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# **The Visegrád Group as a Platform for Cooperation within the Central European Subregional Security Complex: Hopes and Disappointments in the Sphere of Military Security**

## **Abstract**

The article examines the Visegrád Group (V4) as a subregional platform for cooperation among the Central European states after 1989, with particular emphasis on the military dimension and its place within the regional and European security architecture. The aim is to assess the effectiveness of the V4 from the perspective of middle-power cooperation and the logic of regional security complexes. The study employs institutional-legal and comparative analyses, secondary source analysis, and a case study approach. The findings indicate that, despite the preserved integrative achievements, the potential for military cooperation within the V4 remains underutilised, primarily due to limited institutionalisation and divergent threat perceptions.

**Keywords:** Visegrád Group, regional cooperation, Central Europe, security, V4 EUBG, military cooperation of middle powers, RSCT

## **Introduction**

The Visegrád Group (V4) constitutes one of the key frameworks of regional cooperation in Central Europe after 1989. It was established on 15 II 1991 in Visegrád, Hungary, by Poland, Czechoslovakia (and, following its dissolution, by the Czech Republic and Slovakia) as well as Hungary. This initiative represents a distinctive

example of the integrative capacity of states that regained full sovereignty after the fall of communism in Europe. During the period of systemic transformation, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary – in contrast to the disintegration tendencies observed at the beginning of the 1990s (notably in the USSR and Yugoslavia) – chose to deepen their cooperation. The objective of this endeavour was a shared pursuit of the restoration of democratic governance and participation in the process of constructing an integrated Europe.

The principal objective behind the establishment of the Visegrád Group was to coordinate political, economic, and social actions during the transformation period and to pursue integration with Western structures – with NATO and the European Union. Over more than three decades of its activity, the V4 has undergone various stages of development, determined by both international factors and the internal situation of its member states, as well as by the dynamics of relations within the organisation itself. From a phase of intensive cooperation in the early 1990s, through a period of stagnation, to a subsequent revival and partial institutionalisation of collaboration, the Visegrád Group has played a significant role in shaping the identity and position of Central Europe within the continent.

The last decade, however, has not been among the most successful periods in the history of the Visegrád Group. Nevertheless, analysing the successive stages of cooperation allows for a better understanding of the integrative mechanisms in Central Europe and of the evolution of the foreign and security policy objectives and priorities of the member states. These processes have resulted in the implementation of cooperation initiatives characterised by varying degrees of effectiveness.

Among the various areas of activity of the Visegrád Group, cooperation in the military domain should be assessed as relatively the most effective. Although the achievements in this field are noticeable, the potential of military cooperation could have been utilised to a considerably greater extent – as several projects were either not implemented or discontinued for political or organisational reasons.

The purpose of this study is to present the main areas of activity of the Visegrád Group and to assess their significance for the development of military cooperation in the context of regional and European security. The research problem is formulated in the form of the following question: *To what extent does the Visegrád Group constitute an effective platform for military cooperation among its member states in the context of regional and European security?*

The analysis employs research methods characteristic of the academic disciplines of international relations and security studies, including institutional-legal analysis, comparative analysis, secondary source analysis, and the case study method.

The Central European Subregional Security Complex can be conceptualised, in the spirit of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), as a system characterised by a high density of security interactions, interconnected with the Euro-Atlantic security architecture yet generating its own dynamics of interdependence and divergence of threats<sup>1</sup>. The literature indicates that, following the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union has acquired the features of a post-Lisbon security complex, in which subregional subsystems (such as the V4) remain interconnected with the Euro-Atlantic level while retaining limited functional autonomy. This perspective extends the classical Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by incorporating the dimension of vertical linkages between the Union and subregional levels, offering a more accurate explanation of the selective institutionalisation and the „niche diplomacy” of middle powers<sup>2</sup>. Centres of risk perception and vectors of external pressure (the Russian war against Ukraine, energy tensions, migration, cyber) intersect here with internal conditions (asymmetries of potential, political cycles, sectoral vulnerabilities), generating feedback loops between the state, subregional, and Euro-Atlantic levels. As a result, this complex functions as both a relay and a filter of securitisation: it transposes strategic stimuli from the periphery (the Eastern Front) to the core of Euro-Atlantic structures but also reverses the direction by „importing” norms, standards, and capabilities from the NATO/EU level.

From this perspective, the V4 functions as a coordination format and a channel for transmitting subregional preferences to EU and NATO institutions. Under conditions of the erosion of the role of traditional security providers after 2014 (the post-Crimean order), stabilising functions have increasingly been assumed by coalitions of middle powers operating within EU and NATO structures. The V4 illustrates this logic through functional specialisation and *niche diplomacy*, aimed at closing capability gaps in such areas as military mobility, CBRN, logistics, and CIMIC/PSYOPS<sup>3</sup>. Acting as a *coalition-builder* of middle powers, the V4 enables the coordination of positions, the aggregation of niche capabilities (e.g. logistics, CBRN, military mobility), and the reduction of cooperation costs (*burden-sharing*), while simultaneously enhancing interoperability. At the same time, the divergence of threat narratives, characteristic of regional security complexes, constrains strategic coherence – hence the importance

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<sup>1</sup> B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge 2003; M. Musioł, *The EU as a Post-Lisbon Regional Security Complex*, Berlin 2021.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> M. Musioł, A. Polus, *The post-Crimean international order and its main challenges for traditional security providers*, [in:] *Traditional Security Providers Encounter Non-traditional Threats in the Post-Crimean Era*, eds. M. Musioł, M. Kulczycki, A. Polus, W. Szczerbowski, T. Wieteska, Toruń 2023, pp. 15-29; *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, ed. A.F. Cooper, Basingstoke–London 1997.

of „soft institutionalisation” (regular consultations, procedures, joint planning), which stabilises the practice of cooperation despite political differences and divergent priorities.

This approach corresponds with the most recent proposals for the conceptualisation of the EU’s subregional security complexes, in which the „density” of interactions and the interconnection with the Euro-Atlantic level simultaneously explain both the selective institutionalisation and the *niche diplomacy* of middle powers. In this sense, the V4 represents an example of the EU’s post-Lisbon security complex, in which ad hoc coalitions and *burden-sharing* translate into practice (GBUE, MND-C, military mobility)<sup>4</sup>.

