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Evolution of Regional Cooperation Frameworks in Eastern Europe (1990–2021). The Role of Poland as a Regional Actor

Abstract: Poland's power plays an important role in building the image and international position of the country in the region. It is a good starting point to conduct a proactive policy, which gives Poland the opportunity to act on behalf or in defence of smaller regional neighbours. This, of course, can increase Poland's own significance and potentially opens new political opportunities to contribute to the realization of its own geostrategic interests and goals; in this sense, broadening its influence. It is therefore worth analysing the roles that Poland plays within its region and find the answer to the question of how its position evolves, and to what extent regional roles have an impact on the international position and strength of the state in the European Union. The paper argues that Poland does not effectively exploit cooperation in regional organizations. Thus, its role remains below its own capabilities and it is inferior to the nation's ambitions. Nevertheless, there is still potential to strengthen the state's position and its international role in the European Union and beyond.

Key words: Poland, potential, Europe, region, position on international arena

Poland's power plays an important role in building the image and international position of the country in the region. It is a good starting point to conduct a proactive policy, which gives Poland the opportunity to act on behalf or in defence of smaller regional neighbours. This, of course, can increase Poland's own significance and potentially opens new political opportunities to contribute to the realization of its own geostrategic interests and goals; in this sense, broadening its sphere of influence. It is therefore worth analysing the position of Poland in its region and

find the answer to the question of how its position evolves, and to what extent regional standing have an impact on the international position and strength of the state in the European Union. The paper argues that Poland does not effectively exploit cooperation within regional organizations. Thus, its position remains below its own capabilities and it is inferior to the nation's ambitions. Nevertheless, there is still potential to strengthen the states' position and its international role in the European Union (EU) and beyond. Poland has been a member of three regional international organizations of a general integration nature: the Visegrad Group (V4), the Central European Initiative (CEI), and the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). Only the first one of them has played an important role in shaping Poland's international position. Hence, its membership will be discussed in more detail. Poland is also a member of the Weimar Triangle, but geopolitically this organization is not a part of Central and Eastern Europe, and thus, it will not be further discussed. Moreover, the authors deliberately decided not to discuss Poland's membership in special purpose organizations, such as CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement). The analysis is limited to the period between 1990 and 2021. The paper is based on qualitative research, using analysis, synthesis, and case study methods along with comparative studies based on open sources that allow to validate collected information and data. Thus, it is founded on the desk research of literature and publicised official documents, including government papers, national defence policies, strategies, and reports. The conclusion of the article conceptualises Poland's unique contribution to regional cooperation, security, and defence.

The concept of Central Europe has various definitions depending on the author and the purpose. Definitions vary with respect to geography, geopolitics, culture, etc. The authors of this paper adopt the definition of Central Europe by R. Tiersky (2005, p. 472), who identifies Central Europe as countries which are members of the Visegrad Group, as it is closest to the current geopolitical reality. Some researchers add Slovenia (Jordan, 2005, p. 164) to this group while others include Germany, Austria, and sometimes even Switzerland or Liechtenstein (*Col-lins Dictionary*, 2020). In this paper, the authors focus on the position of Poland in its direct neighbourhood taking into consideration the V4 and the East European nations as these are the most important from the point of view of Poland's foreign policy and security. The first section presents origins of cooperation and the transformation period leading to accession to NATO and the EU. Then, the article examines the peri-

od after all the four nations achieved the important strategic goal. The section that follows examines the importance of eastern neighbourhood and the perception of the region by V4 nations. It enables to recognise different priorities and possible options for Poland to make this political engagement more active. The next section argues that despite common interests, V4 countries show different perception of each other and contrasting attitudes toward international policy. Finally, the article discusses a way ahead, including military cooperation and very briefly new Poland's initiatives. The paper ends with conclusions that contain a synthesis of previous sections and reference to the aim of the paper as specified in the introduction.

Poland as a Leader of Central Europe in the Transformation Period

As noted by Roman Kuźniar (2002, p. 56), “in the regional dimension, the most distinctive geopolitical effect of the 1989 Spring of Nations was the emergence of Central Europe, which was both an objective process and the result of the conscious actions of the countries in the region.” Their goal was to be able to pursue common interests on the international arena (mainly integration with Western structures, but also policy towards the USSR and later the Russian Federation). In this process, Poland played an extremely important role as an initiator, driving force, leader, and a beneficiary of the process at the same time.

The period of transformation and preceding years were marked by the struggle of the former Soviet satellite states to regain their sovereignty. Deliberated support to those nations offered further opportunities for Poland to become a regional leader. Such a perception of Poland was also possible at that time due to its geostrategic location, large population, and the successful transition to democracy and free market economy. These transformations, initiated in Poland by the “Solidarity” movement, triggered the so-called domino effect. Already at that time, Poland became a leader, as other countries drew inspiration and modelled their drive to independence on the development that took place in Poland before and after 1989. The anniversaries of 4th June are celebrated as a symbolic commemoration of the overthrow of communism not only in Poland, but also in other states (as the beginning of the political system collapse in other European countries).

