

ISSUE BRIEF

Adrian A. Basora

The Value of the Visegrad Four

Relations between the United States and Central Europe have stabilized after a period punctuated by tensions over Iraq, fears of a resurgent Russia, and uncertainty about U.S. policy toward the region. Critical to this outcome was sustained outreach by the Obama Administration over the past year-and-a-half, including support for NATO contingency planning and military exercises in the Baltics – all designed to provide highly sought “strategic reassurance.” At the same time, it is clear that the full potential of the relationship has not been realized. What had once seemed like immutable ties have frayed through mutual inattention, plus factors ranging from Central Europe’s deepening integration into European structures to America’s intense focus on the Middle East and South Asia. However, the time is now ripe to explore avenues for deeper cooperation.

The year 2011 is without precedent in terms of Central European¹ leadership, with Hungary and Poland holding the rotating European Union (EU) presidencies and Lithuania taking up the Chairmanship-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This “Year of Central Europe” coincides with recent efforts by Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic to revitalize the “Visegrad” cooperation framework, in the hope of gaining greater influence in Europe and a renewed channel for U.S.-Central European dialogue. Although skeptics might wonder whether this initiative can realistically make a significant contribution to transatlantic relations, U.S. officials are in fact engaging with the “Visegrad Four” at senior levels. So are

leading policy thinkers outside of government, whose parallel efforts to engage the region have played a role in reassuring Central European partners of U.S. commitment.

Visegrad at Twenty: A Mature Partner?

The Visegrad group was launched in February 1991 by the first generation of Central Europe’s post-communist transition leaders: Lech Walesa, Jozsef Antall, and Vaclav Havel (before Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Divorce” in 1993). At that point, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia had emerged as the clear front-runners of democratization in the post-communist region. Their leaders wanted to strengthen the reform momentum by working together. And, despite strong initial U.S. and Western European support for their transitions, they also feared that Moscow might once again become a threat to their newly-won freedoms.

A decade later, with internal reforms far more consolidated and NATO and EU membership either imminent or already achieved, Visegrad cooperation lost momentum. By the mid-2000s, however, Central European perspectives had once again begun to change – as Vladimir Putin consolidated his power and sought to undercut Western-style democracy in Russia’s “near abroad.” The Russian military intervention in Georgia in August 2008 and what the Central Europeans saw as weak NATO and EU responses sharply heightened their concerns. These renascent fears of potential abandonment by the West were exacerbated just a few months later, when the Obama Administration announced its “reset” policy

¹ Although this paper focuses largely on the Visegrad Group and recent U.S.-V4 consultations, many of the questions and arguments pertain to U.S. relations with a more broadly construed Central Europe, i.e., the post-communist members of the European Union.

Ambassador Adrian Basora was U.S. Ambassador to Czechoslovakia from July 1992 to December 1992, and then U.S. Ambassador to the Czech Republic from 1993 to 1995. Currently, he serves as a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and Director of the Project on Democratic Transitions.

toward Moscow and its decision not to deploy ground-based anti-ballistic missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic.

These concerns led former Presidents Havel, Walesa, and several other respected leaders of the early stages of Central Europe's transformation to co-sign an open letter to President Obama in July 2009. They said, in effect: "Do not abandon us now, after all you have done to enable our successful democratization, and after all we have done to prove ourselves loyal allies when you needed us" (read: Iraq and Afghanistan). In this context, regional leaders undertook to reinvigorate the V4 – efforts given further impetus by the election of center-right, Atlanticist governments in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

A year-and-a-half later, following consistent U.S. engagement, V4 Political Directors came to Washington in December 2010 for high-level meetings with U.S. government officials. The list of issues that they brought to discuss bespoke progress and confidence. Rather than dwelling primarily on fears of Russia and a desire for more emphatic U.S. security guarantees (along the lines of the 2009 open letter to President Obama), the Political Directors' agenda and approach were forward looking and results-oriented. They addressed a range of issues including Afghanistan and Turkey, energy security for all of Europe, potential U.S.-EU cooperation regarding the EU's Eastern Partnership, and integration of the Western Balkans into NATO and the EU.

Another "Special Relationship?"