The analytical framework adopted here combines the perspective of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) – emphasising the density and directions of security interactions within the subregion – with the logic of middle-power cooperation, which explains the distribution of roles, specialisation, and mechanisms of burden-sharing. Such a configuration allows the achievements of the V4 (V4 EU Battlegroup rotations, command-and-planning formats such as HQ MND-C, joint training activities) to be interpreted as practices of soft institutionalisation that enhance interoperability despite limited political cohesion. In the subsequent sections, we examine the extent to which these theoretical mechanisms translate into operational outcomes and the durability of cooperation under the conditions of a changing threat environment.

## Historical Conditions and the Current State of Cooperation

The Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary have been bound by a shared history for centuries, particularly in terms of political, cultural, and economic conditions. The Czech kings introduced the Polish lands into the sphere of Christian culture, while the Czech monarch George of Poděbrady – together with the King of Poland, Casimir IV Jagiellon – sought to create an integrated Europe. The histories of both nations also feature episodes of personal unions: the Hungarian King Louis of Anjou ascended the Polish throne, while the Polish ruler Władysław III of Varna assumed the Hungarian crown<sup>5</sup>.

Neighbourly relations among these states have taken various forms over the centuries – periods of tension and disputes alternated with phases of cooperation and rapprochement. The fourteenth century, however, brought a new quality to the political relations between Poland, the Czech lands, and Hungary. The rulers of this era undertook efforts to clarify mutual dynastic claims, settle territorial

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<sup>4</sup> M. Musioł, *op.cit.*

<sup>5</sup> K. Baczkowski, *Dzieje Polski późnośredniowiecznej (1370-1506)*, Warszawa 1999, pp. 22-25.

issues, and foster economic and political cooperation. The outcome of these endeavours was a series of summits of the monarchs of Bohemia (John of Luxembourg), Poland (Casimir the Great), and Hungary (Charles of Anjou), held in the Hungarian town of Visegrád in 1335 and again in 1338 (or possibly 1339)<sup>6</sup>. The primary objective of the first meeting was to settle border issues, both with the Czech lands and with the Teutonic Order – with the remaining monarchs serving as arbiters in this conflict – as well as to resolve succession matters related to the Polish crown. The congress also resulted in the conclusion of a Polish–Czech–Hungarian alliance directed against the Habsburgs<sup>7</sup>.

The Visegrád congresses initiated not only political but also economic cooperation among the participating states. Agreements were reached, inter alia, on the routes and security of trade corridors, designed to bypass Vienna to avoid high customs duties (the so-called *stallage* or *toll right*)<sup>8</sup>. The beginning of this cooperation marked a period of dynamic economic development and the rise of power of all the participating states, sometimes referred to as their „golden age”<sup>9</sup>.

Over the centuries, relations among the states whose rulers had met in Visegrád underwent various transformations. Numerous attempts at political integration were undertaken – examples include the unsuccessful attempt by the Czech Hussite–national faction to place Casimir IV Jagiellon on the Czech throne in 1438, the Polish–Hungarian union of 1440–1444, and the election of the Transylvanian prince Stephen Báthory as King of Poland.

In the modern and contemporary periods, these relations deteriorated, particularly during the interwar years and after the Second World War, when numerous border conflicts occurred between Poland and Czechoslovakia<sup>10</sup>.

The collapse of communism and the lifting of Soviet domination over the countries of Central Europe opened a new chapter in the history of relations among these nations. The experience of cooperation, particularly between Polish and Czech dissidents during the period of communist rule – many of whom subsequently became part of the new political and governing elites – laid the foundations for joint efforts to shape the future of the newly independent states. The common goals set by the countries of the region predisposed them to deepen their relations not only in the political sphere, but also in the economic and security domains.

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<sup>6</sup> J. Wyrozumski, *Dzieje Polski piastowskiej (VIII w.-1370)*, Kraków 1999, pp. 430–432.

<sup>7</sup> P. Tańkowski, *Polska a Czechy w XIV wieku. Polityka, dyplomacja, społeczeństwo*, Lublin 2003, pp. 118–120.

<sup>8</sup> W. Szymański, *Szlaki handlowe Europy Środkowej w XIV–XV wieku*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 97–102.

<sup>9</sup> R. Skowron, *Europa Środkowa w późnym średniowieczu. Integracja i rywalizacja*, Kraków 2010, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> J. Kłoczowski, *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia. Wspólnota i podziały*, Lublin 1996, pp. 288–292.

The Central European states, which found themselves in a new political, economic, and security environment – both internal and external – were aware that they would not be able to face these new challenges alone. They were, rather, „destined” for regional cooperation, which was supported by the Western countries. The noble idea of cooperation among the Central European states, and the creation of the so-called „Visegrád Triangle”, was thus revived – albeit in a different historical context – at the beginning of the 1990s. The objective of the new Visegrád Group was to coordinate joint actions aimed at future integration with European structures, as well as to establish a common platform capable of counterbalancing the Russian policy of that time.

On 15 II 1991, referring to the historical meeting of the three kings, a summit was held in Visegrád, where the Presidents of the then Czechoslovakia (Václav Havel) and Poland (Lech Wałęsa), together with the Prime Minister of Hungary, József Antall, signed the *Declaration on Cooperation between the Republic of Poland, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration* – commonly known as the *Visegrád Declaration*. The document articulated the common goals that the signatories were to pursue on the path towards the European integration of their states. It stated that the member states of the Visegrád Group would seek to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) the full restoration of state independence, democracy, and sovereignty;
- 2) the elimination of all existing social, economic, and spiritual privileges of the totalitarian system;
- 3) the construction of parliamentary democracy and a modern state governed by the rule of law, ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- 4) the creation of a modern market economy;
- 5) the comprehensive inclusion of the member states in the European political, economic, security, and legal systems<sup>11</sup>.

The Declaration also announced the undertaking of joint practical steps consisting in:

- 1) harmonising their actions aimed at developing cooperation and maintaining close contacts with European institutions, in accordance with the interests of the signatory states, and conducting consultations on matters concerning their security;
- 2) striving to establish unobstructed contacts among citizens, institutions, churches, and social organisations;

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<sup>11</sup> *Visegrad Declaration*, 15 II 1991, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2> (13 VIII 2025).

- 3) supporting the free movement of capital and labour, developing economic cooperation on market principles, and promoting mutually beneficial trade in goods and services. The signatories also pledged to create favourable conditions for direct cooperation between enterprises and for foreign-capital investments aimed at enhancing economic efficiency;
- 4) paying special attention to the development of infrastructure in the sphere of communications – both between these countries and with other parts of Europe, particularly along the north–south axis – and coordinating the development of their energy systems and telecommunication networks;
- 5) expanding environmental cooperation;
- 6) creating appropriate conditions for the free exchange of information, the press, and cultural goods and values;
- 7) jointly developing multilateral cooperation in order to ensure optimal conditions for the full realisation of the rights of national minorities living within their territories;
- 8) promoting mutually beneficial cooperation among the interested local governments of their countries and establishing subregional contacts<sup>12</sup>.

