

# The Scope of Influence of the Central and Eastern European Member States of the EU on Shaping the EU's Policy towards Russia – The Case of the Visegrad Countries

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As a result of the EU's Eastward enlargement, when the Union's closest neighbourhood was significantly changed, the relations between the EU and Russia have gained a new dimension. In 2004, the EU's eastern border shifted towards the region that is perceived by Russia as its main area of influence. The special interest of Central and Eastern European Member States of the EU in the eastern neighbourhood has caused tensions in the EU's relations with Moscow. The author argues that these arise from diverging visions of the post-Soviet space. This raises the question whether the CEE member states of the EU are entitled, due to their geographical and historical conditions, to shape the EU's policy towards Russia. The complexity of this issue requires looking at the Union's policy towards Russia in the context of the national interests of selected EU Member States. The paper examines the scope of the influence the Central and Eastern European Member States of the European Union have on shaping the EU's policy towards Russia, with the focus on the Visegrad countries. The author analyses whether the V4 countries' foreign policy interests affect the Union's decisions on its policy towards Russia, and then moves on to assess the need of building wider alliances with the 'old' Member States of the EU in formulating a common policy towards Moscow.

*Keywords:* CEE states, Visegrad Group, Russia, European Union, foreign policy.

The accession of new countries to the European Union in 2004 and 2007 brought a new geostrategic reality to Europe. Bilateral relations between the Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states of the EU<sup>1</sup> and Russia could play a significant role for the cooperation between Moscow and the EU. Although the acceding countries were obliged to accept the *acquis communautaire*, relations between Russia and the European

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<sup>1</sup> Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Bulgaria.

Union are still determined by the previous bilateral cooperation.<sup>2</sup> The question that needs to be asked is whether there is subregional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe in matters related to Russia or the common historical background of the CEE states is insufficient to build a single vision of relations with Kremlin. What needs to be taken into account when analysing the potential of the Central and Eastern European states is the fact that when joining the European Union in 2004 and 2007, these countries became party to pre-existent policy between the EU and Russia. The only thing they could have done at that time was to present new and fresh perspectives in the relations with the EU's largest eastern neighbour. The 'new' countries needed to answer the question whether they had the will to find common ground and create a new policy towards Russia. When looking at the current relationship with Moscow, it can be stated that the common historical background of the CEE states alone proved to be insufficient for building a single vision of EU–Russia relations.

### **Different visions of the post-Soviet space**

Russia sees itself as an actor who plays a stabilising role in its periphery. Nonetheless, Moscow has failed numerous times in convincing the former members of the Soviet Union of its role as a stability guarantor in the region.<sup>3</sup> After the biggest enlargement in 2004, it was the European Union that offered an instrument to its eastern neighbours – the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).<sup>4</sup> Its aim was to create a ring of friends to better promote democracy and stabilisation in the closest neighbourhood, without offering accession prospects. All EU countries, including CEE states, agreed on the principles and goals of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Russia refused to join the ENP but became a key partner for the European Union. The EU's policy towards Russia has been an exceptional case of diverse interests among EU Member States, and the Union's policy towards its eastern partners within the ENP (and later the Eastern Partnership) has proven to have a strong impact on the relations between the European Union and Russia.

The Russian Federation is a strategic partner of the European Union and at the same time its competitor in the post-Soviet space due to its different vision of the common neighbourhood. The legal basis of cooperation between the EU and Russia is the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1994, ratified in 1997. Russia's relations with the EU are based on four common areas (the common economic area,

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<sup>2</sup> T. Bordachev, 'The Russian challenge for the European Union: Direct Neighbourhood and Security Issues', in I. Kempe (ed.), *Beyond EU enlargement, The agenda of direct neighbourhood for Easter Europe*, Vol. I, Guetersloh: Bartelsmann Foundation Publishers, 2001, pp. 47–48.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> The European Neighbourhood Policy covers 16 countries: 6 from the EU's eastern neighbourhood (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and 10 from the southern neighbourhood (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia).