Shortly after 1989, Poland began to engage actively in sub-regional groupings: the Visegrad Group, the Central European Initiative, and the Council of the Baltic Sea States. The position of regional leadership was facilitated by the fact that Poland had no problems related to the integrity of the state, i.e. the lack of border disputes or claims made by national minorities, which other countries struggled with. Those advantages enabled Poland to strengthen quickly its position in the region. This was important because at that time ensuring security depended almost exclusively on diplomatic efforts and the quality of regional “coalitions.” It was due to the low potential of the new states’ defence capabilities and the absence of any committed defence allies (Kuzniar, 2002, p. 58). Poland tried to settle relations with its new sovereign neighbours as soon as possible and most of the treaties on neighbourly relations were concluded in 1991–1992, and only the treaty with Lithuania was signed in 1994.

Poland’s political actions in Central Europe initiated the emergence of so-called “new regionalism” (Gajewski, 2002, p. 297). If one were to analyse the exposés by Polish ministers of foreign affairs, a certain rule could be noticed: an emphasis on the essence of cooperation in the region. Central European policy and its active development became inseparable elements of the Poland’s foreign policy. Regional cooperation served as an “instrument for increasing stability in the region, overcoming the existing economic and civilizational divisions, overcoming stereotypes, and consolidating the habits of neighbourly cooperation” (pp. 276–278). Its overarching goal was to create a pool of common interests, which was especially important in the negotiations with NATO and the EU accession.

In the 1990s, Poland was involved in and initiated many cross-border projects aiming to strengthen the cooperation of EU candidate countries and promoting it in the Committee of the Regions. Certainly, the most important expression of regional cooperation was the creation of the Visegrad Group, whose activities could be divided into three distinct stages (Gajewski, 2002, p. 299):

- 1990–1992: creation and determination of basic directions of activity;
- 1993–1997: discontinuation of political cooperation, except for military issues and limited integration with the European Communities;
- from mid-1997 until the EU accession: revival of cooperation due to the accession of Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary to NATO, and the launch of accession negotiations with the EU.

Poland perceived this initiative as extremely useful in the implementation of its policy. Hence, Warsaw was determined to maintain and strengthen this cooperation. Simultaneously, the cooperation created an opportunity to strengthen Poland's position of the leader and advocate for Central European countries. This not only suited Poland, but it was also welcomed by Western countries, which in part felt exempt from "supervising" actions undertaken by the Central European countries on their path towards democratization and "Westernization." Another forum for Poland was the Council of the Baltic Sea States. Poland recognized the Baltic Sea Region as important, and therefore, it initiated cooperation also in the field of civil security, including combating crime, and sought to make this region important for the EU. Unfortunately, over the years, this priority has ceased to occupy an important place in politics at the governmental level. However, it has remained important as a regional initiative, which is why cooperation at lower levels is still quite intensive.

Poland's interest in the Central European Initiative (CEI) was in turn directed to the implementation of specific projects and was not a top priority. Initially, Poland showed a lot of interest in this organization, which was the effect of the 1991 Soviet coup d'état attempt or "the August Coup" and the situation in the former Yugoslavia. It was considered a threat due to possible consequences for Poland and its immediate neighbourhood. The only major success of the Polish membership in this organization was the decision to expand it in the mid-1990s to include Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine, an expansion which Poland effectively sought. Another Polish initiative was the establishment of a working group on agriculture and Poland's activity in the group for the reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. In general, despite initial declarations, the CEI did not become an effective organization; therefore, the Polish engagement in this forum was limited. It did not allow Poland (or other countries in the region) to be an intermediary or a liaison in creating the unity of the European continent (Gajewski, 2002, pp. 309–312).

After Poland's accession to NATO, the regional policy continued to be important, on the one hand, and on the other hand, Poland felt more responsible for the situation in the region. Poland tried to maintain its position of a decisive leader, which also manifested itself through supporting Slovakia's efforts to integrate with the North Atlantic Alliance. This way Warsaw wanted to show that its accession was fully justified, and the country matured to take responsibility for the entire region.