The signatories emphasised that their shared history, cultural and spiritual heritage, and religious traditions constituted the foundation for the intensive development of cooperation, which was to represent an important step on the path towards European integration. At the same time, it was explicitly underlined that this cooperation was not directed against the interests of any third party, nor would it disrupt or restrict relations with other states.

The Visegrád Declaration represented an important new opening in the cooperation among the states of the region. Their shared objectives included accession to the European structures, namely NATO and the European Union. However, the ambitious political plans proved difficult to implement in the initial period. The practical dimension of cooperation was significantly affected by the international political situation of the 1990s.

The stages of the Group's activity following the adoption of the Declaration can, for analytical purposes, be divided into six phases, which are presented in Table 1.

From the very beginning of the organisation's existence, regional security and the security of its members constituted an important element of its activity. It should be remembered that, at the time of the Visegrád Group's formation, Soviet troops were still stationed on the territories of these states, despite the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and their withdrawal was among the priorities confirming the full independence of these countries. Closer cooperation within the Group was, to some extent, „necessitated” by the negotiation problems with

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the Stages in the Activity of the Visegrád Group

No	Stage	Period (in years)	Characteristics of the Stage
1	Stage 1	1991-1993	from the establishment of the Group until the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, characterised by intensive cooperation and the creation of the foundations for the Group's functioning
2	Stage 2	1993-1998	characterised by the „dormancy” of the V4's activity and even by doubts concerning the legitimacy of this forum's existence
3	Stage 3	1998-2004	a period of the „reactivation” of the Group, marked by Slovakia's practical return to the V4 structures and by an intensification of cooperation culminating in the integration of all members into NATO and European Union structures
4	Stage 4	2004-2014	characterised by the development of new directions of activity encompassing cooperation within the framework of the European Union
5	Stage 5	2014-2022	a period of cooperation under the conditions of European crises, both military and non-military (the war in Ukraine and the migration crisis)
6	Stage 6	2022-present	characterised by the strengthening of cooperation in security matters, but also by the weakening of collaboration among the V4 states following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and due to political differences

**Source:** Own elaboration based on: M. Kulczycki, *Visegrad group as a platform of regional cooperation*, [in:] *Armed Forces in System of International Security*, ed. M. Kulczycki, Wrocław 2013, p. 58.

the former ally – the USSR – concerning the dissolution of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the Warsaw Pact, and the withdrawal of Soviet forces. The member states of the Group also adopted a pro-Western and pro-NATO orientation. An important element of this endeavour was the so-called *Kraków Declaration*, adopted in the same year, in which it was recognised that the principal objectives of the Group would be the inclusion of the signatory states into the European political, economic, legal, and security system. At the summit, the development of cooperation with NATO was announced, and it was emphasised that European security is indivisible<sup>13</sup>.

An important signal for the member states of the Group, confirming the need to continue cooperation – particularly in the field of security – was the invitation extended to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary in 1997 to begin membership negotiations for accession to NATO, and in 1998 to commence talks on ac-

<sup>13</sup> M. Herman, *Grupa Wyszehradzka. Narodziny, rozwój, perspektywy*, „Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny” 2001, 2(2), p. 172.

cession to the European Union. The slowdown in accession activities by the then Slovak government on the path towards joining NATO and the European Union resonated widely and generated public dissatisfaction with the government's policy, contributing, to some extent, to the subsequent change of power in the country following the 1998 elections<sup>14</sup>. Political changes in the V4 countries – particularly in Slovakia and the Czech Republic – as well as the settlement of disputes between Slovakia and Hungary made possible the „reactivation” of the Visegrád Group. At the meeting held in Budapest in October 1998, Slovakia was offered the „activation” of its membership and was assured of both political and practical support in its efforts to join NATO<sup>15</sup>. Owing to extensive political efforts as well as practical support initiatives, Slovakia became a member of both NATO and the European Union in 2004, which opened a new chapter in the history of the Visegrád Group's activity.

Between 2004 and 2012, the Visegrád Group gradually strengthened its position as a forum for political consultations and an instrument for coordinating activities within the framework of the European Union. Meetings of prime ministers, ministers, and speakers of the member states' parliaments focused on key issues of the EU agenda, including the New Financial Perspective, institutional reforms, and the European Neighbourhood Policy<sup>16</sup>.

The areas of Visegrád cooperation were broadly defined by the *Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrád Cooperation*, annexed to the *Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the V4 Countries on Cooperation of the Visegrád Group Countries after Their Accession to the European Union*, adopted in Kroměříž on 12 V 2004<sup>17</sup>. They referred to intergovernmental cooperation and indicated that Visegrád intergovernmental cooperation would be developed particularly in the following areas: cooperation within the Visegrád Group (V4), cooperation within the European Union, cooperation with other partners (in the *Visegrád Plus* format), and cooperation within NATO and with other international organisations<sup>18</sup>.

In the middle of the decade, the V4 intensified its cooperation in the field of the EU's Eastern Policy, supporting, inter alia, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership initiative, of which it was a co-initiator.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 186.

<sup>15</sup> A. Cottey, *The Visegrád Group and Beyond: Security Cooperation in Central Europe*, [in:] *Sub-regional Cooperation in the New Europe. Building Security, Prosperity and Solidarity from Barents to the Black Sea*, ed. A. Cottey, Basingstoke 2000, pp. 69-89.

<sup>16</sup> *Informacja na temat Grupy Wyszehradzkiej*, Biuro Spraw Międzynarodowych i Unii Europejskiej, Warszawa 2012.

<sup>17</sup> *Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation*, Kroměříž [12 V 2004], <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412> (14 VIII 2025).

<sup>18</sup> A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej: doświadczenia i perspektywy*, Katowice 2018, p. 130.

At the same time, cooperation was developed with the Baltic states as well as with partners outside the EU, such as Japan<sup>19</sup>.

Since 2008, energy security has become a priority for the Group, as reflected in the establishment of the Visegrád Energy Infrastructure Task Force and in the support expressed for the construction of the North–South Gas Corridor<sup>20</sup>. In the same period, the V4 increasingly presented unified positions on EU policies – particularly in matters related to the budget, climate and energy issues, and the enlargement of the European Union.