including environment; the area of freedom, security and justice; the area of external security; the area of research and education, including cultural aspects<sup>5</sup>) and road maps, which are similar to the Action Plans formulated for the ENP partners. Relations with Kremlin are a divisive issue among the EU countries. Diverse standpoints are a serious obstacle in creating a unified foreign policy towards Russia.<sup>6</sup> Mutual relations are influenced by different visions of the post-Soviet space. Russia perceives this region as its sphere of influence and therefore opposes any special relations between the European Union and its eastern neighbours that could cause a detriment to Russia's national interests. The EU's policy towards its eastern neighbours is interpreted by Kremlin as an instrument for the EU to assert itself in the region. Russia therefore perceives any attempt to launch special relations between the EU and the eastern countries as a threat to its interests.<sup>7</sup>

### **Foreign policy interests of the CEE member states of the EU – the case of the Visegrad Group**

The foreign policy interests of the CEE member states of the EU are clearly geographically oriented and mostly concern their immediate neighbourhood. Besides territorial conditions, there are historical factors that determine the intensity of their foreign policy. While all CEE countries declare interest in the EU's eastern policy, for some of them particular relations are of fundamental importance. Good examples of this are the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia), for whom, as post-soviet countries, relations with Russia are the main priority. All of them are also interested in relations with other eastern neighbours, but their main (and common) goal is to contain Russia's expanding influence in the region.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, challenges that need to be faced after the accession of the CEE countries affect not only the political level of cooperation but also issues such as trade and cross-border cooperation as well as the problem of Russian-speaking minorities in the EU Member States.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Formulated in ST. Petersburg in May 2003 in the framework of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, EU external action service website: [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia_en) (accessed on 28.12.2016).

<sup>6</sup> D. Lynch, 'In Search for EU Foreign Policy', *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2007, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> H. Adomeit, 'Russia. ENP competitor', in E. Lannon (ed.), *The European Neighbourhood Policy's Challenges. Les défis de la politique européenne de voisinage*, College of Europe Studies/Cahiers du Collège d'Europe, No. 14, Brussels: P.T.E. Peter Lang, 2012, p. 393.

<sup>8</sup> V. Bilcik, 'Foreign Policy in Post-Communist EU', *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2010, Vol. XIX, No. 4, pp. 9–10.

<sup>9</sup> T. Bordachev, 'Europe's Russia Problem: Immediate Concerns and Long-term Prerequisites', in I. Kempe (ed.), *Prospects and Risks Beyond EU Enlargement. Eastern Europe: Challenges of a Pan-European Policy*, Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2003, p. 97.

## The Visegrad countries

The Visegrad Group (VG, also known as V4) was formed in 1991 as a platform for Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland aimed to help in the accession process to the European Union and NATO. Once these goals were fulfilled, there came the question of the need for further subregional cooperation among the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.<sup>10</sup> The V4 countries decided to focus on regional activities to strengthen the CEE region in the European Union. They addressed some attempts to create a joint vision of the European Union's eastern policy. The new guidelines presented after the accession highlighted the need for cooperation with the new eastern neighbours.<sup>11</sup> The V4 states have presented numerous 'Joint Declarations' regarding the relations with the countries beyond the EU's eastern border, although strong reactions to the EU's proposals in this matter could be seen from 2006. It was the Polish and Lithuanian response to the Germany's 'ENP plus' proposal.<sup>12</sup> Both governments demanded differentiation between 'European neighbours' (with accession prospects) and 'neighbours of Europe' (with no institutional prospects). These views were highlighted in the V4 document presented to the Council in April 2007: 'The Visegrad Group Contribution to the discussion on the strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy'. The plan was to make a clear distinction between the eastern and the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, at the same time, there was no joint vision concerning EU–Russia relations. They were never included in the V4 programme as the countries preferred bilateral cooperation with Moscow. Only the topic of common energy security, as Russia remained their main energy supplier, was discussed during the V4 meetings.<sup>14</sup>

The Visegrad Group acts only within those areas on which all V4 countries hold a common position. Consequently, it tries to ignore issues in which they have different interests. This division among the Visegrad states influences the V4's effectiveness in foreign policy issues. Differences in the attitudes towards Moscow surfaced in the Visegrad Group in the periods of tense relationship between the EU and Russia. During the Russian–Georgian war in 2008, Poland and the Czech Republic expressed their critical attitude towards Russia; Slovakia and Hungary, however, criticised Georgia.

