

Chapter 3

Title

**The Visegrad Group's Position
Towards the Ukrainian Crisis**

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An Analysis

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Introduction: The Ukraine crisis – a media-coined term – has been one **A brief** of the most discussed topics in the global media in recent **history of** months. It is still not presented as a direct conflict between **recent** Russia and Ukraine, mainly because of the mainstream **events** discourse. The Ukrainian media use the term “antiterrorist operation” instead of “war” or “conflict.” Although there have been some accusations from the Ukrainian side that Russia is directly involved in the rebellions, until NATO made public its observations Kiev was afraid to publicly charge Moscow with sending its special forces to eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian army was, until Petro Poroshenko’s inauguration, almost helpless. Although now the situation has improved, the Ukrainian army – as well as other Ukrainian auxiliary forces most notably composed of volunteers – has to fight Russian professionals, although there is only presumptive evidence.

Recent evidence shows greater use of Russian military equipment – mainly heavy weapons such as T-72 battle tanks and missile systems – by the “rebels”. There remains the possibility that this equipment was taken from Ukrainian military depots, although NATO satellite images indicate that the tanks came from Russian territory – at least the battle tanks. At first, the Russian Federation did not publicly admit using military force on the Crimean peninsula but later – after annexation – Russian officials announced

and confirmed the use of Russian troops in this area. The main reason for the intervention was the concern about the security of the Russian-speaking population there. Many Russian-speaking people live in eastern Ukraine. Indeed, the 20th century was full of interventions aiming at protecting “weak” minorities living abroad. The most well-known example includes Nazi Germany’s intervention in the Sudetenland.

The situation in eastern Ukraine is very similar and it is just a question of time when Russian officials publicly confirm the use of military power – or at least the export of weapons. Russian tactics show a good example of those employed in modern warfare in the 21st century – the time frame and media discourse are very important elements. In this respect we can speak about a media war, because, naturally, Ukrainian media see the “problems” in eastern Ukraine differently to the way the Russian media do. The Internet also, (and predictably) serves as a propaganda tool.

The Ukrainian crisis offers a significant opportunity for members of the Visegrad Four (V4) to strengthen cooperation among them, especially political and military cooperation. Military exercises in Slovakia were planned for the autumn of 2014, the biggest since 1989. Ukraine is interested in fostering military cooperation with V4. All of the V4 members are also member states of NATO – Ukraine previously participated in NATO’s Partnership for Peace, so this step could be seen as the widening of cooperation with NATO as well as with EU member states. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the cooperation among V4 countries, together with their policies towards the Ukrainian crisis, Ukraine in general, and the Russian Federation.

V4: Strong national interests? The attitudes of the V4 countries towards Ukraine are fully dependent on their relations with Russia. Although V4 has a single official attitude towards the Ukrainian crisis, there

are many major differences in their individual foreign policies. Slovakia's Prime Minister and his political party have very close relations with Russia, and Slovakia generally is very dependent on Russian replacement parts for its army. The Slovak Army is under heavy criticism at the moment. The current president of the Czech Republic is known for his sympathies towards the Russian political elites, although the government cooperates with Poland – until the Prime Minister started to coordinate the steps of the Foreign Minister and the course was changed. Neither country – Slovakia nor the Czech Republic – agree with the presence of foreign troops on their territories. Hungary's Prime Minister has signed a contract with Russia about upgrading the country's sole nuclear power plant in the town of Paks, which also involves a Russian loan, in addition, he is very interested in the Hungarian minority living in eastern Ukraine – although he publicly supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Only Poland has taken a firm and unambiguous stand with respect to the Ukrainian crisis. The Polish government successfully reached agreement with NATO about the presence of US troops on its territory and it remains a strong critic of Russia.

*Picture 1.
Putin and
his friends.
A picture in
the Polish
Newsweek*



Hungary According to Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Hungary is not involved in the Ukrainian conflict. This is very similar to the prevailing attitude in France, which is going to sell several warships to Russia, a contract which the French President, François Hollande, will not cancel for fear of losing thousands of French jobs. Mr. Orban signed a contract with no public competition, and according to the opposition, too hastily – with Mr. Putin at the beginning of this year about upgrading a major nuclear plant, which would boost its energy production from 2,000 MW to 4,400 MW. Russia will also provide massive long-term credit – 10 billion euros –, which is around 80 per cent of the estimated cost. It should be mentioned here that it is still not clear in which currency the loan was agreed – there are doubts about why Russia would provide a loan in euros. The Hungarian parliament approved the deal, known as the “Paks deal” in June.