The twentieth anniversary of the Group was marked by the *Bratislava Declaration* of 2011<sup>21</sup>, which emphasised the significance of the V4 as an effective format of regional cooperation and a partner in the process of European integration. In the following years, the Group continued its efforts to strengthen the Eastern Partnership, the cohesion of the European Union, and the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy.

Since 2014, because of the Russian Federation's dismantling of the existing European security architecture, a distinct period in the field of cooperation and security has begun also for the V4 states. Unfortunately, due to the particularistic interests of individual member countries, significant differences and contradictions have emerged, especially in the economic sphere, stemming from the divergent threat perceptions of the Visegrád partners. The discrepancies in the assessment of threats and the divergent positions of the Visegrád Group states towards Russia and the possibilities of strengthening NATO's eastern flank have been referred to in public discourse as the „Visegrád cacophony”<sup>22</sup>.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, however, restored security as a key element of the V4 agenda. This conflict revealed significant differences in threat perception – ranging from the unequivocally anti-Russian stance of Poland and the Czech Republic, to the pragmatism of Slovakia, and the openly pro-Russian position of Hungary<sup>23</sup>. These differences have caused the V4 to lose its former cohesion and its ability to act as a unified political bloc. However, in the face of growing hybrid and geopolitical threats, the future of Central Europe's security still requires cooperation – even if such cooperation is to remain limited and pragmatic in nature. Despite these differences, the V4 countries con-

<sup>19</sup> M. Gniazdowski, *Współpraca wyszehradzka w polityce europejskiej i bezpieczeństwa*, Warszawa 2009.

<sup>20</sup> *Deklaracja ministrów energii państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej*, Bratysława, 25 I 2011.

<sup>21</sup> *Deklaracja Bratysławska z okazji 20-lecia Grupy Wyszehradzkiej*, Bratysława, 15 II 2011.

<sup>22</sup> M. Dahl, *Ewolucja Grupy Wyszehradzkiej i jej znaczenie dla bezpieczeństwa Polski*, Foreign Affairs. Pulaski Commentary [30 XI 2014], <https://pulaski.pl/ewolucja-grupy-wyszehradzkiej-i-jej-znaczenie-dla-bezpieczenstwa-polski/> (17 VIII 2025).

<sup>23</sup> A. Czyż, *The Visegrad Group Countries Towards the War in Ukraine in 2022*, „Studia Politologiczne” 2024, no. 73.

tinue to cooperate in the humanitarian, infrastructural, and energy domains; however, their ability to formulate a common security policy remains limited<sup>24</sup>.

Read through RSCT, each phase in Table 1 corresponded to distinct waves of securitisation. Phase 1-3 centred on exit-from-Pact and NATO/EU accession acts of speech. Phase 4 shifted to energy security and infrastructure interdependence. Phase 5 (post-2014) re-securitised Russia and hybrid threats, while Phase 6 (since 2022) re-elevated hard-security logics yet exposed divergent acceptance among audiences (notably on Russia policy), producing selective rather than comprehensive securitisation across V4. This sequencing explains why soft-institutionalised military formats persisted even as political cohesion fluctuated.

In the perspective of *middle power cooperation*<sup>25</sup> from the outset, the V4 strengthened the agency of the four medium-sized actors through ad hoc coalitions, niche diplomacy, and the sharing of costs and risks (*burden-sharing*). This logic assumes that states with limited individual power-projection capabilities enhance their influence through functional specialisation, the consolidation of positions, and the utilisation of multilateral formats. In practice, within the V4 this was manifested, inter alia, in the coordination of positions ahead of NATO and EU summits, in the harmonisation of training plans, and in the allocation of roles according to relative advantages (e.g. logistics components, CBRN, CIMIC, PSYOPS). These mechanisms help explain the early investments in interoperability, the creation of consultative formats, and the consolidation of staff-level cooperation habits, even in the absence of strong formal institutionalisation<sup>26</sup>.

In the subsequent stages of cooperation, the logic of middle powers materialised in highly specialised projects (so-called *niche capabilities*)<sup>27</sup> and in the development of collective readiness capabilities (the V4 EU Battlegroup rotations). This type of *niche diplomacy* contributed to raising the level of readiness and standardising procedures at an acceptable unit cost for each of the partners. In parallel, the V4 acted as an intermediary and *agenda broker* (*agenda-setting/brokerage*) in areas where subregional interests could be translated into the language of NATO/EU policies (e.g. military mobility, logistical support, and the resilience of critical infrastructure). In this sense, the V4's *institutional entrepreneurship* did not consist in creating „hard” treaty structures but rather in consolidating cooperative practices and accumulating operational experience that increased the „density” of defence relations within the subregion.

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<sup>24</sup> *Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the the V4*, Bratislava 2022, <https://www.mod.gov.sk/programme-of-the-slovak-presidency-of-the-v4/> (17 VIII 2025).

<sup>25</sup> *Niche Diplomacy*...

<sup>26</sup> M. Kulczycki, *Visegrad group as a platform of regional cooperation*, [in:] *Armed forces in system of international security*, ed. M. Kulczycki, Wrocław 2013.

<sup>27</sup> *Niche Diplomacy*...

Finally, the *middle power* strategy of risk mitigation (*hedging/strategic restraint*) enabled cooperation to be maintained despite cyclical perceptual differences and political changes. As a result, the V4 was able to balance the divergence of narratives (particularly regarding Russia) through low-escalation instruments such as joint exercises, staff training, and shared readiness planning. It is precisely this combination of specialisation, coordination, and burden-sharing that constitutes the most complete operationalisation of middle power cooperation within the Visegrád security practice.

### **Military Cooperation within the Visegrád Group States**

Following NATO's enlargements in 1999 and 2004, when all V4 member states achieved full membership in the Alliance, Visegrád cooperation also acquired a military dimension. Shared historical experiences, similar threat perceptions, and the geopolitical position between East and West led the Group's states to develop cooperation in the field of defence<sup>28</sup>. The military cooperation of the Visegrád Group can be regarded as a product of shared securitisation processes triggered by common perceptions of regional threats. The V4 states, positioned at the intersection of the Euro-Atlantic and post-Soviet spheres, have repeatedly identified similar existential concerns: the persistence of Russian neo-imperial policies and military assertiveness (particularly after 2014), vulnerabilities in energy supply and critical infrastructure, irregular migration and border management challenges, as well as hybrid and cyber threats. These problems, collectively framed as threats to the autonomy and stability of the region, generated subregional security dynamics characteristic of a distinct Central European Subregional Security Complex. In line with the logic developed in the book entitled *The EU as a Post-Lisbon Regional Security Complex*<sup>29</sup>, these acts of securitisation produced recognizable amity and enmity patterns: amity within the V4 and toward NATO and the EU as guarantors of collective defence, and enmity – though variably defined – toward revisionist Russia and, in functional terms, toward sources of instability on the EU's eastern and southern peripheries. The asymmetrical polarity of the V4 complex – manifested in economic, demographic, and military disparities (with Poland's dominant potential contrasting with the smaller capacities of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) – did not prevent the consolidation of a shared threat discourse. Rather, it encouraged functional specialisation and burden-sharing within a soft-institutionalised framework, confirming that subregional military cooperation emerges where the density of security interactions is reinforced by convergent

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<sup>28</sup> R. Zięba, *Europejska tożsamość bezpieczeństwa a Polska*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 45-48.