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<sup>10</sup> The dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia took effect on 1 January 1993.

<sup>11</sup> M. Dangerfield, 'The contribution of the Visegrad Group to the European Union's "Eastern" policy: Rhetoric or reality?', in J. Gower, G. Timmins (eds), *The European Union, Russia and the Shared Neighbourhood*, London: Routledge, Europe-Asia Studies, University of Glasgow, 2011, pp. 52–54.

<sup>12</sup> The German proposal of the "ENP-Plus" was aimed at creating a more attractive partnership for the EU neighbours to ensure stability and security in the EU neighbourhood.

<sup>13</sup> M. Dangerfield, 'The contribution...', op. cit., pp. 56–57.

<sup>14</sup> A. Adamczyk, 'Cooperation of the Visegrad Group member countries within the European Union: experiences and challenges for Poland', in A. Adamczyk, P. Dubel (eds), *The European Union and Poland. Problems and Achievements*, Warsaw: Centre for Europe, University of Warsaw, 2015, pp. 68–69.

Russia's annexation of Crimea<sup>15</sup> and the conflict in eastern Ukraine<sup>16</sup> have been a challenge to the solidarity of the V4. The Visegrad countries perceive the Ukrainian crisis from different angles, which directly causes a split in the V4 in terms of the policy towards Russia. The Visegrad states agree on many issues (such as sanctions against Russia), but there are more differences than common points in their attitude towards the biggest eastern neighbour. Historical and geographical ties have been replaced by competitive political and economic interests, mostly in terms of energy and security. Poland draws attention to the (security) threat posed by Russia, while the other three states focus more on pragmatic concerns.<sup>17</sup> The European Union showed unity by imposing sanctions on Russia,<sup>18</sup> but the political leaders of the Visegrad states expressed their different attitudes to some aspects of the conflict. They complied with the EU's official position and supported Ukraine, but at the same time, none of the Visegrad countries except Poland showed readiness to shape the EU's policy towards Russia.<sup>19</sup>

Different national interests in relations with Moscow have led to the lack of cohesive stance within the V4. In the Czech Republic there have been two narrations on the attitude towards Russia. One presents Russia as a partner in trade, neglecting the security aspect of the relation. The other focuses on the authoritarian regime in Kremlin and its anti-Western position and thus sees Moscow as a potential enemy.<sup>20</sup> The new foreign policy strategy formulated in 2015 presents, however, a clear stance of the Czech Republic on the Ukrainian crisis. It states that policy towards Russia will be 'determined by respect for international law and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of its neighbours'.<sup>21</sup> The Czech Republic is dependent on imports of gas and oil from Russia, therefore energy is the most important part of the bilateral trade relations.<sup>22</sup> The economic ties with Russia and reliance on the supply of its fossil fuels

<sup>15</sup> More: T. A. Olszański, A. Wierzbowska-Miazga, *The consequences of the annexation of Crimea*, Analyses, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 19.03.2014, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-03-19/consequences-annexation-crimea> (accessed on 19.12.2016).

<sup>16</sup> More: K. Bachmann, I. Lyubashenko, *The Maidan Uprising, separatism and foreign intervention: Ukraine's complex transition*, Frankfurt am Main–New York: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014; D. R. Marples, F. V. Mills (eds), *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution*, Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> B. Jarábik, *Russia, Ukraine and the Visegrad: time to get real*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 November 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/11/14/russia-ukraine-and-visegrad-time-to-get-real-pub-57236> (accessed on 16.02.2016).

<sup>18</sup> More on sanctions: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/ukraine-crisis/> (accessed on 18.12.2016).

