Presidency in the Council of the EU will be a good opportunity to further enhance the Visegrad cooperation and to intensify the dialogue between the V4 member state presiding the EU and the Visegrad Group on common priorities" (Joint Statement VG Foreign Ministers April 2008).[11] The draft work programme for the Czech EU Presidency stated that the Czech government would "during its EU Council presidency support deepening of the European Neighbourhood Policy with orientation to its Eastern dimension" (Czech EU Presidency Programme). Despite the considerable turbulence during its EU Presidency, the Czech government managed to retain its focus on Eastern policy and was set to achieve a key V4 objective with the scheduled (May 2009) launch of the EP. The Czech presidency is one of three upcoming VG country EU Presidencies. Hungary and Poland have back-to-back Council Presidencies through 2011 which gives some scope to plan ahead. Moreover, a Swedish EU Presidency comes immediately after the Czech one and Sweden is what might be called an 'honorary' VG member when it comes to the EU Eastern policy.

Clearly, the need to address occurring crises does not totally derail the planned business of the EU. As one commentator put it the "EU presidency is a licence to pursue pet projects rather than an opportunity to change the course of the supertanker".[12] The EP is both 'pet project' and currently built it to the course of the 'supertanker' as particularly strong imperatives have been driving it in any case. For example, one clear effect of the Russia-Georgia crisis has been for the EU to receive (in time-honoured fashion) a 'wake-up call' on its dealings with the Eastern neighbours – witness the recent keenness for a measure of rapprochement with Belarus. The combination of the EP project being approved in June 2008 and the Russia-Georgia conflict shortly afterwards seems to have not only accelerated the urgency of upgrading EU relations with the Eastern neighbours but also the depth of integration which will be on offer. The November 2008 draft Commission communiqué on the EP started from the position that the "conflict in Georgia in August 2008 and its broader repercussions have

[11] In an attempts to explore ways in which this might be possible within the Czech EU presidency, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted a major VG conference – "Visegrad and the Czech Presidency of the EU" on 5-6 June 2008 (the Czech Republic at that time in the dual position of currently holding VG Presidency and the EU Presidency from January 2009) sponsored by the IVF and organised within the framework of the IVF 'Strategic Programme'.

[12] *Financial Times*, 26 March 2009, p.10

resulted in increased awareness of the vulnerability of eastern partners…There is a sense of urgency among member states as to the need to enhance relations with our eastern neighbours to support them in drawing closer to the EU" (Runner, 2008). The EP proposals include signing of Association Agreements, and full absorption into the EU internal market (as opposed to the partial and somewhat confused incorporation contained in the current ENP objectives) to give them effective European Economic Area status. The Commission proposals also suggest rapid moves to ease the current obstacles on Eastern neighbours citizens' travel into the Schengen area, including waving of visa fees. So this was an especially permissive time for new dynamics and developments in Eastern policy which in any case already had its place on the EU business agenda.

Turning now to other forms of multilateral VG contributions, these are mainly carried out through the IVF which, since the 2004 EU enlargement, has been increasingly used as an instrument to support external actions of the VG. It does this in a number of ways as far as Eastern neighbours (and West Balkans) are concerned. First, entities from Eastern Europe (including Russia as well as the WNIS) have participated in a few IVF projects. For example in 2007 Russia and Ukraine led some **Small Grant** (max €4000) and **Standard Grant** (usually between €4000 and €20000) projects. However, these projects are few in number and less than what the Central European Initiative (CEI) organises, for example. Second, and far more significant, is the **Visegrad Scholarship Programme,** which started in 2003 as a scheme to finance intra-VG postgraduate student mobility and was subsequently (in 2004) extended to enable students from certain non-VG countries – including WNIS, West Balkans and Russia - to study at a nominated VG university. VG Scholarships are offered to Masters' and Doctoral students for between 1 and 4 semesters and offer € 2000 per semester (**Intra-Visegrad Scholarship**) and €2500 per semester (**Incoming Visegrad Scholarship**). This is undoubtedly a valuable activity, especially for countries hampered by a lack of EU programmes to support outgoing students. Since it operates at postgraduate level, the scheme plays an important role in Europeanisation by widening the horizons of the next generation of leaders/intelligentsia (especially important for say, Belarus). During the first year of operation, Incoming Scholarship numbers were negligible, but have steadily increased, particularly in 2007. Since 2007 a separate programme for Ukrainians has operated, indicating the broader VG priority given to Ukraine, which has been the biggest recipient of the programme by some margin. WNIS/Russia are the main recipients in overall terms with the West Balkans, apart from Serbia, not really taking part so far (see Table 1).