<sup>29</sup> M. Musioł, *op.cit.*

securitisation narratives. It gained particular significance after 2014 – in the context of the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas – and subsequently following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

A key example of practical military cooperation was the establishment of the V4 European Union Battlegroup (EU Battlegroup V4), which achieved operational readiness in 2016 under Polish command. The V4 states co-organise numerous military exercises such as *Common Challenge*, *Brave Warrior*, *Slovak Shield*, and *Maple Arch*, aimed at developing interoperability and crisis response capabilities. The members of the Group also participate in joint NATO missions, including in Kosovo (*KFOR*) and within the framework of the enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states. Prior to 2001, there had also been plans for genuine military cooperation which, in practice, were never implemented. One such initiative was the attempt to establish a multinational brigade that would have included military components from the V4 countries.

Attempts to establish a joint V4 military unit date back to the early 21st century, when Poland and the Czech Republic, seeking to support Slovakia in its aspirations to join NATO, proposed the creation of a Czech–Polish–Slovak Multinational Brigade. The formation of this unit was to be based on Polish experience in establishing the North-Eastern Corps (composed of Danish, German, and Polish troops). On 30 V 2001, in Bratislava, the Ministers of Defence of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Poland, and the Slovak Republic signed a Letter of Intent expressing their willingness to establish the Czech–Polish–Slovak Brigade in accordance with NATO standards<sup>30</sup>.

The brigade was intended to participate in NATO and EU peacekeeping missions, and its establishment represented political support for Slovakia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. One battalion from each founding state was designated for the brigade: the Czech Republic assigned the 46th Artillery Battalion from Pardubice, Poland declared the 6th Airborne Assault Battalion from Gliwice, and Slovakia contributed the Rapid Reaction Battalion from Martin. The brigade's staff comprised 22 officers – 10 from Slovakia, 6 from the Czech Republic, and 6 from Poland<sup>31</sup>.

In V 2004, the defence ministers of the three countries decided to disband the brigade as of 22 VI 2005. In the adopted statement, it was declared that the brigade had fulfilled its mission, namely, to support Slovakia in its efforts to attain NATO membership<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> *Odpowiedź ministra obrony narodowej na interpelację nr 188*, <http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/IZ4.nsf/main/21B2E67E> [17 VIII 2025].

<sup>31</sup> *Rozformowanie Czesko-Polsko-Słowackiej Brygady w Topolčanach*, <http://www.mon.gov.pl/pl/artykul/933>, (14 VIII 2025).

<sup>32</sup> *Sprawozdanie Komisji Obrony Narodowej oraz Komisji Spraw Zagranicznych o rządowym projekcie ustawy o ratyfikacji Umowy między Republiką Czeską, Rzeczpospolitą Polską i Republiką*

After the V4 countries acceded to the European Union, they began to play a more active role in shaping European security within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). The *European Security Strategy*, adopted in 2003, identified new threats to the security of the EU and outlined new approaches to countering them. In 2004, at the European Council summit in Brussels, the EU member states adopted the *Headline Goal 2010*, which introduced the concept of the EU Battlegroups<sup>33</sup>. This framework was updated by the *EU Global Strategy* of 2016<sup>34</sup> and the *Strategic Compass (2022)*<sup>35</sup> which reaffirmed the priority of readiness, resilience, and military mobility, as well as the need for the tangible utilisation of CSDP formats. Within this horizon, the V4 EU Battlegroup rotations remain a 'plug-and-play' practice in relation to the broader security architecture of the EU and NATO<sup>36</sup>.

The idea of establishing these tactical structures was based on the military experience gained from the 2003 Operation *Artemis*. The European Union Battlegroups (EUBGs) were designed to provide rapid response capabilities to potential conflicts or emerging threats to prevent their escalation. These units were intended to carry out the so-called *Petersberg tasks*, which include humanitarian and rescue missions, crisis management operations, peacekeeping, and peace-building activities<sup>37</sup>. It was assumed that the EU Battlegroups could operate at up to approximately 6,000 kilometres from Brussels. Their deployment may take place following a decision by the EU Council, and they are expected to reach the area of operations within ten days. A Battlegroup can operate independently

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*Słowacką w sprawie rozwiązania Brygady Wielonarodowej*, Bratysława, 30 V 2005 r. (druki nr 190 i 224), <http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata5.nsf/7105daf5973e96b5c125745f00379391/22f-c842ee701746ec12574650036da41?OpenDocument> (17 VIII 2025).

<sup>33</sup> *The European Security and Defence Policy: from the Helsinki Headline Goal to the EU Battlegroups*, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/sede/dv/sede-030909noteesdp/\\_sede030909noteesdp\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/sede/dv/sede-030909noteesdp/_sede030909noteesdp_en.pdf) (17 VIII 2025).

<sup>34</sup> European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf) (17 X 2025).

<sup>35</sup> Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security*, Brussels 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence_en) (17 X 2025).

<sup>36</sup> European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf) (17 X 2025); Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security*, Brussels 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence_en), (17 X 2025).

<sup>37</sup> *Petersberg Declaration*, Western European Union Council of Ministers, Bonn VI 1992.

for 30 days, and up to 120 days with resupply. The EU is to maintain two Battlegroups at immediate readiness, performing six-month rotational standby duties. A specific duty roster has been developed for this purpose. Under these assumptions, the EUBGs were intended to serve as the foundation of the European armed forces, permanently available to the EU and equipped with a full range of air and maritime support assets<sup>38</sup>. Unfortunately, despite the ambitious plans to establish a designated number of multinational military structures to conduct six-month combat duty rotations, numerous problems arose in implementing the adopted initiatives. Between 2005 and 2007, it proved impossible to mobilise a total of ten groups – representing 40 per cent of those originally planned – for active standby duty<sup>39</sup>.