<sup>19</sup> J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov, 'The Visegrad countries have a stake in the success of a pro-European Ukraine', in J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds), *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, Warsaw: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2015, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> P. Kratochvíl, V. Řiháčková, 'Domestic political context since 1989: Russia as a dividing element in Czech society', in J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds), op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> J. Marusiak, 'Russia and the Visegrad Group – More Than a Foreign Policy Issue', *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2015, Vol. XXIV, No. 1–2, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> H. Schulzová, 'Trade and energy – the conflict's limited impact on the Czech economy', in J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds), op. cit., p. 37.

influence decisions taken by the Czech authorities. The conflict in Ukraine has also had impact on the Czech Republic's support for a single energy market. The question of energy efficiency could be recently heard more often in the Czech public debate, although not only due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine but also due to energy debates within the EU.<sup>23</sup>

In Slovakia, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine caused a contradictory response from country's authorities. Officially, Slovakia supported the EU's perception of the annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of Ukraine by Russia, but at the same time Prime Minister Robert Fico made statements that were not in line with the official position of the country.<sup>24</sup> President Andrej Kiska has shown no doubt about the presence of Russian troops in eastern Ukraine, whereas Prime Minister Fico perceives the situation in Ukraine as a geopolitical conflict between Russia and the United States.<sup>25</sup> These discrepancies show there is a division on the Slovak political stage between supporting the democratic transformation of the Eastern neighbours and pragmatic cooperation with Russia while avoiding any conflict relations. The Russian intervention in Ukraine has not changed the government's attitude towards Moscow, and Bratislava is trying to have a good relationship with both Ukraine and Russia.<sup>26</sup> Slovakia supports the Eastern Partnership,<sup>27</sup> but its officials are emphasising that the EaP should not be treated as an EU project against Kremlin.<sup>28</sup> In terms of energy dependence, Slovakia is not dependant on fossil fuels from Russia as much as other countries, but the imports of oil and gas from Russia are still significant.<sup>29</sup>

In Hungary, Fidesz's foreign policy consists in distancing the country from its Western partners as a form of disapproval of the liberal democracy model and in trying to avoid unequivocal positions regarding the Russian intervention in eastern Ukraine. Therefore, among the CEE countries Hungary is the one that tries to maintain the closest relations with Moscow. This major shift in policy direction came in 2013 with the meeting between Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and President Vladimir Putin. At the beginning of 2014, the Hungarian government decided to launch strategic cooperation with Russia in the field of nuclear energy, including the construction of

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> G. Mesežnikov, O. Gyárfášová, 'Slovakia's response to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: Domestic socio-political aspects, parties' stances, public opinion', in J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds), op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>25</sup> M. Gniazdowski, J. Groszkowski, A. Sadecki, *Wyszehradzka kakofonia wobec konfliktu rosyjsko-ukraińskiego*, Analizy, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 10.09.2014.

<sup>26</sup> A. Duleba, 'Slovakia's foreign policy towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict', in J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds), op. cit., p. 168.

<sup>27</sup> The Eastern Partnership is a joint project of Poland and Sweden within the ENP, inaugurated on 7 May 2009 in Prague. Its goal is to enhance cooperation between the EU and its eastern neighbours – partners of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan).

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 171.

<sup>29</sup> More: J. Mesík, 'Economics and energy in Slovak-Russian relations in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict', in J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds), pp. 177–179.

Paks II (a nuclear power plant) by Rosatom, financed with a EUR 10 billion loan from Russia.<sup>30</sup> Hungary's political dependence on Moscow became stronger as almost half of electricity in Hungary comes from nuclear energy and around 25 per cent from gas (mostly supplied by Gazprom).<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Orbán claimed that sanctions towards Russia were more harmful to the Europeans than Russians and thus were not bringing good results. Although Hungary condemned the annexation of Crimea, Victor Orbán did not want to be associated with the conflict, also because of the situation of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. Despite the Prime Minister's critical remarks, the Hungarian government followed the EU's policy line towards Russia, but it did so mostly due to pragmatic calculation.