The Importance of Poland in the Region after the Accession to the European Union

After achieving two strategic goals, namely accession to NATO and then the EU, the countries of the region gradually lost interest in each other, as little could be achieved through mutual support. It turned out that further pursuit of national interests required a different path and the goals of foreign policies these countries had were often no longer as convergent as it was the case of striving to integrate with the Western structures. Poland lost its position of a regional leader because it did not have much to offer to smaller countries once they joined the above-mentioned structures. Poland was not able to build a new position as the “driver” for Central and Eastern Europe because it was incapable of finding any attractive goal (interest) that could be important for these countries. This happened despite the fact that a number of new states emerged, especially those in the Balkans, as well as in the East. The latter group was particularly important from the Poland’s national interest point of view. Nevertheless, there were still many possibilities to form coalitions among countries of the region to force advantageous solutions in the EU or NATO. Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Hungary, for example, were interested in the situation in the Balkans, while for Poland this was not a priority region. Being the largest country in the region with specific experience in state-building, Poland could have shown more interest in Balkans. It was especially true as the engagement of Polish Military Contingents was significant, although not supported by political activities related to good governance and developmental support.

The remaining countries of the Visegrad Group rightly criticized Poland for its passive attitude on these issues, because they considered that joint action as a bloc within the EU would bring much better effects and give wider possibilities for action. This indicates that these countries had certain expectations towards Poland and the position it could occupy. It also means indirectly that these countries recognized possibilities offered by joint actions with Poland as a large and strong country. Thus, the situation was paradoxical as other countries recognised opportunities that Poland could use in the EU, which the Poland’s government seemed to ignore. The Poland’s lack of initiative was perceived by other V4 partners as limiting the potential of Central Europe in shaping EU and NATO’s activity in the Balkan region (Nic et. al, 2012, pp. 2–3). The synergy of activities in this field would probably bring positive effects in the implementation of national interests,

and it would strengthen Poland's international position both in the region and throughout the EU. The Visegrad Group with Poland at the forefront was in position to opt for the subsequent enlargement of the EU with countries that meet membership conditions.

The Significance of the Eastern Partnership

Another, even more important aspect, is the Eastern Partnership and relations with Russia. In this field, the V4 is currently not unified either, whereas Poland does not strive to make it happen, even though it lies within its vital interest. Russia is able to break up the group's cohesion and conduct bilateral talks, although it is obvious that such a situation is ideal for Moscow and unfavourable for the V4 countries. Hence, it is much easier to achieve national goals when four countries act together within one coordinated approach compared to acting separately. A common action also carries a specific message of cohesion of interests and mutual trust, which in relation to Russia is an extremely important factor. It would show solidarity, which might also materialize in other fields of bilateral relations between individual V4 countries and Russia. On the other hand, joint involvement in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership would create the opportunity to build a political identity of the region keenly interested in supporting democratic transformation and strengthening civil society (Kałan, 2013, pp. 2–5). The Eastern policy is also a potential ideal niche which could be used to implement the EU policy while having the V4 countries as a driving force of the process. It is in the best interest of Poland, which is somewhat predisposed to perform such a function due to its geostrategic location. At the level of political declarations, Poland wants to be an active player, but no major actions have been taken so far. Poland is passive, and no measures are taken to build a coherent approach to the region or to Eastern affairs. This could give Poland a chance to act as an ambassador of European ideas in Eastern Europe, a role which would greatly strengthen Poland's position both in the region and in the EU. At the same time, it could improve bilateral relations with the United States, its largest ally. Poland's prestige would increase significantly together with its position in relation to Russia. It could facilitate the re-establishment of a larger regional coalition – enlarged to include the Baltic States, as well as Romania, which would probably be useful for its operation in the Balkan region.

Poland should become an advocate of the idea of the Eastern Partnership among the V4 states and stress how important it is to promote democratic principles in those countries by helping them in matters of adopting Western (instead of Russian) political and social models. Cooperation with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia is particularly important, but also Belarus should not be neglected. The West has already largely given up Belarus and left it to remain in the Russia's sphere of influence. This is an absolute failure of the European Union policy. The war in Ukraine is also a serious threat to the Baltic States and Poland. The events that took place in Georgia and in Ukraine, respectively in 2008 and 2013, suggest that every scenario is possible. For all these reasons, the better regional cohesion (V4 countries, Baltic states, and Romania) in relations with the other East European nations, the greater chance that the idea of the Eastern Partnership will survive, will be noticed in the European Union, and gain more interest and attract more resources. Nevertheless, it is necessary to create effective action plans instead of leaving them in the declarative sphere only. Therefore, Poland needs to seek more ways to unite countries of the region and encourage them to take joint effective actions. Unfortunately, the individualistic approach to these Eastern issues among the V4 countries was evident even during the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and the gas crisis in 2009. In none of these cases, did the V4 countries create a coherent front against the emerging problems. Moreover, these cases did not become subject to serious discussions to develop a common position or a course of action in the future. A consensus was not achieved even on such key issues as the Ukrainian crisis, annexation of Crimea, and the conflict over the territory of Ukraine.