Until that time, the Visegrád Group countries had not established joint military structures for participation in military operations under the aegis of European security organisations. Consequently, a significant opportunity emerged for them to undertake such tasks collectively. In the context of the establishment of the EU Battlegroups, each of the V4 states possessed relevant experience in this field and had participated in international EU Battlegroup rotations. Hungary was the first among the V4 members to participate, joining Italy and Slovenia in the *Multinational Land Forces* formation during the second semester of 2007, and again in the same composition in the second semester of 2012. The Czech Republic and Slovakia jointly formed a Battlegroup in the second semester of 2009, while the Czech Republic also took part in another rotation in the second half of 2012 alongside Germany, Austria, Croatia, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Poland, acting as a framework nation, formed a Battlegroup in the first half of 2010 together with Slovakia, as well as Germany, Lithuania, and Latvia; it was also set to command the so-called *Weimar Battlegroup* – comprising French and German military components – in the first half of 2013.

The Visegrád Group decided to return to the concept of establishing joint military units and to emphasise its contribution to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 2011, when, during a meeting in Levoča (Slovakia), it was decided to form the Visegrád Battlegroup, composed of the armed forces of the member states, with Poland acting as the so-called framework nation – effectively assuming command. The Group was to comprise approximately 3,000 troops and undertake its combat readiness rotation in the first semester of 2016<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> K. Miszczak, *Armia europejska. Strategiczne bezpieczeństwo militarne Unii Europejskiej*, Warszawa 2020, p. 148.

<sup>39</sup> A. Ciupiński, M. Soja, *Europejska Unia Bezpieczeństwa i Obrony. Struktury, wizje, perspektywy*, Warszawa 2020, p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> M. Kowalska-Sendek, *17 Brygada rusza na europejski dyżur* [30 X 2012], <https://polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/5344> (14 VIII 2025).

During this period, the V4 also undertook active initiatives in the field of security not only within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), but also by presenting a common position on matters related to their membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. An important event was the meeting of V4 defence ministers in Litoměřice (Czech Republic) in V 2012, held prior to the NATO Summit in Chicago, during which the countries reaffirmed their joint commitment to strengthening the Alliance, as expressed in the declaration *Responsibility for a Strong NATO*. It was envisaged that the Visegrád Group, building upon bilateral, regional, and international cooperation, would enhance the Alliance's collective defence capabilities through increased interoperability, and that V4 armed forces would play a more active role, particularly within NATO and the EU. The V4 countries also spoke with one voice regarding the coordinated withdrawal from Afghanistan and their continued engagement in supporting the successful transformation of that country. Furthermore, the Visegrád states declared their intention to assist other countries with so-called *Euro-Atlantic aspirations*<sup>41</sup>.

The statement signed by the defence ministers of the Visegrád Group countries in Litoměřice declared that the Visegrád European Union Battlegroup (Visegrád EUBG) would comprise 3,000 troops. Minister Siemoniak announced at the press conference that „a Polish officer will command the formation, and the Polish contingent will number 1,200 soldiers”. In addition to performing operational tasks, this military structure was also intended to assist civilian populations in responding to natural disasters<sup>42</sup>. In 2013, the armed forces of the countries forming this multinational formation began preparations through joint exercises conducted under the auspices of NATO's rapid reaction forces, codenamed *Steadfast Jazz*. The Group was placed under the command of the European Union's military structures, with the possibility of operating beyond Europe. The deployment of troops forming this group would require a United Nations mandate. The Visegrád European Union Battlegroup was to reach full readiness in 2016<sup>43</sup>. In the following years, further combat duty rotations were scheduled for this multinational formation, as presented in Table 2.

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<sup>41</sup> *Joint Communiqué of the Visegrad Group Ministers of Defence, Niepołomice, Poland* [26 X 2016] <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/official-statements/joint-communique-of-the>, (17 VIII 2025).

<sup>42</sup> *Informacja/Komunikat Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej*, <http://www.mon.gov.pl/pl/artykul/12818> (17 VIII 2025).

<sup>43</sup> *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych (PISM), Raport DAV4 II: Od grupy bojowej do trwałych form współpracy*, [http://www.pism.pl/obszary-badawcze/projekty/DAV4\\_pl](http://www.pism.pl/obszary-badawcze/projekty/DAV4_pl) (18 VIII 2025).

**Table 2.** Combat Duty Rotations of the Visegrád EU Battlegroup, 2016-2025

No	Framework Nation	Participating States	Approximate Number of Troops	Period of Rotation
1	Poland	Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Ukraine	approx. 3,900	1 I-30 VI 2016
2	Poland	Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Croatia	approx. 2,200	1 VII-31 XII 2019
3	Poland	Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and Latvia	approx. 2,300	1 I-30 VI 2023
4	Poland	Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary	approx. 2,300	1 VII 2024-30 VI 2025

**Source:** Author's own elaboration based on communications and decisions of the Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland (2015-2024) concerning the Visegrád EU Battlegroup (V4 EUBG), as well as reports of the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

According to the adopted plans, the Visegrád European Union Battlegroup (V4 EUBG) undertook its first combat duty rotation between I-VI 2016. Poland served as the framework nation, and out of a total of 3,900 troops, the Polish Armed Forces provided a contingent of 1,870 soldiers. As the framework nation, Poland was responsible for establishing the group's headquarters, the manoeuvre battalion, as well as the reconnaissance detachment and the air component. The Czech Armed Forces were responsible for logistics, while Hungary contributed special forces, engineering units, and cells responsible for civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) and psychological operations (PSYOPS). Slovakia, in turn, provided chemical defence units. Ukrainian troops also took part in this multinational structure<sup>44</sup>.

It was envisaged that the Visegrád Battlegroup, in conjunction with NATO and the European Union's diplomatic and political defence initiatives, would make a substantial contribution to the broader security architecture. Moreover, this V4 military component was intended to serve as a first step for the Central European states towards closer cooperation in the field of security in the future<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> *Wyszehradzka Grupa Bojowa: Komandosi z Polski w 2019 roku na straży UE*, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/komunikat.xsp?documentId=20CC32EC83FE62A9C12581F60051857B> (18 VIII 2025).

<sup>45</sup> Instytut Obywatelski, *W grupie siła*, <http://www.institutobywatelski.pl/8667/komentarze/w-grupie-sila> (18 VIII 2025).