Among all Visegrad countries, Poland has supported Ukrainians in the conflict with Russia from the very beginning of the crisis. Poland's official position has emphasised multilateral cooperation in resolving the conflict on its eastern border. Ukraine has always been the most important partner for Poland among its neighbours (Poland has been known as Ukraine's 'advocate' in Brussels). Russia, in turn, has usually been seen as a 'problematic neighbour'.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Poland tries to convince Western countries (France, Germany) to shape relations with Russia within the framework of the European Union rather than on the bilateral level of cooperation.<sup>33</sup> In terms of Visegrad cooperation, Warsaw has been the biggest opponent of Russia's policy towards Ukraine among all the V4 countries.<sup>34</sup> Given that the other V4 capitals advocated a soft policy towards Moscow, Poland started looking for a partner in its eastern policy in Germany rather than within the V4. Since Ukraine as a gas transit country is a key partner for Poland, the Ukrainian crisis has become an opportunity for Warsaw to raise the issue of dependence on Russia's energy supply on the EU level.<sup>35</sup> Poland aims to be independent from Gazprom, but other Visegrad countries perceive dependence from Russian gas as an economic (and not security) problem.<sup>36</sup> Before the gas crisis of 2009, there was no cooperation within the Visegrad Group in this sector.

<sup>30</sup> For more see: A. Sadecki, Sz. Kardaś, *Rosyjsko-węgierska umowa atomowa*, Analizy, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 15.01.2014, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2014-01-15/rosyjsko-wegierska-umowa-atomowa> (accessed on 04.02.2017).

<sup>31</sup> B. Feledy, 'Hungarian foreign policy and the crisis in Ukraine', in J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds), op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> A. Łada, Ł. Wenerski, 'Back to basics? Polish foreign policy and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict', in J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds), op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>33</sup> A. Szczerbiak, *Poland within the European Union. New awkward partner or new heart of Europe?*, London–New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 95–96.

<sup>34</sup> Radosław Sikorski, the Polish minister of foreign affairs, together with the foreign ministers of France and Germany facilitated negotiations between the Ukrainian opposition and President Yanukovych in February 2014.

<sup>35</sup> In April 2014, the Polish government proposed establishment of the Energy Union, including energy security.

<sup>36</sup> E. Kuźelewska, A. R. Bartnicki, R. Skarzyński, 'Origins of and perspectives for the future for the Visegrad Group', in A. Piekutowska, I. Wrońska (eds), *Ten years of the Visegrad Group member states in the European Union*, Warszawa–Białystok: Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA, 2015, p. 157.

Until then, gas prices were low and there was no threat of energy shortages. After 2009, the Visegrad countries considered diversification of supplies to increase their security.<sup>37</sup> The V4 countries were perceived as transit countries for Russian gas and oil to Western Europe, but the engagement in Nord Stream and South Stream decreases the importance of the V4 in this matter.<sup>38</sup> However, the expectations of the Visegrad countries concerning the energy union are not consistent, which raises the question whether further close cooperation on this issue will take place.

### **Sanctions against Russia – a problematic issue among the Visegrad countries**

Despite having condemned the annexation of Crimea, the Visegrad countries are split over the sanctions against Russia. Although they jointly declared solidarity with Ukraine, with the exception of Poland they hold a ‘soft line against Moscow’, mostly due to economic reasons: not only because of trade relations but also due to their great dependence on Russia’s supplies of gas.<sup>39</sup> All Visegrad countries supported the first round of the EU’s sanctions towards Russia, but the initial penalties affected only a small group of officials (mostly visa bans and freezing of foreign funds of certain individuals). With the escalation of the conflict, the EU decided on additional sanctions against Russia.<sup>40</sup> Discussion in the EU regarding new waves of sanctions as well as debates during the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014 highlighted the differences in the positions of the V4 countries towards the conflict in Ukraine. This was in stark contrast to the previous practice of the Visegrad countries’ cooperation because on the issue of NATO enhancement and perception of threats on its eastern flank all four countries usually maintained similar positions.<sup>41</sup>