For the members of the Visegrad Group the Eastern Partnership could be the regional "leverage of identity" within the European Union policy and it could be an important test of the strategic identity for the V4 (Szczerki, 2009, pp. 52–54). Therefore, a mutual and committed approach from all of the V4 members toward common priorities and directions of foreign policy within the Eastern Partnership concept is very crucial. It could also be considered as the most important aspect of their recognition and policy. This should be achievable, but it requires a collective attitude. In this context, the importance of the Eastern Partnership is growing among the political leaders in the Czech Republic, whereas Hungary follows a very pragmatic policy toward Eastern nations and the policy is partially linked with Hungary's own bilateral relations with the Russian Federation. The last factor is linked with energy security, which affects

the consolidation and importance of the V4 as an organization. Nevertheless, both Hungary and Slovenia are not openly negative regarding the idea of a common international policy. In this context, there is a place for Poland as the biggest and the strongest nation in the region. Poland need to enhance its own support to Eastern Partnership projects by providing leadership and resources. In doing so, Poland can potentially demonstrate possible future advantages and gains for all four members and the wider region.

There is another aspect of potential enhancement for the V4 and its role in the EU, provided the organization is encouraged to broaden operation and reliance on experiences of new member nations, in particular those related to development policies. To some extent, it could be a link to better understanding of the Eastern nations mentality. The significance of this can be seen in the 2010 European Transition Compendium Report (ETC) by the European Commission, a document which describes experiences of twelve nations that joined the EU between 2004 and 2007. The study covered all V4 nations and Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). The report includes a very complex analysis and synthesis of the nations' struggle during the "transition to democracy, market economy, and integration into the EU" and it was recognized as "inspiring or interesting for developing countries engaged in the implementation of reforms of an equivalent scope and purpose" (European Commission, 2010, vii). That complex project was supported by some nations and the majority of EU members proposed a follow-up to the report to "develop conditions to use it in practice, e.g. through allocating special resources in the EU budget for cooperation in the area of transformation" (Kugiel, 2011, p. 2551). Importantly, the eight nations mentioned in the report wanted to continue the study. However, Poland was not supportive and decided not to join the proactive group of nations. Nevertheless, the report still has a value as it shows successful models of democratic transition.

Common and Diverging Interests among the Member Nations

Considering the history and geography of the region, it seems logical for the V4 nations should intensify their common activity and, based on still valid experiences, close ranks to support 'third nations' in the direct neighbourhood of the EU. Such actions proved to be effective in their drive to adopt western values and join western organizations. Poland has

much to offer and its proactive approach could lead to a regional leadership in the promotion of peaceful development. As mentioned earlier in this paper, a great deal was done for the Balkan nations. Although “the V4 has contributed to the pro-European moves in the Balkan countries” (M. Bútorá cited in Dostál at al., 2016, p. 29) by promoting various aid and development programmes, there is still much to do in respect of North Africa and the Middle East. Those initiatives were completed hand-in-hand by V4 nations and Baltic countries with Poland as a contributor to the security domain. The engagement beyond the European borders has shown the ability of the V4 to exert influence not only in the continent. Nevertheless, according to Vladka Votavová, the Director of the Association for International Affairs, the four nations missed “the opportunity to utilize the observations it gained during the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), and transform this knowledge into rational answers to the refugee crisis” (V. Votavová quoted in Dostál at al., 2016, p. 159). In that context a positive example of actions taken was the support for the establishing of the European Foundation for Democracy. It was a tangible answer for the crisis created by the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The challenge, however, was that the programme was initially offered from Poland and Slovakia, and it should not be treated as the joint initiative. This was detrimental to the credibility and cohesion of the whole V4. It is further connected with a tendency to undertake projects by each nation individually without consulting the other organizational partners. It is a rather significant disadvantage, as the common voice would support the effectiveness of projects, visibility and prestige of the V4, and would make better use of the available toolbox in the EU. Nevertheless, according to Martin Dangerfield (2011), the “VG has developed a sizeable cooperation agenda which involves continuing its pre-existing internal cooperation activities and various dimensions of cooperation – at political and practical levels – around EU issues.” As an outcome, it could enhance their effectiveness along with diminishing fragmentation of assistance and support related activities (Brudzińska, 2013, p. 2).

In that case, Poland could be a leading actor of joint initiatives being the biggest nation among all four and using its historical experiences of the ‘Solidarity’ movement. It was initially expected that Warsaw would commence dialogue within the V4 to close ranks and to promote development related cooperation. Sharing good practices and wider cooperation with Baltic and Scandinavian nations could also support the extended V4+ formula. Nevertheless, there are a variety of opinions for

Poland’s position and priorities as expressed by Bence Nemeth (2018, p. 18):

“Among others, Poland has a larger geopolitical focus and ambition than the other three smaller Visegrad countries, accordingly the interest in investing in the V4 military collaboration has further diminished. At the same time, the Czech Republic is concerned about the domestic political developments in Poland, thus Prague is deepening its defence cooperation rather with Germany than with Warsaw. In addition, while Poland has focused exclusively on the threats Russia poses, Hungary and Slovakia, and partly the Czech Republic are much more concerned with mass irregular migration than with possible Russian hybrid or military activities. These processes do not support the development of a long-term and healthy V4 military cooperation.”