This initiative of the Visegrád Group aimed at strengthening international security shared certain features with similar earlier undertakings – notably that of the group of Northern European countries, including Sweden, Finland, Norway, Ireland, and Estonia, which had established the Nordic Battlegroup. The V4 states' initiative fitted well within the broader field of security and defence cooperation and was firmly embedded in the context of the contemporary debate on methods of creating and sharing joint military capabilities – the so-called *pooling and sharing* or *smart defence* approach – as ways to overcome the negative impact of the economic crisis on European defence budgets<sup>46</sup>.

For the second time, the Visegrád EU Battlegroup (V4 EUBG) commenced its combat duty rotation in the second half of 2019. This multinational military component comprised 2,200 troops, and, as before, Poland acted as the framework nation. The operational complement was provided by soldiers from the Visegrád Group countries and Croatia.

For the third time, the Visegrád EU Battlegroup (V4 EUBG) carried out its standby duty during the first half of 2023. It was composed primarily of Polish troops from the 6th Airborne Brigade. The second largest contribution came from Hungary, followed by the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Officers from the armed forces of Croatia and Latvia were also assigned to the Battlegroup's headquarters. Poland formed the manoeuvre battalion and provided various specialist sub-units. The Polish Armed Forces were additionally responsible for logistical support and the communications system. A significant development during this rotation was the establishment of the EU Operational Headquarters (OHQ) based on the Land Operations Centre – Land Component Command in Kraków. The OHQ included an international staff, with most personnel contributed by Poland, but also including officers from Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Croatia<sup>47</sup>. This development is of particular importance, as such a key EU command structure was established in one of the Visegrád Group countries. Only a few member states possess Operational Headquarters (OHQ) status, including France, Germany, Italy, Greece, and Spain. The EU OHQ functions as a strategic-level command, working directly with the EU Military Committee.

The Visegrád EU Battlegroup (V4 EUBG) undertook its most recent combat duty rotation between VII 2024 and VI 2025. This marked a significant change in the duration of the EU's multinational formation's standby period, which until then had lasted six months. During this annual rotation, more than 2,300 troops were engaged, the majority of whom were Polish service members. The Czech Armed Forces contributed several dozen soldiers responsible for medical sup-

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<sup>46</sup> *Raport DAV4 II...*

<sup>47</sup> M. Kowalska-Sendek, *Polacy kończą dyżur w UE [7 VII 2023]*, <https://polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/134372?t=Polacy-koncza-dyzur-w-UE> (17 X 2025).

port, Slovakia provided a helicopter component, and Hungary ensured strategic air transport capability<sup>48</sup>.

Military cooperation within the Visegrád Group (V4) developed in parallel with the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, becoming one of the key dimensions of the practical implementation of the concept of subregional security. From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), it represents an example of the institutionalisation of security interdependence in a space where a high level of military interaction does not lead to the establishment of formal alliance structures, but rather to the consolidation of network-based strategic linkages. The V4's activities in the military sphere – ranging from the coordination of positions within NATO, through joint training, to the development of operational capabilities under the V4 EU Battlegroup – are consistent with the logic of a cooperative security complex. In this framework, the V4 functions as a sub-system of security that enhances regional cohesion and mitigates asymmetries among the Central European states.

The V4's military collaboration represents a manifestation of the typical strategies employed by medium-sized states – namely, ad hoc coalitions, niche diplomacy, and burden-sharing. Each state contributed specific competencies to this cooperation: Poland – operational and command potential; the Czech Republic – training and logistical components; Hungary – experience in crisis management and responses to asymmetric threats; and Slovakia – expertise in defence planning and infrastructure. Joint projects such as HQ MND-C (Multinational Division Central Europe), as well as exercises including *Common Challenge*, *Brave Warrior*, and *Slovak Shield*, have facilitated the development of interoperability and habits of cooperation that constitute the foundation of the subregional security complex's resilience. This mechanism reflects the principle of *soft institutionalisation* – the consolidation of cooperation through practice and technical coordination rather than through the creation of extensive bureaucratic structures.

At the same time, military cooperation within the V4 faces limitations arising from divergences in threat perception, differences in the level of armed forces modernisation, and distinct strategic orientations towards the United States, NATO, and the European Union. Despite the members shared engagement in strengthening NATO's eastern flank, divergences in their approaches to Russia and in the extent of their participation in international missions have contributed to a loosening of the Group's strategic cohesion.

The V4 thus remains a coordinating rather than a decision-making format – a platform for consultations and exercises, but not an autonomous security actor. Nevertheless, its importance for maintaining Central Europe's operational

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<sup>48</sup> Eadem, *Spadochroniarze na warcie w UE* [5 VII 2024], <https://polska-zbrojna.pl/home/article/show/42035?t=Spadochroniarze-na-warcie-w-UE> (18 VIII 2025).

cohesion remains significant: it is precisely through Visegrád projects that the practical translation of subregional cooperation into military capabilities takes place, strengthening the European security architecture and supporting the securitisation of new challenges in the region.

## Summary

Military cooperation among the Visegrád Group states not only contributes to the development of the individual member states' military capabilities but also constitutes an important complement to the activities carried out within NATO and the European Union. Despite the evident benefits arising from jointly implemented projects, this cooperation continues to face numerous political, institutional, and military limitations and challenges.

Based on the V4 states' military cooperation to date, four key areas can be identified in which its effective implementation is particularly evident.

The first conclusion concerns the operational dimension, which has constituted the foundation of the Visegrád Group's functioning since its inception. Even during their pursuit of NATO membership, the states of the region coordinated their activities in the field of security and defence policy. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the transformations within the Euro-Atlantic security environment, military cooperation among the V4 states has acquired renewed significance. In 2023, joint engagement continued, notably through the Visegrád countries' participation in the European Union Battlegroup rotation and the development of operational capabilities within the Multinational Division Central Europe Headquarters (HQ MND-C)<sup>49</sup>.

The second area concerns the growing complexity of threats that contemporary armed forces must confront. As P. Gawliczek observes, „the complexity and diversity of current and anticipated tasks facing the armed forces mean that only a few states are capable of carrying them out independently”<sup>50</sup>. In this context, the importance of multinational structures is steadily increasing – both within international organisations and in subregional groupings such as the V4. The Visegrád Group states have accurately recognised the need for joint action and the effective use of available military resources to strengthen regional security.

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<sup>49</sup> *Rozwój współpracy wojskowej państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej w ramach jednostek międzynarodowych w 2023 roku*, „Komentarze IeŚ 952”, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/rozwoj-wspolpracy-wojskowej-panstw-grupy-wyszehradzkiej-w-ramach-jednostek-miedzynarodowych-w-2023-roku/> (18 VIII 2025).