Table 1: Incoming Visegrad Scholarships, 2004-2007 (Number of scholarships allocated, by country)

Home Country	2004	2005	2006	2007
Albania	0	0	0	0
Belarus	3	0	4	12
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0	0	0	0
Croatia	0	0	0	1
Macedonia	0	0	0	0
Moldova	0	0	1	2
Montenegro	0	0	0	0
Russian Federation	1	1	3	13
Serbia	2	1	1	5
Ukraine	0	33	27	73
Total	**6**	**35**	**36**	**106**

Source: *Annual Report of the International Visegrad Fund, various years*

The IVF also recently introduced **Visegrad Strategic Programs,** which provide relatively large sums for projects that "link institutions of all four Visegrad Group countries. The projects must adhere to at least one of the priorities defined by the Conference of Ministers for the given year. The priorities follow the foreign policy priorities of the Visegrad Group" (IVF Annual Report 2007, 27). Four projects which have relevance for the VG states' inputs to EU Eastern policy are currently being implemented (see Table 2). Like all IVF projects, they are run by NGOs and must involve all four VG countries. Though networks between VG researchers in this field are already well-established, IVF projects provide the key ingredient of financial means to support and motivate their collaborative work. Those projects focusing on the Eastern neighbourhood are bringing together think-tanks – including the leading foreign and security policy analysts - to work together on Visegrad-level studies and policy research. Their effectiveness will be revealed in due course (3 out of the 4 are in their early/mid stages). Outputs which have appeared so far include conferences and workshops to develop and share ideas and experience, policy briefs, in-depth studies of specific issues/problems (e.g. visa policy, cross-border people movements, energy security). Communication and consultation with state bodies is built in to the programmes as is a

process of obtaining inputs and advice from partners in the recipient countries via offering them funded access to conferences and workshops. Recommendations which have been reflected in the VG policy level have also been generated. For example, a Policy Brief by Balázs et al produced within the project *Strengthening Central European Contribution to the Eastern Dimension of EU's CFSP'* recommended that for Eastern policy "the EU needs to develop a coherent two-tier strategy: The existing *bilateral* frameworks should be complemented by a new *regional* framework(s). The Action Plans should facilitate *political* modernisation and democracy building, while sectoral agreements (as designed in the Commission's Communication) should serve *sectoral* modernisation of new neighbours (Free Trade Agreements/FTA, Trans-European Networks/TEN)" (Balázs et al, 3). Another notable component of that same project is an ongoing collation of data on all VG entities, including NGOs not covered by IVF funds, currently providing know-how training/experience sharing to WNIS with the aim of achieving a more effective and cost-efficient coordination of such activities. The policy-making contribution of the VG therefore includes sponsorship of major IVF projects aiming to improve the scope and effectiveness of V4 foreign policy cooperation. Finally, it should be noted that strategic projects oriented specifically towards cooperation towards Eastern neighbours should appear in the near future since the 2009 priorities include "Sharing V4 Know-How with Neighbouring Regions" (IVF Annual Report 2008, 12).