The differences in the attitudes towards the sanctions have various reasons (economic, ideological, etc.) that underlie the countries’ foreign policies. The Visegrad states are exposed to the effects of sanctions against Russia (as well as Russian sanctions against the EU). For export-oriented economies, trade bans have become a challenge, particularly for the business circles that are interested in developing the economic

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<sup>37</sup> A. Rącz, *Models of Energy co-operation between V-4 Member States and Russia*, Conference Paper presented at the international conference “Visegrad Group States and Russia: dimensions of cooperation, chances and challenges” organised by the Embassy of the Republic of Poland Moscow, 17 April 2013, pp. 61–62.

<sup>38</sup> T. Strážay, *The Visegrad Group and Russia: in search for common grounds for a non-existing cooperation*, Conference Paper presented at the international conference “Visegrad Group States and Russia: dimensions of cooperation, chances and challenges” organised by the Embassy of the Republic of Poland Moscow, 17 April 2013, p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> S. Casablanca, *V4 divergences: symptom of a deeper crisis in Europe?*, 22.12.2014, <http://www.eurodialogue.eu/V4%20divergences%3A%20symptom%20of%20a%20deeper%20crisis%20in%20Europe%3F> (accessed on 16.12.2016).

<sup>40</sup> A. Adamczyk, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>41</sup> M. Gniazdowski, J. Groszkowski, A. Sadecki, op. cit.



relationship with Russia. In the conclusions from the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committees of the V4's parliaments, the MPs reaffirmed that 'Russian intervention in Ukraine has affected mutual relations', which were based on long cooperation, and emphasised that sanctions against Russia 'are used as an instrument; not a goal in itself'.<sup>42</sup> Three out of the four Visegrad countries – Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – were not in favour of further sanctions against Russia. Poland seems to be the only V4 country that wants to maintain a harsh policy towards Kremlin.<sup>43</sup> Prime Minister Sobotka claimed that extending the sanctions would have a negative impact on the Czech economy. According to President Zeman, only an invasion similar to the one against Czechoslovakia in 1968 could justify economic sanctions on Russia. Slovakia's Prime Minister Fico opposed the sanctions as well; he found them counterproductive and claimed they could escalate tensions, affecting the possibility of finding a diplomatic solution to the conflict, but he did not block them – he just wanted to limit the scope. Viktor Orbán declared solidarity and supported the EU sanctions; however, at the same time, he continued his efforts to maintain good relations with Moscow.<sup>44</sup> The contradictory signals coming from the capitals of the Visegrad countries are perceived by Moscow as a proof of the lack of unity in the EU (and NATO), which encourages it even further to cooperate with European states on a bilateral basis.

### Visegrad Group's 'non-policy' on Russia

It is doubtful whether the Visegrad countries are capable of successfully turning their former pre-accession cooperation into a post-accession joint vision of the EU's relations with Russia. Despite the Visegrad countries' different opinions on the policy towards Russia, the V4 does not have a negotiating body that could be helpful in working out common positions. At the same time, Russia prefers bilateral dialogue to multilateral agreements. Although some issues could be coordinated on the V4 level (such as energy policy), Visegrad countries are still hesitant of cooperation in terms of policy towards Russia. The section regarding areas of potential cooperation in the guidelines presented by the V4 mentions 'active contribution' to the development of the neighbourhood policy.<sup>45</sup> Notwithstanding, formulation of a unified foreign policy is a problematic matter. Cooperation between countries that have a common historical background regarding relations with Russia could be turned into effective policy but

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<sup>42</sup> Conclusions from the meeting of Foreign Affairs Committees of V4 Parliaments, 25.02.2015, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/conclusion-from-the> (accessed on 16.12.2016).

<sup>43</sup> F. Markovic, *What lies behind Visegrad Four's different positions towards Ukraine and Russia?*, 5 September 2014, <http://www.europeanpublicaffairs.eu/what-lies-behind-visegrad-fours-different-positions-towards-ukraine-and-russia/> (accessed on 16.12.2016).