<sup>50</sup> P. Gawliczek, *Transformacja współczesnych sił zbrojnych – aspekt działań połączonych oraz przywództwa*, [in:] *Transformacja instytucjonalno-organizacyjna wojska na progu XXI wieku*, ed. W. Chojnacki, Warszawa 2004, p. 123.

The third conclusion focuses on the organisational aspects of the functioning of multinational structures. The implementation of joint tasks necessitates the harmonisation of procedures, the integration of command systems, and the standardisation of military equipment. A good example is the operation of the Visegrád EU Battlegroup (V4 EUBG), whose functioning illustrates the need for interoperability in the areas of armaments, logistics, and the planning and execution of military operations<sup>51</sup>.

The fourth conclusion concerns the so-called human factor. Joint exercises and the preparation of soldiers for operations within the V4's multinational structures contribute not only to the development of operational competences but also to the strengthening of interpersonal bonds, enabling the exchange of cultural, religious, and social experiences. Such interactions may have a long-term impact on fostering pro-defence attitudes and a sense of regional community and, in a broader perspective, on reinforcing regional security.

Despite the positive outcomes, military cooperation within the V4 also faces significant barriers.

The first of these are strategic and political differences. The primary limitation lies in the divergence of the member states' security policies. Poland focuses on strengthening NATO's eastern flank and maintaining a strategic partnership with the United States. Hungary pursues a more pragmatic, and at times pro-Russian, policy, whereas the Czech Republic and Slovakia place greater emphasis on European integration. These differences translate into limited strategic coherence and hinder the formulation of a common defence policy.

Another barrier is the imbalance in military potential. Significant disparities in military capabilities – both in terms of the size of the armed forces and the level of defence expenditure – further complicate cooperation. Poland, allocating more than 4% of its GDP to defence in 2025<sup>52</sup> is the regional leader, whereas the remaining V4 states allocate considerably smaller resources for this purpose. This disparity hinders the implementation of joint armament projects and complicates operational planning.

The limited use of operational structures constitutes another obstacle to improving interoperability. Despite the formal attainment of combat readiness by the V4 EU Battlegroup, this structure has never been employed operationally. Its functioning has primarily had a political and symbolic dimension. The absence of actual deployment and a shared operational strategy undermine its effectiveness and constrains its potential for further development.

<sup>51</sup> M. Kulczycki, *Wielonarodowe siły wojskowe – wspólne spojrzenie na bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe*, [in:] *Katastrofy naturalne i cywilizacyjne*, ed. M. Żuber, Wrocław 2012.

<sup>52</sup> *Wydatki obronne Polski w 2024 roku* [9 VI 2025], <https://dziennikzbrojny.pl/artykuly/art,2,4,12151,armie-swiata,wojsko-polskie,wydatki-obronne-polski-w-2024-roku> (18 VIII 2025).

Another area of concern is the weak cooperation among defence industries. The declarations regarding joint industrial and defence initiatives have not translated into tangible actions. Most projects have not progressed beyond the conceptual or preliminary analysis stage. There is also a lack of institutional mechanisms that would enable effective coordination of activities in this field.

A final point of note is the lack of institutionalisation. Military cooperation within the V4 remains largely unsystematised. It is dominated by ad hoc initiatives dependent on the current political climate and the decisions of national governments. There is an absence of permanent institutional structures capable of coordinating activities and ensuring the continuity of initiatives.

Despite the limitations, military cooperation within the Visegrád Group is not without significance. It provides a platform for the exchange of experience, the conduct of joint exercises, and the maintenance of interoperability. In the longer term, the effectiveness of this cooperation will depend on the V4 states' ability to overcome political differences and to develop a shared vision of regional security.

The observed practices of the V4 confirm the pattern of *soft institutionalisation* – the consolidation of cooperation through procedures, interoperability, and planning – staff habits, without the expansion of „hard” institutions. In a turbulent environment, it is precisely such soft institutionalisation that ensures the durability of operational outcomes despite political divergences and electoral cycles<sup>53</sup>.

The V4 functions as a subregional security complex (RSCT) of variable geometry and limited institutionalisation, in which the key determinants are patterns of interaction and the density of cooperation rather than „hard” commitments. At the same time, the Group embodies the logic of *middle power* cooperation: it aggregates niche capabilities, conducts niche diplomacy, reduces costs and risks (*burden-sharing*), and enhances interoperability. The juxtaposition of both perspectives explains why operational outcomes (training, Battlegroup rotations, MND-C) are relatively stronger than political cohesion; the absence of robust institutionalisation makes the V4 resilient to operational crises but vulnerable to divergences in threat perception and political cycles.

The continued strategic relevance of the V4 depends on three key moves: the systematisation of *soft institutionalisation* (establishing regular calendars of defence consultations, shared planning procedures, and minimum information standards); the continuation of specialisation in selected niches (logistics, CBRN, military mobility, and EU/NATO operational command in a plug-and-play mode); and the management of divergence through low-escalation practices

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<sup>53</sup> M. Musioł, *Znaczenie sekurytyzacji i sektorów bezpieczeństwa w ramach krytycznych studiów nad bezpieczeństwem*, „Historia i Polityka” 2018, 23(30), pp. 39-51.

(joint exercises, readiness planning, and procurement compatibility). This set of measures makes it possible to sustain operational cohesion despite political differences and to maintain the V4 as a coordination format that translates subregional preferences into the language of NATO and the EU.

## Abstrakt

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### Grupa Wyszehradzka jako platforma współpracy w ramach subregionalnego kompleksu bezpieczeństwa Europy Środkowej

Artykuł analizuje Grupę Wyszehradzką (V4) jako subregionalną platformę współpracy państw Europy Środkowej po 1989 r., z naciskiem na wymiar militarny oraz jej miejsce w architekturze bezpieczeństwa regionalnego i europejskiego. Celem jest ocena efektywności V4 z perspektywy współpracy państw średnich oraz logiki kompleksów bezpieczeństwa. W badaniu wykorzystano analizę instytucjonalno-prawną, porównawczą, analizę źródeł wtórnych i studium przypadku. Wnioski wskazują, że przy zachowanych osiągnięciach integracyjnych potencjał współpracy wojskowej V4 pozostaje niewykorzystany, zwłaszcza z powodu ograniczonej instytucjonalizacji i dywergencji percepcji zagrożeń.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Grupa Wyszehradzka, współpraca regionalna, Europa Środkowa, bezpieczeństwo, Grupa Bojowa Państw V4, współpraca wojskowa państw średniej wielkości, Regionalny Kompleks Bezpieczeństwa

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