Russia has been Hungary’s main partner in solving its energy-sector problems. Mr. Orban presented co-operation with Russia as an opportunity for the Hungarian economy. Hungary is also against sanctions aimed at Russia largely because of its dependence on Russian natural gas. Hungary is more than 80 per cent dependent on gas from Russia and more than 75 per cent of Hungarian households use gas instead of other energy sources.

Russia is Hungary’s major trading partner outside the EU – but it is also very important for Poland – meat and apples export – and for the Czech Republic as well as Slovakia. The stock of the Hungarian Richter Gedeon pharmaceutical company is very low at the moment because of the Ukrainian crisis – Ukraine as well as Russia mean very important markets for this company.

The Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula was – according to Russian officials – motivated by the desire to protect of the Russian-speaking people. Mr. Orban often speaks about restoring a greater Hungary, which would in-

clude Hungarian minorities living in neighboring countries – in Slovakia, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine. Both Mr. Orbán and Mr. Putin share this expansionist nationalism. According to the former Hungarian Foreign Minister, Janos Martonyi, the nuclear plant upgrade deal was signed before the Ukrainian crisis had begun. Mr. Martonyi also argued that Hungary does not sell weapons to Russia – as France does. Generally, the rhetoric of Mr. Martonyi was not so strong. Mr. Martonyi claims to be concerned about the security of Hungarians – as well as other minorities – living in Ukraine. This is natural, as one of any state's most fundamental functions is to protect its citizens. The question should be rather: *How should it be done?* Mr. Orbán's original statement included reference to a peaceful solution and attention to the rights and security of the Hungarian minority. This statement was released on March 4. Two days later, the Visegrad Group released a joint declaration, which accused Russia of conducting military operations in Crimea and of violation international law. The Russian intervention was compared to Soviet military interventions in the second half of the 20th century.

Most recently, Mr. Orbán has renewed his call for the autonomy of Hungarian minorities in Ukraine. Such calls are not uncommon; however, Mr. Orbán's came at an inopportune time, as it could seriously undermine the unity of the V4. There are almost 200,000 ethnic Hungarians living in the western parts of Ukraine – mainly in Zakarpattia Oblast. According to him, Ukraine cannot be stable without giving collective rights and autonomy to its minorities. This statement was heavily criticized by Poland within the V4; Donald Tusk, the Polish Premier, expressed his displeasure at the recent GLOBSEC Bratislava Global Security Forum. Later – again – Mr. Martonyi tried to calm down the diplomatic tensions. The Russian press gave a great deal of publicity to Mr. Orbán's calls for autonomy because the Russian government accuses the Ukrainian government of discriminating

against national minorities. It seems likely that Hungary is to maintain its neutral position. It should also be mentioned here that its participation in NATO – as well as Slovakia’s – is very weak.

Slovakia Both Slovakia under Prime Minister Robert Fico, as well as his political party *SMER - socialna demokracia* maintain warm relations with Russia. Mr. Fico sees a solution to the Ukrainian crisis in diplomacy and politics – not in military action or economic sanctions. If sanctions against Russia continue, Slovakia’s economic growth in 2015 is likely to fall to only about 1 per cent of the GDP. In contrast, according to Frantisek Sebej, Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Slovak Parliament, Slovakia’s attitude is very irresponsible. Slovakia should realize that it is threatened by Russia, too. The attitude that Slovakia should offer NATO use of its bases and other facilities is shared by many Slovakian politicians as well as security experts.

Mr. Fico also announced that he cannot imagine any foreign soldiers being based in Slovakia. He cited – as Martin Stropnický, the Czech Defence Minister, in the Czech Republic did – the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. In his opinion, the presence of the foreign troops is still a very sensitive issue in Slovakian society. The former Slovakian President, Mr. Gasparovic, also disagreed with the stationing of foreign troops in Slovakia. The question is why it is necessary to compare democratic countries to the former Soviet satellites and to the Soviet Union. His successor – Andrej Kiska – is expected to be more pro-western. According to his inaugural speech, Slovakia cannot expect to be protected by other NATO states. Mr. Kiska pointed to security matters as being very important; in particular, Slovakia’s membership of NATO and the EU as being pillars of the country’s security.

Mr. Fico refuses to comment on the current talks about gas prices between Russia and Ukraine. It seems, however, that the Prime Minister is not in favor of the new Ukrainian government, saying *"It's pathetic and comical to have the same Ukrainian Government minister who signed an unfavorable deal complain today and refuse to pay for what he signed a couple of years back. But that's their internal problem."* As in the case of Hungary, Slovakia received an 870 million euro loan from Russia. This loan was given by Sberbank, which is owned by the Russian state, to *Slovenske elektrarne* – a company 66 per cent owned by Italian Enel and the rest by the Slovakian state.