Another aspect of a different approach to national priorities is reflected by various positions towards the anti-ballistic shield, energy security, and the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008. Interestingly, each position lacks consensus, as presented in table 1.

Table 1

The attitude of Visegrad Group nations toward selected aspects of security

Nation \ Area	Anti-Ballistic Shield	Energy Security	Russian-Georgian Conflict
Czech Republic	Support	Energy solidarity	Support for Georgian action with some criticism
Poland	Support	Energy solidarity and independence from Russia	Support for Georgia
Slovakia	Lack of Support	Dependence on Russia	Criticism of Georgian actions
Hungary	Ambivalent attitude	Energy pragmatism	Passivity

Source: W. Gizicki, *Grupa Wyszehradzka wobec wybranych problemów bezpieczeństwa w Europie Wschodniej*, in: *Bezpieczna Europa z perspektywy Wschodu*, ed. W. Walkiewicz, SGGW Publishing House, Warsaw 2010, p. 154.

At the beginning of the war in Ukraine, we could observe an erosion of relations within V4 and there were even some symptoms of possible deterioration of the organization due to the lack of consensus. Interestingly, their positions evolved to become slightly closer and Poland played an important role as its position influenced the other three nations. Nev-

ertheless, economic interests played a significant role in shaping bilateral relations with Russia; Poland's view, compared to Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, has not changed to the detriment of the national economy. So, after some time "in the fourth year of the war between Russia and Ukraine, Hungary advocates for the lifting of economic and political sanctions against Russia and implements major energy projects with this country. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, however, believe today that there is no longer a direct security threat caused by Russia and they have also considered to support continued sanctions against Russia" (Romanowska, 2018). A different position is represented by Warsaw as it has preserved a decisive and negative stance toward Russia. This has been an element of solidarity with the U.S. policy and its military support to Kiev. Polish troops are participating in the training mission of the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U) carried out by the U.S. armed forces to support Ukraine.

The Ukrainian case has proved that pragmatic national interests are more important than solidarity within an organization and that it could be a long-term challenge in the security domain, energy security in particular. Poland's position as a strong supporter of a robust EU stand toward Russia during the Ukrainian crisis was further diminished, as the country was not invited to join France, Germany, during the Russia and Ukraine negotiations in Minsk (Buras, 2014). That situation had a wider impact on the perception of Poland within the V4 format along with further declining relations with Germany and France in the Weimar Triangle, especially after 2015. It could be ascertained that the geopolitical position of Poland does not meet its national ambitions and affects its wider standing in the region. Another aspect is the organizational unity and common perception of regional matters and security as "the lack of foreign policy strategy and an ambivalence in bilateral relations have the potential to greatly diminish or harm the V4 brand in emerging democracies" (V. Votavová quoted in Dostál et al., 2016, p. 159).

As already stated, the lack of consensus and evolution of the V4 nations' position in respect to the crisis in Ukraine is an example of the lack of internal trust within the organization and divergent strategic priorities. As an outcome, in parallel, it weakens the role of the organization within other structures as the EU and NATO due to the lack of common voice. Moreover, it diminishes its attractiveness, e.g. limited willingness of Baltic countries to have closer relations and common initiatives. The diversity was very visible during the visit of the Slovak President Zu-

zana Čaputová in Warsaw, who highlighted the “values such as the rule of law” as “the violation of the rule of law weakens the position of the eastern Member States in the EU” (Wójcik, 2019). President Duda tried to convince her that everything was in order but “President Čaputová maintained a diplomatic silence during this tirade. It would appear that her position is much closer to that of the new head of the European Commission than to the governments in Warsaw and Budapest” (2019). The same applies to Nordic countries as the Finnish Presidency of the EU focused on rule of law as one of primary topics which did not support the perception of Poland within that domain. That perception was expressed by other authors who recognized that “the founding idea of Visegrád – to stabilise liberal societies and democracies – remains crucial, in particular as the current governments in Hungary and Poland are challenging this assumption” (D. Schwarzer cited in Dostál et al., 2016, p. 21). The common voice was possible in some core areas as the nations considered that “ethnicity is a form of capital, and we can rely on it in (migration) crisis situations” (Visegrad Discussion Papers, 2007, p. 51). Therefore, “the feeling of solidarity of the people in the four Visegrad countries, in relation to those who have arrived and will continue to arrive to our countries, is rather strong” (p. 70). This type of thinking was especially visible in the context of the 2015 migration crisis. All these nations rejected EU quotas which lead to a discussion about sanctions toward them (López-Dóriga, 2018). Next, the management of irregular migration became a major task for armed forces of Hungary and Slovenia; similarly, Czech Republic prepared their armed forces to face the flood of irregular migrants and provided military and police support to the two former states. The Poland’s stand was very similar and the ‘immigration card’ was used instrumentally during parliamentary elections as a factor underpinning the victory of the Law and Justice party.