Table 2: Visegrad 'Strategic Projects' on the EU Eastern Policy theme

Year Commenced	Title of Project	Lead Institution
2005	***Strengthening the Central European Contribution to the Eastern Dimension of the EU's CFSP***	Prague Security Studies' Institute (Prague)
2007	***The Evaluation of the Visegrad Countries' Democratic Assistance Programmes***	Policy Association for an Open Society (Prague)
2007	***Strengthening Visegrad Cooperation via Foreign Policy Research: Channelling Experiences and Learning From each Other***	Hungarian Institute for International Affairs
2008	***Young Experts of Visegrad for the Future of Europe – Sharing the Experience of European Integration with Neighbouring Countries***	National Fund for Students in Hungary (Budapest)

Source: *Annual Report of the International Visegrad Fund, various years*

4. MULTILATERAL VISEGRAD COOPERATION ON EU EASTERN POLICY: OBSTACLES AND LIMITING FACTORS

The final section deals with some problems surrounding the VG contribution to EU Eastern policy and broader Europeanisation processes in WNIS. As far as the chance of the VG achieving any major strategic overhaul of Eastern policy is concerned, this is something that

was probably quite unrealistic right from the start. The main thrust of ENP was established before the 2004 enlargement and was, for many, in any case path-dependent in that it utilised the basic enlargement methodology. This path-dependency reflects the limited 'toolbox' of the EU and the common ways (i.e. economic integration, adoption of elements of the 'acquis', political conditionality etc.) in which it tends to engage with membership candidates and aspirant candidates. Furthermore, any ideas of a 'grand initiative, which would "interconnect ENP policy in Eastern Europe with its common spaces agenda with Russia" (Duleba, 2008, 67) obviously runs up against a key problem. EU-Russia relations generally are bedevilled by divergent member states' attitudes towards and relationships with Russia. Moreover, as Smith put it "several members states (particularly the large states, Germany, France and the UK) consider Russia to be too important a global player to let the EU lead in relations with it" (Smith, 2005, 286). Even the achievement of a membership perspective for say, Ukraine, faces too many formidable obstacles at the current time, including the many issues hampering further enlargement initiatives in general and again the Russia factor.[13]

Thus only piecemeal moves forward in relations with the WNIS were feasible to achieve, such as introduction of sectoral programmes, opening up more EU programmes, increase of funding to the Eastern flank of ENP, moves to Associate Membership, the EP etc.. However, as is clear from section 3, the VG has only really played a secondary role in the incremental gains achieved so far. Therefore a very important overall observation on the VG multilateral approach is that the V4 have clearly not managed to exercise *collective strategic leadership* of EU policy towards Eastern neighbours. The main proposals for reforming the ENP have come from other major players in the EU. Most notably Germany, which seems to have retained its role as "the traditional driving force for a European Eastern policy" (Kempe, 2007, 34), with its ENP-plus being followed by reactions from individual CEE, including VG, states (Poland, essentially the lead VG country on Eastern policy, and also Lithuania) and most recently other alliances formed on this issue most notably Poland and Sweden for the EP proposal. The main contribution of the VG multilateral approach therefore has been as an alliance to support and push Eastern policy initiatives that get VG approval but which so far have not been products of a VG multilateral approach. The absence of a collective V4 lead even within the main parameters of ENP reform reflects a number of factors which have so far diluted a collective VG response to the challenges of EU relations with Eastern Europe. Some of these problems reflect the weaknesses of the concept of a VG multilateral approach. They not only affect the process of influencing EU policy but have also been holding back the both V4 effort in

[13] Even the V4 do not explicitly state their joint support for Ukraine membership of the EU. Their many joint statements approve the principle of not refusing membership to any European country that can meet EU standards but it is not possible to find a clear endorsement of Ukrainian EU candidacy.

helping to implement the current EU approach and the process of supplementing it with their own programmes to further the Europeanisation of the WNIS.