The main security problem for Slovakia arising from the Ukrainian crisis is human trafficking. The human traffickers are currently very well armed and determined. The Ukrainian government has little control over the situation and the smugglers have taken full advantage of this fact. Slovakia has moved more paramilitary police to the borders as well as increased military patrols. The Slovakian government has also obtained support from the EU. Slovakia is a transit country because it lies on the eastern fringes of the EU, where the Schengen area begins.

Slovakia does not intend to increase its military budget despite the Ukrainian crisis. Current defense spending is about 1 per cent of the GDP – which is more than 26 per cent decrease although Slovakia's GDP has grown by 10 per cent – and NATO's proposed target is at least 2 per cent of the GDP. According to Mr. Fico, Slovakia has very limited resources with respect to increasing its military spending; he said that an increase was possible, but only a minimal one. Slovakia allocated 745 million euros to the Defense Ministry in 2014 – this is exactly 0.9 per cent of its GDP.

In contrast, Mr. Fico's ally, Mr. Putin, has increased Russia's military spending. According to analysts, the Slovak army is near to collapse. According to Marian Majer and Jaro-

slav Nad of the Central European Policy Institute, the Slovak policy towards defense has a bad international reputation. Although Slovak troops earned a good name in NATO, the defense sector is under severe criticism. A lack of interest in defense issues could lead to a greater dependence on Russia. Of all the new NATO states, Slovakia is the most dependent on Russia because of its reliance on replacement parts for its aging Russian-made military equipment. The third round of sanctions against Russia includes the Russian export of Russian military items and, thus, the Slovak army could be without vital components for its armed forces. The Slovak Air Force still uses old MIG-29 jet fighters, which are dependent on Russian replacement parts. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Defence is attempting to resolve this issue by means of cooperation with the Czech Republic and Poland. The Czech Republic should protect Slovakian airspace after 2016, and Poland should eventually be able to service its aircrafts. This can be seen as a very positive step towards cooperation within V4 as well as within NATO. Slovakia is not as active in NATO as at least two of the other V4 member states, namely Poland and the Czech Republic.

Czech Republic The Czech position towards the Ukraine crisis remains unstable, unclear and complicated. Although there is strong support for Ukraine from the Czech government as a whole, the Czech President's stance towards Ukraine is highly controversial because of his close association with the Russian political elites. Milos Zeman believes that the Russian occupation of Crimea is legitimate because it never truly belonged to Ukraine. Bohuslav Sobotka, the Czech Prime minister, disagrees. In his opinion, it was a violation of international treaties. Mr. Zeman also says that referring to ethnic minorities in Ukraine as Russian or as Hungarian in the case of Mr. Orban, is quite inappropriate. On this basis, Russia would also demand the annexation of Karlovy Vary,

because many Russians live there. The Czech President strongly supports – as Russia does – Ukraine as a federation. Although Mr. Sobotka agrees with sanctions against Russia, the Czech Republic is, in his opinion, not directly threatened. He also noted that there is no evidence to show that Russia is preparing an attack on a NATO or EU member state. Strangely, however, Mr. Zeman agrees with boosting the US military presence in Europe, while Mr. Sobotka does not. Mr. Sobotka prefers a more intensive dialogue between the EU and Russia.

Regionalism or the process of decentralization, which can be seen in many European countries, most notably Italy or Spain, could be one of the solutions to the Ukraine crisis. It has helped to stabilize these counties, thus, there should be similar results with Ukraine. However, there are significant (and obvious) differences between “Russian federalization” and “western federalization.” Mr. Zeman speaks about the decentralization of Ukraine – the Ukrainian government should stop fighting against its own people. According to Mr. Zeman, there are no terrorists in eastern Ukraine but only disaffected citizens. If the Ukrainian government halted its military operation in eastern Ukraine, Russia would have no reason to invade the country. On the other hand, Mr. Zeman would support NATO intervention in Ukraine in the case of Russia launching military operations on Ukrainian soil.

Czech defense spending was under severe criticism recently. Mr. Rasmussen visited Prague on April 10 and stressed that NATO's proposed target is at least 2 per cent of the GDP, while current Czech spending is only about 1.08 per cent – one of the biggest defense's decrease among NATO members in recent years. From this point of view, the Ukrainian crisis can be seen as providing a potential boost to Czech military spending. Otherwise, Czech military units – most importantly its anti-chemical troops – are highly appreciated by NATO Headquarters and the Czech Republic sends its

newly-acquired JAS-39C Gripen aircraft to the Baltic States to guard their airspace. Both Mr. Zeman and Mr. Sobotka agree that it is necessary to increase the Czech defense budget as a response to regional security concerns – at least to 1.4 per cent of the GDP in the mid-term. According to Mr. Sobotka, the Czech Republic needs to fulfill its commitments within NATO and also in relation to the Ukrainian crisis.

