

# The V4's perception of Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian crisis. Implications for the formation of Central European identity seven years on

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Source: <https://twitter.com/PEParliament/status/1351049118271021059/photo/1>

## Introduction

The outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis at the end of 2013, initiated by President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to suspend the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU, has produced concerns voiced across Europe over the future political and economic development of this country. The subsequent involvement of Russia in the course of these events has fuelled those concerns, adding a security dimension to their scope. The following occupation and annexation of Crimea, developments that constituted an overt breach of international law, resulted in a wave of sanctions imposed on Moscow both by the EU and the US. Despite the fact that EU member states have embraced a joint policy of non-recognition of the Crimean annexation and agreed unilaterally on the imposition of restrictive measures, there was no unity among them over their appropriate scope and depth.

Different positions over the need of broadening the sanctions and supplementing them with economic and financial components were visible not only at the European level but also among the Visegrad Group (V4) states<sup>1</sup>—most significantly exposed to the negative economic consequences of both EU sanctions and Russian retaliatory measures. The lack of consensus among the four Central European states over this issue and presence of other differences in their perception of the Ukrainian crisis gave rise to questions concerning the V4's future and its credibility as a (dis)united regional group.<sup>2</sup> In reference to these questions, the present paper illustrates how the V4's unity has changed in the perspective of the Ukrainian crisis, and particularly in the wake of Russia's involvement in it.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to claims interpreting the above phenomena as a bone of contention among the V4 states, it assumes that the Russian intervention in Ukraine has been a catalyst for the formation of Central European (Visegrad) identity. The verification of this assumption is based on the analysis of the V4 official discourse (conclusions from the meetings, joint statements, joint communiqués, declarations, and letters) formed around the Ukrainian crisis and referring to the issue of Russian involvement in it.

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<sup>1</sup> Nowadays the Visegrad Group is comprised of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Markovic, F. (2014), *Divided more than united? Behind the V4's different positions towards Ukraine and Russia*, <http://visegradinsight.eu/divided-more-than-united12092014/>

<sup>3</sup> The paper draws largely on the Master's thesis written by the author in the frame of Joint Degree Programme in International Relations: Europe from the Visegrad Perspective.

## **Russia as the ‘common other’**

The analysis of more than a dozen documents issued by the V4 representatives in the period of March 2014–April 2015 has revealed that along with the development of the crisis, the practices of differentiation and othering directed at Russia have become a recurring element of the Visegrad discourse. The use of discourse analysis<sup>4</sup> for examining the V4 official statements has allowed the identifying of a prevailing representation of Russia constructed jointly by Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The results indicate, firstly, that Russia’s role in the crisis has been presented in negative terms (‘destructive’, ‘illegal’, ‘aggressive’) and depicted as contradictory to the V4’s self-declared role (‘constructive’, ‘legal’, ‘peaceful’). Secondly, the consistent use of differentiation and othering practices has positioned Russia as the ‘common’ or ‘external Other’ of the V4 states. Thirdly, the structural relation between the two subjects (the V4 and Russia) reflects a long-established dichotomy of ‘civilised vs. barbarian’—framing the difference in their behaviour towards the situation in Ukraine.

In this point of view, the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis at the end of 2013, and the subsequent Russian involvement in it, has significantly remodelled the context of relations between the V4 and Russia—enough to influence the latter’s representation within the official discourse of the V4. The representation of Russia has not only been redefined, but it is simultaneously employed as a point of reference for the construction of the V4’s self-imposed image (as the positive opposite of the former). From this perspective, Russia’s intervention in Ukraine has paved the way for the reconsolidating of the V4’s perception of itself (at least of its role in the Ukrainian crisis), and thereby for the strengthening of the collective identity among its members.<sup>5</sup>

## **A more united Visegrad Group?**

Taking into account that the occurrence of a ‘common Other’ is likely to facilitate collective identity formation, the V4’s positioning of Russia into such a role should be followed by the signs of a rising unity among the V4 states. However, the practices of differentiation and othering directed at Russia were not followed by the identification or reestablishment of

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<sup>4</sup> Discourse analysis is a method of extracting the meanings attributed to objects, subjects, and phenomena in a particular discourse and uncovering the system of relations between them.

<sup>5</sup> Theorising on collective identity formation is strongly correlated with the arrival of constructivist and post-structuralist perspectives for studying international politics. It is based on the realisation that the fundamental structures of international politics are socially rather than materially constructed.

common values, beliefs, or understandings which are specific to the group of these states. Secondly, the frequency of issuing joint documents with references to the situation in Ukraine was very irregular. The juxtaposition of several turning points in the Ukrainian crisis with the dating of the V4 official statements has revealed that the pace of these reactions did not mirror the phases of exacerbation and stabilisation of the conflict. The long period of time within which no joint statement was issued, despite the escalation of fighting in Eastern Ukraine and the recurring allegations of Russia crossing the Ukrainian border, indicates that the ability of the V4 to adopt a common position on crucial developments in the crisis was fluctuating over time, and so was its internal unity.

The above outcome does not allow to maintain that the Russian intervention in Ukraine, especially since the annexation of Crimea, has been a catalyst for the formation of Central European identity. As it follows from the present work, the dynamics of collective identity formation cannot be accounted for by focusing attention only on the role of external or systemic developments, such as the emergence and identification of a ‘common Other’. The results suggest that the role of domestic factors in shaping collective identity among states should be considered with no lesser attention, as these were arguably a decisive factor that has hindered the formation of collective identity among the Visegrad states so far.

### **Conclusion: A long-lasting impact.**

On the other hand, any identity change is a long-term process (see, for example, the long-lasting process of forging European identity) and should not be examined on the grounds of short-term developments. The deepening of Visegrad cooperation in regional defence and energy security, triggered by the crisis, may lead to the gradual emergence of such an identity in a long-term perspective. Six years on, we can observe the functioning of the V4 EU Battlegroup (operational for the first time in 2016 and reinforced by Ukraine and Croatia), however the list of unfinished projects remains long.<sup>6</sup> In terms of energy security, the Visegrad states have developed projects such as the North–South Gas Corridor, decreasing their energy dependence from Russia.<sup>7</sup> These efforts have been additionally strengthened by the establishment of the

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<sup>6</sup> Krupa, J. (2019), *Visegrad Four Defense Cooperation: Years of Missed Opportunities*, <https://warsawinstitute.org/visegrad-four-defense-cooperation-years-missed-opportunities/>

<sup>7</sup> Dyduch, J., Skorek, A. (2020), *Go South! Southern dimension of the V4 states’ energy policy strategies – An assessment of viability and prospects*, Energy Policy, vol. 140.

Three Seas initiative in 2016.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Russia's aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine in 2014 has provided grounds for a more collective behaviour among the V4 states in the future.

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<sup>8</sup> Wycisk, M. (2019), *Die Drei-Meere-Initiative und die EU. Zum jüngsten Gipfel der 3SI-Initiative in Bukarest*, Welttrends, nr. 147.

## AUTHOR

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**Marcin Chruściel** is a graduate of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, where he obtained two master's degrees, one in European Studies and the other in International Relations. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the University of Wrocław and prepares a dissertation on regional parties in Western Europe. Member of „Nowa Konfederacja” editorial team, publishing articles and interviews on the future of the EU. Former consultant at the Regional Centre for International Debate in Wrocław.

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