Perspectives and Prognosis

Already in 2002, Professor Kuźniar recognized that after playing a very positive and constructive role as contributor to regional cooperation, Poland’s position started to diminish as ties among nations relaxed and they lost the drive to look for other options for bilateral and organizational relations. He stated: “after short glimmer during the last decade of the 20th century, the international Central European identity will

become history again; this way one of the very important external conditions underlying the Poland's foreign policy will disappear" (Kuźniar, 2002, p. 57). In reality, it actually happened especially after a few Central and East European nations joined the EU and NATO. Thus, the drive to unite and to build their common identity or to have a common voice internationally was reduced except for some cross border and regional projects. Therefore, looking into the strategic interests of V4 members, cooperation is very declarative in nature. This is the case of Poland and its focus on internal affairs. It looks as if after Poland's accession to the EU, it has fallen into a state of apathy, thereby forgetting how important local alliances and coalitions are, including those in the security domain.

In that context, it is necessary to highlight that such regional groupings do not harm EU or NATO cohesion, as recognized, for instance, by Wojciech Lorenz (2013, p. 2), but they actually enhance the Polish position in the region. The benefits would include better common security and enhancement of Poland's position as a country having the biggest military capability to organise V4 Battle Groups. The V4 military cooperation has had some interesting perspective as that domain has been of vital interest of all the nations regionally and beyond. The concept of the V4 EU Battle Group (V4 EU BG) had emerged already in 2007 during a meeting Chiefs of Staff in Slovakia. However, the follow up on this was a slow process. The desire to contribute with a tangible commitment to the EU CSDP and stronger confidence in Poland's capabilities helped to move the project forward. It was a chance for Poland to contribute and to lead; the opportunity was not missed. During the V4 ministers of defence session in May 2012, the Polish Minister of Defence Bogdan Klich "confirmed the role of Poland as the Framework Nation (FN), and at the same time he also determined the deadline of the anticipated operability (stand-by period) – the first half of 2016" (Paulech, Urbanovská, 2014). The Framework Nation's role was proved as out of 3700 soldiers of the V4 EU BG 1800 troops were deployed by the Polish armed forces, 728 by the Czech Republic, 640 by Hungary, and Slovakia deployed 560 soldiers (Nemeth, 2018, p. 18). Poland was also in command of the unit, which was activated and remained on standby in the first part of 2016. The BG proved V4 ability to create real force and develop a common project in real support of EU's BG forces. This was also a very important aspect of visibility as a united organization. The V4 EU BG project continues, and the BG, which was on standby in the second part of 2019, has been reinforced by Croatian soldiers. On 26 June 2019, the V4 EU BG started

its duties with the inauguration held in Cracow with Poland as the Framework Nation. There are other examples of the four nations cooperation, e.g. the 3rd NATO Signal Battalion or the NATO Military Police Centre of Excellence.

The cooperation among as many as 17 nations within the Central European Initiative (CEI), founded in 1989, is another forum in which Poland has the main goal “to bring its Member States closer together under joint initiatives and encourage further regional cooperation in a structured and result-oriented manner” (Division for Sustainable Development Goals no date). It includes many dimensions, such as politics, economy, culture, science, and also the establishment of practical and institutional cooperation with the EU and European Commission (Poland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs). As such, by closing ranks with the Western countries and structures, the organization conceptually proved to be important in preventing Central and East European nations falling back into Russia’s area of influence. That forum was another opportunity for Poland to take a more active and leading position but it was not recognized as a forum worth major investment. According to Ambassador Zappia, Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations, the CEI enjoys the opportunity to be a natural partner for the UN. While explaining priorities of the Italian CEI Presidency, she highlighted the value of organizational experiences as a contribution of regional cooperation and partnerships and the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda (Onultalia, 2019). Therefore, there is a room for Poland to contribute to such initiatives as it would support the visibility of the country not only in Central Europe but much broader along with the support of the UN authority.

In 2015, a new concept has appeared called *Intermarium*. It focused on a more active political involvement of Poland in the region within a triangular geopolitical entity limited by the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic and Aegean Seas (Sienkiewicz, 2016, pp. 149–150). The concept has historical connotations, as Poland once was a strong nation and major player, just to mention the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth extending from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. It is linked with Marshal Piłsudski’s *Intermarium* vision aiming to disintegrate the Russian Empire. The *Three Seas Initiative* follows that vision. The aim behind the initiatives has been to respond to the crisis in the EU and erosion of decision-making processes in the face of an increasingly aggressive Russian policy using variety of tools to weaken European cohesion.