In a speech following U.S. President Obama's announcement in Warsaw about increasing military support for eastern European member states of NATO, including the deployment of U.S. troops, Mr. Stropnický, almost caused a political storm by saying that the Czech Republic does not want foreign troops on its territory because of its history over the last 80 years. A few days later, the Czech Parliament approved a resolution stating that the Czech Republic was ready to fulfill its NATO commitments.

The positive effect of the Ukrainian crisis can be seen in the shared co-operation between the Czech and Slovak Republics. Both countries plan to pool defense resources – including radar installations and personal weapons.

Czech foreign policy under Lubomír Zaorálek, the Czech Foreign Minister, was very similar to Polish foreign policy under Mr. Sikorski. The change came after the intervention of Mr. Sobotka, who, like Mr. Hollande, does not want to lose jobs or Russian investments. As a consequence, and most importantly, the Czech Republic could lose Poland as an important ally.

Poland Poland is the only country inside the EU to share borders with both Russia – Kaliningrad – and Ukraine. Ukraine's new president Mr. Poroshenko's first foreign trip was to Poland. Poland was the only V4 member state to respond quickly. Poland agreed with the deployment of U.S. troops – like the Baltic States – and showed a clear security policy. The Ukrainian crisis was proof that the V4 is not prepared

for deeper dialogue among its members. It was Poland that originally asked for a larger U.S. military presence in Eastern Europe. The earlier request was for at least 10,000 U.S. troops, although, in the end, only a relatively small number of special troops were sent.

Only Polish diplomacy has been stable and strong: Poland supported the uprising in Kiev against the former president Viktor Yanukovich and remains in close contact with the current pro-western government. The most important role is played by Radek Sikorski, the Polish Foreign Minister, who is a long-term critic of Russia and its foreign policy. In his opinion, the V4 as well as the EU as a whole should take a more consistent approach towards Ukraine.

The United States has already sent F-16 fighters and some special forces to Poland, as well as F-15 fighters to the Baltic States. The Polish military is significantly larger than those of the other V4 states. Poland has its own reasons for keeping a strong army – mainly because of its history. Polish entry into NATO was the biggest reinforcement of NATO after the Cold War. On the other hand, Poland has almost 40 million people – more than the combined populations of the other V4 states. Poland continues to increase its defense spending – in contrast to the other V4 member states.

Poland's defense spending is around 2 per cent of its GDP. The current middle-left Czech government must solve this issue. According to the March 5 announcement by Mr. Tusk, Poland intends to modernize its military by 2022 under a 42.7 billion USD program. He later added that Poland plans to purchase hundreds of drones by 2016 under its own national drone program.

Conclusions Mr. Brzezinski, the celebrated American political scientist and geostrategist, sees countries like Ukraine as geopolitically endangered species. The solution to the Ukraine crisis must be Ukrainian; it cannot, as many experts note, come

from the EU or Russia. The current problems have their roots in history – it is not possible to find a simple solution by making a single swift decision.

The Ukrainian crisis can be seen as having both positive and negative effects on the Visegrad Group. Although the relevant Prime Ministers often stress cooperation among the V4, national interests take precedence. Hungary is unlikely to cancel its Paks deal with Russia, and so is Slovakia to cancel the Russian loan planned for its energy sector. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are still uncertain about approving the deployment of foreign troops on their territory – although, after much complicated debate, the original resolution, banning the deployment of foreign troops, was changed. The defense budgets of all Visegrad Group members – except for Poland – are gradually decreasing. The worst situation is in Slovakia, where the armed forces are near to collapse. Polish diplomacy was the most decisive; Poland responded quickly to the Ukrainian crisis, asking the United States to increase its military presence on Polish soil and in the Baltic countries.

The only positive outcome for the V4 states in general is that government ministers are now much more interested in matters of national security. Slovakia has increased border patrols and is expected to introduce a new security scheme in the upcoming months – although Prime Minister Fico has declared that it is not possible to increase the military budget. Slovakia, like Hungary, is also expected to increase its military co-operation within NATO. In the Czech Republic, there is currently a debate about improving the army's readiness.

It should be noted that the V4 Prime Ministers publicly declare co-operation although they, like many others, are aware of continuing disagreements among the V4 states. The Ukrainian crisis is the first significant test of the preparedness of its members to proceed together with one voice.

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