First, the relatively greater commitment of Poland in terms of the intensity of its concern with WNIS (and predominantly Ukraine) brings into play what has long been perceived as a traditional 'structural' weakness of the VG - Poland's size and the longstanding 'regional power/leader' self-perception The other Visegrad countries' tend to harbour suspicion about a Polish tendency to see the VG not as a collective exercise but rather as a vehicle for Poland to use as and when in order to 'amplify' its own preferences and also as a 'forum of last resort'. This connects to a proclivity for the VG members to 'break ranks' and act independently and/or work with other partners, as per Poland's decision to collaborate with Sweden on the EP. The key principles – e.g. a separate approach for Eastern neighbours to include a regional/multilateral framework - of the EP were discussed many times by the V4 and represented a shared VG vision. But the EP itself was not elaborated within the VG mechanism and was not subject to consultation with the Czech 2007/8 VG Presidency. Though the VG partners subsequently endorsed and expressed support for the EP concept, this episode vividly demonstrated that the VG is not the automatic platform for launching major inputs to EU Eastern policy. Yet this should not be seen as a purely Polish tendency and it has been interesting to note that the EU Eastern policy issue has generated a kind of 'leadership competition' within the VG, particularly between the Czechs and the Poles. The Czech government, maybe mindful of its then current 'leadership' status as VG Chair and forthcoming EU Presidency, prepared its own proposal for an upgrading and strengthening of EU Eastern Policy ('ENP and Eastern Neighbourhood - Time to Act') in April 2008. Furthermore, it also presented a proposal on EU-Belarus relations to a GAERC working group, much to the chagrin of the other V4 who had understood that this was supposed to be a joint V4 paper.[14]

Second, due to some of the factors mentioned above, the mechanics of drafting common VG strategy papers for the ENP tend to be rather protracted and beset by bureaucratic procedures and diplomatic issues which make for haggling over fine detail and insistence that national stances are reflected. The April 2007 ***Visegrad Group Contribution to the Discussion on the Strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy*** was arguably something of a rather bland, 'compromise' text containing with mainly already well rehearsed positions rather than any far-reaching novel solutions. Frustration with a slow process and competitive tendencies can mean partners may prefer to keep 'big ideas' back from collective diplomacy and present them as triumphs of national diplomacy. These difficulties also seem to indicate that the VG is not capable of fast collective detailed policy responses when windows of opportunity such

[14] I would like to thank Michal Koran and Joanna Kaminska for informing me about these developments.

as the Sarkhozy Mediterranean Union initiative (which obviously helped pave the way for the EP) present themselves.

Third, specific VG multilateral assistance to WNIS reform programmes is obviously limited by the amount of resources the VG states can provide. The relatively small scale of VG funds may cause the recipient states to see the VG itself as a rather minor player or even irrelevant (for them). While this doesn't rule out useful and welcome contributions (e.g. the Incoming Visegrad Scholarships), larger scale impact will necessitate collective access of EU programmes. Uneven allocations of the limited funding has also caused some mild resentment. Moldova, for example, argues that, like Ukraine, it should have a dedicated stream of funding for IVF Scholarships. Fourth, the unwillingness of the VG to enlarge undermines its image as a serious player in the Europeanisation process of key neighbours. So far certain of the VG states (most notably the Czech Republic and Slovakia in response to past interest from Austria, Slovenia and Ukraine.) have blocked enlargement on grounds that the cooperation would be diluted and the VG would lose its distinct identity. However, admission of strategic countries, such as Ukraine, and locking them into the VG's manifold cooperation schemes would presumably expand and intensify their Europeanisation endeavour by opening up the full array of intra-VG cross-border activities. Fifth, the VG multilateral approach is clearly held back by the lack of a Visegrad Secretariat empowered to develop and coordinate new instruments and measures, and to act as a policy entrepreneur. The experience of the CEI is illustrative, where the Trieste based Secretariat has been important in focusing and developing the CEI agenda. However, for various reasons there are no prospects for a VG Secretariat to appear in the foreseeable future.

Sixth, the capacity and motivation of VG state institutions to engage in knowledge transfer/experience-sharing activities with their Eastern counterparts may be an issue. Despite the V4 announcement in 2005 (see Dangerfield, 2008a) that a significant engagement in 'twinning' by VG actors would be a priority aspect of the VG contribution to Eastern states' Europeanisation, participation of VG states has been low so far. In the case of twinning projects for Ukraine, for example, there are no projects led by a V4 state and as far as involvement as partners is concerned, Hungary and Poland are participating in two projects each, Slovakia is not involved in any and Czech participation is also minimal.[15]

Seventh, the current Polish VG Presidency Programme, in recognition of an unexploited realm of multilateral cooperation, is to "seek closer coordination of assistance undertakings, particular of a technical character, addressed to those states in the V4 neighbourhood, i.e. Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and the Caucasus…we will host in Warsaw in October 2008 a conference on assistance activities of V4 countries. This will enable us to exchange