Polish leaders were motivated by the fact that the ruling party Law and Justice was trying to find any alternative to the EU and build up the national position in the region. Nevertheless, although there are some successes in energy and transportation (infrastructure) none of these are playing a significant political role in spite of great initial ambitions. The future is unclear and maybe it is just “an old Polish geopolitical dream” (Nałęcz, 2017).

In the context of relations with neighbours and the European Union, there is a lot to be done to change the current situation as the lack of support from other nations diminishes Poland's impact on decisions taken by the organization. The infamous 27:1 loss was a clear example of it, and in a similar vein only two nations (two of V4), Poland and Hungary, blocked lately draft conclusions based on the European Commission recommendation and proposed by the Finland's presidency. The latter was linked with the rule of law. This shows differences within the V4; it is not seen as a moonlit, as the nations are not following similar principles and are not presenting a united stand to EU decisions. It translates into a negative perception of the V4 and weakens its role. Therefore, it is important to improve relations with other EU nations if Poland wants to gain a stronger position in European policy. Moreover, the current foreign diplomacy has not been supportive. It is linked to the need to deploy professional diplomats to foreign posts rather than people nominated due to their membership of specific entities. Next, the country needs to implement decisions of the European Court of Justice to present the full respect to independent judiciary as one of three pillars of democracy. This is important, as democracy and respect to constitution are key pillars of European values. Therefore, Warsaw must address the EU criticism regarding violations of the rule of law and democracy. The current policy toward neighbours and the EU has a lot to do with the internal national policy of the government which, for instance, blames Germany for not paying war reparation. The topic is good for the Polish audience to listen, but unrealistic as Berlin considers it settled. The cancellation of the helicopter purchase contract with France and speeches delivered by politicians further weaken the position of Poland, especially as Brexit is imminent and Warsaw's investment in relations with the UK will not underpin its position in the EU. The change is required to avoid marginalisation as Poland might be accused of being non-cooperative and it is still not a member of the Eurozone. The change will support not only Poland, as it will have a positive impact of the nation's po-

sition in the region and international organizations to which it belongs. Such an approach will be important for the credibility of Poland and its support for democratic transformation to strengthen the civil society in the Eastern Partnership. Other nations have been observing Warsaw and its actions. Therefore, when the so-called Article 7 procedure is activated, they will look at other partners who are recognized and who could be a role model rather than a troublemaker.

Conclusion

Already Pilsudski acknowledged that the power of Poland had to be based on alliances and regional cooperation with Poland as a primary actor encouraging other associates to undertake joint actions and projects. This would definitely weaken Russian imperial ambitions and the implementation of the *divide et impera* policy with its power in unity. Such concepts were followed, for example, by Zbigniew Brzeziński (2009, p. 2) who highlighted the role of NATO as an alliance that ensured security in Europe for many years. In the V4 context, it is important to mention that the Czech Republic was the biggest opponent and was sceptical about common activities in the region, as they favoured individual decision-making. The approach was ineffective during negotiations with NATO and the EU.

Initiatives like BGs are to be continued but their missions are not clear. It is because Hungary, Slovakia, and to lower extent the Czech Republic will be hesitant to use BGs in the Eastern Europe. Their perception of immediate Russian threat is much less obvious compared to that in Poland. The EU BG are a visible project within the EU but, at the same time, those are not solutions to enhance reasonably respective nations' military capabilities and to create real combat power suitable to face any aggression from the East. They could lead, however, to closer cooperation, joint military procurement, and cooperation among territorial defence forces. Larger military budgets would support such a constructive way of thinking. Initiatives are required to show cooperation capability and their role can be enhanced at relatively low cost. Common military exercises, trainings, education, contribution to the European Defence Agency *Pooling & Sharing* (European Defence Agency, 2013) initiative or NATO *Smart Defence* (NATO, 2017) are further areas of V4 active arrangements. In that context, some differences among V4 nations can be seen regarding

their approach to the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as part of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Although "the Czech Republic and Slovakia were 'early adopters' of the PESCO project, while Hungary and Poland especially joined at the eleventh hour. outlining the red lines that would condition Poland's participation in all EU projects" (Michelot, 2018). The future of it is unclear especially as "Warsaw and Budapest understandably have serious concerns about the idea of 'European strategic autonomy'" (2018) as they focus on cooperation with the US, which especially visible in the case of Poland. The above differences make the V4 treated in the EU as a 'informal discussion club' which only occasionally is able and willing to formulate a common position (Gostyńska, 2012, p. 11). This seriously limits the ability of the Visegrad Group to influence the European policy, and the parallel depreciation of the Group does not support its member nations in the strengthening of their international status. There are of course reasons for this situation, as in reality the V4 has not come up with any important and cohesive propositions. Even the Eastern Partnership was based on actions taken by Poland's diplomacy supported by Sweden, and it has not been a Visegrad Group project.