Despite the enthusiasm surrounding these meetings, questions remain as to whether there is a realistic basis for the kind of "special relationship" that the four Visegrad countries seek with the United States. The answers revolve around four key issues:

1. Can the Visegrad Four hope to gain significantly more by working with the United States as a *group* rather than by dealing with Washington separately?
2. From a Washington perspective, would the potential benefits justify the efforts that overburdened senior U.S. government officials would have to expend on this new "special cooperative framework" for it to produce a real impact?

V4 Political Directors' Visit to Washington

On December 8 and 9, 2010, the "Visegrad Four" Political Directors – top foreign policy officials from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary – came to Washington as a *group* for a broad-ranging discussion with senior U.S. government representatives. They also met separately with several former American ambassadors to Central Europe and with interested Washington think-tank leaders to explore the potential for broader V4-U.S. cooperation. In addition, the V4 Political Directors participated in an on-the-record forum with interested academics, policy analysts, and the broader public. These events were co-sponsored by the Center for Transatlantic Relations at SAIS, the Atlantic Council, and the Center for European Policy Analysis. The resulting discussions were highly substantive and focused on practical goals.

3. Could the V4 countries, by acting together, become a more significant factor inside the European Union and thus exert leverage within the overall transatlantic community that is disproportionate to their countries' size?
4. Do the V4 have common long-term interests that are sufficiently compelling to sustain their current cooperation through future electoral cycles and changes of government? (Recent efforts to re-energize the V4 have been undertaken by four relatively new center-right governments with Atlanticist leanings.)

The Gains of a Group. On the first question, the answer would seem to be a clear "yes." Given Washington's fiscal crisis and the many urgent challenges that the United States faces around the world, American policy-makers will inevitably have fewer resources and less time than in the past to devote to small, individual European countries. This is true even for a country the size of Poland, with its traditional special ties to the United States and strategic location. But the Poland-Plus-Three combination embodied in the Visegrad Four initiative might have a chance for greater resonance – particularly if the V4 are also seen as often speaking for like-minded countries in Central Europe and beyond.

The Value to Washington. The second question is the potential value for Washington. That will depend in large part on the extent to which the Visegrad countries can gain support for their own positions within Europe, and on how complementary these positions are with U.S. goals. In other words, the V4 countries are much more likely to have an impact on Washington if they focus their attention on issues on which they have some traction within Europe, which are of significant interest to the United States, and on which United States and V4 goals overlap substantially.

Recent events in Belarus, disturbing trends in Ukraine, the Russia-Georgia war, and the Russia-Ukraine gas confrontation serve to remind that the work of creating a Europe “whole and free” is unfinished, and that the stakes involved in the post-communist space are of global import. The region today is less settled, less secure, and less in synch with the United States than it was in the 1990s. Thus, the United States should pursue any promising opportunity to reinvigorate and consolidate democratic progress in the post-communist regions of Europe.² This means working more closely with those, such as the V4, who place a high priority on these goals. In fact, given budgetary trends, leveraging such partnerships may be the best way for the United States to remain meaningfully engaged.

Greater Leverage. Regarding the third question – the V4’s potential to exert greater influence on selected EU policies – it is less than evident that four new members with a combined population of 65 million can exercise broad influence in a European Union of 500 million. However, the V4 are not without assets. Under Council of Ministers’ rules, if Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic vote as a bloc, their total voting weight equals that of France and Germany combined. Obviously, voting rights are not the sole determinant of political influence within the EU, and additional leverage would be needed. For starters, it would be helpful if the V4 were frequently able to be joined by or speak for like-minded countries such as the Baltic States, Romania, and other post-communist EU members. And they would also need to gain support among some of their Western European partners. (There have in fact already been successful “V4-Plus” meetings to coordinate positions on specific topics of clear common interest.)

While it is hard to imagine the V4 carrying the day against France and Germany on major controversial issues, many of their priorities in fact seem unlikely to provoke such opposition. Integration of the Western Balkans into Western structures (Kosovo aside) meets with little opposition within the EU; and diversification of Europe’s energy supplies has begun to garner broader support as well. These are both areas of considerable interest to the United States – and areas in which the United States can make a contribution complementary to that of the EU. To the extent that the V4 can enliven the European Union’s interest in pursuing these goals, U.S. interests will be served, all the more so if the resources Washington has available to support democracy and other reforms in the region continue to decline.