<sup>44</sup> M. Gniazdowski, J. Groszkowski, A. Sadecki, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> M. Dangerfield, 'The Visegrad Group in the Expanded European Union: From Preaccession to Postaccession cooperation', *East European Politics & Societies*, 2008, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 653.

requires political commitment. This mostly depends on the interests of the ruling party in each Visegrad country.

There have been no major collective attempts to influence the EU's policy towards Russia within the V4 format. The Visegrad Group is not an economic project and has no tools for export promotion, so there are no incentives to work together in terms of trade with Russia. Bilateral mechanisms have been found to be sufficient in that case. In fact, the members of the Visegrad Group strengthen their relations with those partners that can meet their national interests.<sup>46</sup> While all V4 states are critical of Russia's foreign policy, they want to maintain good relations, albeit with various intensity. As Mark Leonard and Ninu Popescu indicated in their 'power audit' of EU–Russia relations of 2007 that there is still a division within the Visegrad Group in terms of the members' attitudes towards Russia. The authors called Poland a 'New Cold Warrior', included the Czech Republic in the group of 'Frosty Pragmatists', and called Hungary and Slovakia 'Friendly Pragmatists'.<sup>47</sup> Almost a decade later, this division is still valid. Different attitudes to relations with Moscow among the V4 countries are also linked to the lack of ambition to coordinate them. This is due to the fact that sensitive matters, such as national minorities, are not supposed to be brought to the V4 table.<sup>48</sup> This highlights the difficulties in reaching one standpoint within a joint political platform that should make it possible for all participants to find a strategic vision of their common foreign interests.

### V4's cooperation with the 'old' member states?

Among the 'old' member states of the European Union, Germany is the driving force when it comes to the European eastern policy. Its relations with Russian authorities are also an example of the EU's policy shaped mostly by bilateral relations with particular countries, based mainly on personal connections between heads of states or governments.<sup>49</sup> For many years, Germany's 'Russia first policy' towards the post-Soviet space was directly linked to relations between German and Russian leaders: Helmut Kohl and Boris Yeltsin, Gerhard Schröder and Vladimir Putin. Some of their decisions were related to the interests of the CEE states, but they did not take into account prior objections from the 'new' members states (e.g., the strategic project of the construction of a pipeline under the Baltic Sea, which bypassed the Baltic states).<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> J. Hamberger, 'The Future of the Visegrad Cooperation from the Hungarian Perspective', *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2006, Vol. XV, No. 3–4, pp. 91–107.

<sup>47</sup> M. Leonard, N. Popescu, *A power audit of EU-Russia relations*, Policy paper, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, November 2007.

<sup>48</sup> M. Dangerfield, 'The contribution...', op. cit., pp. 64–67.

<sup>49</sup> I. Kempe, 'European Neighbourhood Policy and Beyond the Priorities of the German EU Presidency', *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2007, Vol. XVI, No. 1, pp. 34–35.

<sup>50</sup> P. Marcinkowska, 'Republika Federalna Niemiec wobec wschodniego wymiaru Europejskiej Polityki Sąsiedztwa', *Studia Politica Germanica*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 123.

Angela Merkel has taken some steps to avoid the 'Russia first' approach by setting German priorities on other EU eastern neighbours. Like Poland, Germany supported the sanctions towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea. Its policy towards other eastern neighbours results from its interest in having a stable neighbourhood. Mutual relations are based not only on the political and economic relationship but also on ensuring security in the region, particularly in the sphere of energy. Berlin actively supports democratic transformation of the Union's neighbourhood and therefore seems to be a good partner for the CEE member states of the EU in their attempts to build coalitions to counterbalance the Russian foreign policy towards the post-Soviet space.