Some researchers emphasise trust as a very important aspect of internal relations within the V4 as it was the foundation of the V4 in 1991. However, it partially dissipated over the years. The common aim to join Western organizations supported their unity; after the accession to the EU and NATO, the Group activity proved not to be very spectacular and definitely below the Group's capacity and potential. One of the factors is connected with the evolution of governance in the V4 nations and changes of governments that have had quite often negative impact on respective nations' foreign policy and priorities. It is visible in the context of Poland as turnarounds in politics toward Baltic countries (approach to Eastern policy), Georgia and Ukraine (during gas crisis in 2009), policy toward Russia and even relations with major European players have caused that the country ceased to be seen as a reliable partner. This is linked with differences in foreign policy priorities between two major parties in Poland: the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice. Those are very visible especially during last few years. The former is very pro-EU and has avoided essential arguments with major European players, such as Germany and France; at the same time it has been against a major conflict with Russia. The latter focuses rather on regional cooperation, and it has already worsened relations with Germany and France trying to work closer with Great

Britain, which has been interrupted by BREXIT; the relations with Russia have deteriorated.

Considering the future of the V4, the development of a cohesive long-term strategy followed by greater commitment to its realization are of great importance, as only such an approach may facilitate the success. Therefore, if an individual policy prevails, the organization will lose its ability to influence effectively EU policy and also positions of individual nations will be much weaker as the power rests in unity. This proactive approach is a chance for Poland to build the position in the region using the V4 as a platform. If successful, it will encourage other nations, e.g. Baltic countries, to tighten relations with Warsaw as a powerful nation ready to lead and contribute. It is important V4 nations have common interests, just to mention further expansion of the EU and NATO, and the stabilization of the Balkans and Caucasus. To implement the interests, internal institutional cooperation coupled with a common stand in the EU are crucial to avoid their mere ceremonial character (Pawlak, 2011, p. 213). The position of Poland could be very significant if the country is capable of putting forward interesting proposals, uniting the V4, and convincing Romania and Baltic countries to support such initiatives based on shared perception of regional interests. Another geographical goal should be closer cooperation in the V4-AGAT (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey) format (Madej, 2010, pp. 57–62). Moreover, the positive image of Warsaw in Tbilisi is still present due to the strong support Poland provided in 2008. Thus, Poland could be a facilitator for building a bridge between the Caucasus and the West.

Although the perception of security threats differs in many areas, just to mention the perception of Russia, future cooperation and joint projects are very plausible. There is a big potential in development cooperation to support nations outside of Europe, and this would significantly improve the position of all V4 nations in the EU. Although Poland could initiate new projects as an important regional player, its position is still below its national potential, capabilities and, furthermore, also below recognized ambitions. The current discussion about the rule of law is not supportive.

Finally, it is worth mentioning two paradoxes. The first is that some Western nations see Poland as a regional leader (it is in line with Poland leaders self-perception) but the same perception is not shared in the region. The second one is linked with Lech Walesa, a contemporary icon of the fight for democracy, who enjoys much stronger respect abroad than in Poland.

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Ewolucja form współpracy regionalnej w Europie Wschodniej (1990–2021). Rola Polski jako aktora regionalnego

Streszczenie

Siła Polski i jej znaczenie w regionie odgrywa ważną rolę w budowaniu wizerunku i międzynarodowej pozycji kraju. To dobry punkt wyjścia do prowadzenia aktywnej polityki, która daje Polsce możliwość działania w imieniu lub w obronie mniejszych sąsiadów. To oczywiście może zwiększyć znaczenie Polski i potencjalnie otwiera nowe możliwości polityczne dla przyczyniania się do realizacji własnych interesów i celów geostrategicznych. Warto zatem przeanalizować rolę, jakie Polska odgrywa w swoim regionie i znaleźć odpowiedź na pytanie, jak ewoluowała jej pozycja i w jakim stopniu role regionalne wpływają na pozycję międzynarodową i siłę państwa w Unii Europejskiej. Artykuł argumentuje, że współpraca w ramach organizacji regionalnych nie jest przez Polskę efektywnie wykorzystywana, a jej rola jest poniżej jej własnych możliwości i ambicji narodu. Niemniej jednak nadal istnieje potencjał do wzmocnienia pozycji państwa, a tym samym pozytywnego wpływania na jego rolę międzynarodową w Unii Europejskiej i poza nią.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska, potencjał, Europa, region, pozycja na arenie międzynarodowej