For similar reasons, the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) is an area of particularly strong complementarity between V4 and U.S. objectives. What started as a Polish/Swedish initiative to offer Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and the Caucasian republics an attractive alternative to near-term EU membership has gradually gained wider support, not only among the ten new post-communist members of the Union, but also in Scandinavia and elsewhere. The United States maintains substantial democracy-assistance programs in several of these countries. Closer U.S.-V4-EU cooperation could help encourage their movement toward Western political and economic systems.

While successful U.S.-V4 coordination along the lines of these two examples would require a careful choice of issues, skillful diplomacy, and a bit of patience, the payoff could be highly worthwhile.

How Long Will It Last? This leads to our fourth question: the likelihood of long-term policy consensus among the four Visegrad countries themselves. To gain and retain the type of influence discussed above, the V4 countries would have to remain united on certain key issues over time.

Based on their track record of the past twenty-one years, however, it is not a given that the V4’s current united front will survive changing electoral coalitions in coming years. While post-communist Poland has consistently pursued strongly Atlanticist policies under both conservative and social democratic governments, this has not always been the case with Slovakia. Bratislava’s interest in pursuing a close relationship with the United States and NATO has waxed and

² Although it is outside the scope of this paper, examples of democratic backsliding and reform fatigue are occurring not only on Europe’s margins, but in the EU’s ten newest members, including the V4. Problems relate to corruption, rule of law, media freedom, and the treatment of minorities. These phenomena argue for more, not less U.S. engagement with Central European allies.

waned as governments have alternated between strongly Western-oriented center-right coalitions and Slovakia's more nationalistic and populist political parties. Hungary and the Czech Republic, while more consistent in their Western orientation than Slovakia under populist governments, have not always been quite as energetically Atlanticist as Poland.

Fortunately, the current center-right Slovak coalition government is strongly committed to transatlantic cooperation, as are the Czech and Hungarian governments, which explains the current high degree of consensus and enthusiasm of the Visegrad Four. Slovakia holds the rotating presidency of the V4 into summer 2011, and the recently-elected Radicova government has given high priority to making a success of its current V4 presidency. In a small country like Slovakia, considerable prestige attaches to foreign policy achievements, and this could prove to be a classic opportunity of "success breeding success."

The present Visegrad constellation is also blessed with a tantalizing short-term opportunity: this year's back-to-back EU presidencies of Hungary and Poland. This combines with the V4's current high internal cohesion and commitment to use their "trifecta" presidencies to full effect to give them a unique advantage. If the Slovaks and Hungarians can parlay their presidencies into even a few tangible results during 2011, this would demonstrate the V4's potential for impact in the longer term. Such success, in turn, could be used to help mold domestic opinion in favor of close Visegrad cooperation, particularly in Slovakia and Hungary, thus creating a positive political dynamic that might further consolidate longer-term cohesion among the V4 and between the V4 and the United States.

A positive and creative U.S. response to V4 policy initiatives would also be very helpful. Furthermore, a forthcoming U.S. government response would be further amplified if there was similarly positive engagement by non-government circles in the United States. This could take the form of new business investment; increased educational, cultural, and leadership exchanges; high-profile conferences; and other events that put the spotlight on the V4 and on their mutual interests with the United States.

Conclusion

In sum, for the V4-U.S. relationship to take on lasting momentum, many things would have to go right over the coming year. However, 2011 seems to offer abundant possibilities. Given that the Visegrad Four have identified key areas of shared interest and conveyed their desire to use the EU's "Year of Central Europe" to enhance transatlantic relations, a reciprocal effort on this side of the Atlantic, to include a broad range of non-governmental actors, might well prove worth the effort.

President George H. W. Bush stated in his famous "Europe Whole and Free" speech of May, 1989: "If we are to fulfill our vision – our European vision – the challenges of the next 40 years will ask no less of us." As we begin the second half of these 40 post-Cold War years, we should refocus on this challenge. The V4-U.S. dialogue looks like a good place to start.

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