[15] This data was obtained from the National Twinning Contact Points of the V4 countries.

experience in this field and to broadly discuss different means and forms of providing and implementing joint projects addressed to V4 neighbouring states, while taking into consideration a possible form of more institutionalised cooperation" (Polish VG Program 2008/9,2). Lack of coordination of bilateral assistance programmes stems from differences in the scale and type of aid given, the length of time assistance programmes have been in place, alternative national priorities (Ukraine is not a priority country for the Czech Republic for example; Hungary attaches greatest importance to the West Balkans) and preferences for working bilaterally or through other subregional programmes other than the VG (see Hamberger, 2006, pp.96-7). On this theme, Kratochvil and Tumets make an important related point that within the Czech Republic at least "institutional coordination of the (European Neighbourhood – author's insertion) policy is also extremely difficult…Although a number of central institutions deal with ENP partner countries, they seldom see their activities as part of the ENP. Consequently, the only institution really dealing with the ENP is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; however even there the communication has to overcoming substantial problems. In particular the existence of several departments dealing with the ENP" (Kratochvil & Tumets, 2007, 11). However, initiatives taken in 2005 by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and more recently by the Slovak MFA on bilateral assistance offers to Ukraine (see below) may indicate that the question of institutional capacity may assessed too pessimistically and needs to be carefully nuanced. VG coordination of the activities and programmes of NGOs has also been lacking. In sum, coordination of bilateral assistance has been an area of significant but unfulfilled potential for now, but one which the V4 now seem to be getting round to addressing.

The capacity of the WNIS states – political and institutional - to receive the experience-sharing assistance from any source also seems to have been a problem. In June 2005 a Czech MFA 'non-paper' elaborated suggestions for Czech-Ukraine bilateral cooperation in order to assist Ukraine with implementation of the EU-Ukraine Action Plan. It specified the exact fields of assistance on offer and the Czech Ministries available and willing to engage in the assistance. This text was communicated to the Ukrainian government and invited the responses and further suggestions from the appropriate Ukrainian partners who were essentially those ministries with the appropriate competencies. No serious take-up of this offer was received. This seems to indicate therefore that up until now at least experience-sharing efforts have come up against weaknesses in the capacity of the Ukrainian state bodies to engage with a comprehensive and structured reform assistance programme, especially when no funding incentives have been on offer.[16] On the positive side, it also means that role

[16] This episode echoes findings of recent studies by certain specialists on Ukraine. See, especially, Wolczuk (2008) and Solonenko who argues that "pro-EU interests are not well-entrenched in Ukraine, at least not enough to create successful pressure for reforms…the EU has to pay more

of the VG states could well take off significantly in the future should Ukraine and the other WNIS succeed in building the necessary reform momentum and capacity. Since the Slovak MFA currently operates a programme called "Slovak Republic – Ukraine cooperation on EU – Ukraine Action Plan", some evidence on the current state of play should be available soon. The 2008 programme entailed some nineteen (mostly co-financed) activities (seminars, study tours, training courses) focused on helping Ukraine approach EU standards across a number of themes.

Finally, the question of the extent to which the V4 (and CEECs in general) are unified on the Eastern question and whether and how significantly this impedes VG collaboration. In particular, what is the impact of alternative attitudes towards Russia – especially resonant given the different assessments of the Russia-Georgia conflict which were evident between and within the V4 political elites? Kratochvil has written that the assumption that CEE states are "all supportive of further enlargement, they are all very critical of Russia, and they are all dissatisfied with the ENP in its present form" does generally apply. However, a more detailed assessment reveals "striking differences – both in their approach to the East and in their assessment of the ENP" (Kratochvil, 2007, 191). Whilst Ktratochvil's analysis sees less disunity within the V4 compared with across the whole CEE group (see Table 3), it does seem to be sufficient enough to doubt that a VG Eastern policy of *common direction and intensity* can prevail due to: differing levels of commitment to the Eastern policy issue; the 'latecomer' status of the 'three' (and underdevelopment of foreign policy measures therefore) compared to Poland's longstanding attention to the Eastern dimension; variations in country preferences and expertise (though this could also be a strength as it provides a basis for a division of labour in assistance/experience-sharing programmes etc.); and the Russia factor given that "unlike Poland, the three smaller Visegrad countries wish to maintain good relations with Russia, and sometimes they are even willing to sacrifice their ties with other East European countries" (Kratochvil, 2007, 193).