The CEE member states of the EU are mostly interested in stressing reform processes of the eastern neighbouring countries covered by the eastern dimension of the ENP and therefore in helping these states change their political orientation from Russian influence to European values. Despite close cooperation among Visegrad countries on the Eastern Partnership, they hold different positions on the policy towards Russia. Moscow thus prefers negotiating with individual countries rather than with the whole European Union. This approach is based on the existing form of cooperation and on the fact that different EU Member States present different standpoints. It is harder to reach a consensus within the EU than to negotiate with individual countries.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, Kremlin is determined to negotiate primarily with the most powerful members of the European Union, mainly Germany. Close cooperation with Berlin therefore seems essential. Some of the CEE countries are guided mostly by political motives, while other EU Member States – when it comes to relations with Russia – emphasise the practical aspects of cooperation. Nevertheless, the CEE Member States have undoubtedly brought a new set of interests to the European Union, which have roots in their common communist background. It relates also to the different levels and areas of possible cooperation with Russia, such as identity and ethnicity, which are for the CEE states of the same value as trade benefits. Their strength could lie in common projects, formulated first on a subregional level and then developed when building wider coalitions.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusions

Solidarity in the EU regarding the eastern policy is of special value for the CEE states not only because of their geographical location but also given the fact that inadequate EU policy will primarily and directly affect them. The European Union's foreign policy towards its eastern neighbours is the best ground for cooperation among

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<sup>51</sup> M. G. Delyagin, 'Energy Security: Real and Fictional Problems', *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2007, Vol. XVI, No. 1, p. 82.

<sup>52</sup> T. Dubowski, 'Visegrad Group – common goals and potential at the level of European Union institutions. Selected issues', in A. Piekutowska, I. Wrońska (eds), *Ten years of the Visegrad Group...*, op. cit., p. 23.

the CEE member states of the EU to strengthen their position as a subregion in the EU decision-making process. None of the Western EU Member States understands better the EU's eastern neighbourhood than the CEE countries. They should take advantage of their potential. Among the 'old' members, it is Germany that is vitally interested in the eastern policy of the EU, but it is in the interest of the European Union to consider the Central and Eastern Member States in building relations with the EU's largest neighbour.

So far, the Visegrad Group has not been effective in terms of shaping the EU's policy towards Russia. The CEE member states of the EU need to present a coordinated position of their concept of the relations with Moscow and find a common vision of the European Union's activity in this matter. Besides regional solidarity, the CEE countries should be interested in strengthening the decision-making of the whole European Union. This includes energy solidarity in the EU.<sup>53</sup>

Any assessment of the relations between the EU and Russia needs to take into account cooperation with the other eastern neighbours of the European Union to minimise the conflict areas. As the cooperation within the V4 has shown, there is no automatic mechanism in the CEE region when it comes to launching new projects or a common vision of EU–Russia relations. The formal platform of cooperation is insufficient; readiness for regional cooperation is needed if further negotiations are to be moved to the EU level.

Despite the fact that the Central and Eastern European member states of the EU share a common historical experience, the policy of each individual state has different intensity, based on its national interests. The negative aspect of this approach is the long process of negotiating the new agreement between the EU and Russia. In fact, after the EU enlargement in 2004, we can observe numerous tensions regarding various aspects of cooperation – on both the bilateral and the multilateral level. This concerns problematic issues such as energy matters and interruptions in the energy supply. Any political conflict between Russia and a particular CEE country does not have a direct impact on the relations with the European Union. However, it poses an obstacle for presenting unity of the European Union towards Russia. Russian authorities take advantage of this situation to continue its policy towards individual Member States instead of the EU. Participation of the Visegrad countries in wider alliances within the Union makes it possible for them to influence the policy of the EU towards Russia more effectively than on the bilateral level. So far, the different attitudes of the CEE countries towards Russia's foreign policy has made an impact on the EU's awareness of threats and challenges coming from its eastern border. However, the lack of solidarity between the 'old' and 'new' EU Member States can limit the influence of the CEE states on the EU's policy towards Russia.

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<sup>53</sup> J. Więclawski, 'Poland East-Central Europe and the European Union's policy towards Russia', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2011, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 25–29.