Different attitudes to Russia do not so far seem to be a serious problem so far for the VG multilateral approach as it stands. For one, the 'low-key' nature and scale of V4 involvement in the Eastern neighbourhood is such that it tends not to cut across the V4 individual considerations vis-à-vis Russia (when it comes to IVF activities, for example, Russia takes part). Also, as with many sensitive policy areas and in accordance with standard understanding of the boundaries of VG cooperation, there is no ambition to have policy

attention to capacity-building of the civil service in order to support its so-far positive response to the ENP tools" Solonenko (2008, 34).

coordination on such a 'high politics' topic as relations with Russia.[17] Russia policy and closely-connected aspects of 'hard' security policy (Slovakia and Hungary, for example, were not enthusiastic about the proposed Missile Defence System deployment in their V4 allies) remain the province of national policy and not in the realm of V4 coordination. In any case, the threshold for VG states cooperation on issues pertinent to relations with Russia seems in fact to be to be quite high if recent evidence is anything to go by. To illustrate this with an example, the current programme of the VG, under the Polish 2008/9 presidency, aims to transfer NATO and EU accession-related experience to Georgia and Ukraine and, to coordinate "the input of V4 states to the allied debate on granting the MAP to Georgia and Ukraine" (Polish VG Program 2008/9, 10).

Table 3 Differing Preferences and Strategies of VG states

	Importance of the Eastern dimension	**Main geographical focus**	**Start of involvement**	**Relation to Russia**
Poland	Top priority	Ukraine, Belarus	Before 2004 enlargement	Tense
Visegrad (- Poland)	One of several priorities	Ukraine, Moldova	Mainly after 2004	Cautious

Source: Reproduced from Kratochvil, (2007), p.195

5. CONCLUSIONS

Since 2004 the EU Eastern policy issue has been increasingly prominent in both VG rhetoric and concrete cooperation activities. Joint VG attempts to achieve significant inputs to EU policy became more observable after the end of 2006 and ENP has tended to develop in a way that reflects at least some of the V4 preferences. However, the VG collectively has not played a lead role in the reform of ENP to date. Key moves forward have come from the large EU states (Germany and ENP-plus, France and the Mediterranean Union) and from other intra-EU alliances (Poland/Sweden). So far the VG role – albeit an important one - has been to

[17] Another example of a sensitive policy area on which a unified V4 approach was not possible was the timing of imposition of visa requirements on Ukrainian nationals prior to EU accession, which the V4 were unable to coordinate.

endorse and advocate these other initiatives and to facilitate policy alliances with other EU states seeking to get advantages for the Eastern dimension of ENP. Various factors have limited the effectiveness of VG cooperation towards the Eastern neighbours in the first few years of the post-enlargement period. Some of these reflect some fundamental weaknesses of the multilateral concept. Others suggest that the VG multilateral contribution to EU Eastern policy is probably below potential at the current time, particularly when it comes to the operational dimension of reform assistance and promotion. Further reform progress inside the WNIS and stronger EU commitment to integration with them could facilitate an upgraded VG contribution. Finally, one might expect that divergent approaches to relations with Russia would have considerable scope to undermine the VG cooperation on EU Eastern policy. This does not seem to be the case so far and, rather than the fallout from the Russia-Georgia incident having caused any disruption to the VG's role in EU Eastern policy, it has actually brought about increased opportunities. It resulted in not only an acceleration of the EP project but also stimulated a more accommodating stance on Belarus. These outcomes are likely to result in further opportunities both for VG bilateral and multilateral initiatives towards WNIS. The key question is whether VG cooperation will be sufficiently robust, coordinated and resourced to take advantage of them.

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