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Russia's view of relations with European Union and the Visegrad Group

Abstract: Recently relations between Russia and the European Union have been experiencing another dramatic period. Unfortunately this is not the first time in the centuries-long history of Russian-European relations. If we look back at the last quarter of a century i.e. the period when modern Russian foreign policy was created, it is clear that Russia was waltzing at least theoretically towards establishing and developing relations with Europe and implementing Eurasian integration projects, but lagged behind with its own projects. Relations between Russia and the European Union were complicated by the EU back stepping each time it became dissatisfied with Russia's actions. Ultimately, the entire Russian and EU Four Spaces program collapsed as the EU opted for relations with Eastern Partnership countries which seemed more predictable. Notwithstanding this, Russian geopolitical strategy was focused on Europe. Russian experts believe that the main aspect requiring attention was and is to shape the political culture of a Russian-European consensus.

Russia's relations with the Visegrad countries were always overshadowed by its relations with the EU. With the Ukrainian crisis it became evident that both Russia and the V4 are immediate neighbors of an unstable region and are therefore most interested in settling the crisis. Although the V4 is in the EU and NATO, both of whom restrict its sphere of initiative, it had the chance to take on a constructive role in settling the Ukrainian crisis and, in the future, can connect the two transcontinental integration processes.

Some lessons from history

Recently relations between Russia and the European Union have entered another dramatic period. Unfortunately this is not the first time in the centuries-long history of Russian–European relations. If we were to open, for example, Dostoyevsky's diaries, written in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, against the backdrop of the Russian–Turkish wars, we would find a striking similarity in the description of the major European tendencies and in Russia's response to them.

People in Europe it seems, now no longer understand one another, as in the days of the Tower of Babel; each one no longer even understands what he wants himself. There is only thing that unites them all: they all immediately point to Russia: each one is certain that the malicious vermin always emanate from there.¹

Now just as then, we are witnessing the revival of anti-Russian hostility and the establishment of anti-alliances.

Within the last 150 years since these words were written, Russian opinion on European policy has alternated like a pendulum, swinging from “friendly relations with Europe” at one pole to “fatal contradictions and dangerous confrontations” at the other. It is as if nothing has changed since then: today Russia is again encountering this reality, as Tsar Alexander III, “the Peacemaker,” put it: Russia has only one ally and that is its army and fleet. Each time relations deteriorate Russia is sure that it is not her fault. There may be some seeds of truth in that as it is rare to find an author in Europe whose thinking is free of the clichés used to describe Russians that evoke images of “bears” or “brutal Asians,” but who understands its geopolitical importance for Europe. Among these “rare authors” we find British historian of German origin Helmut Koenigsberger who stated that

While Russia stood in the front line of European and Christian defense against non-European and non-Christian invaders, this role also tended to divide it from the rest of Europe and to divert its history into different paths. The Russians got little help from the rest of Europe in their life and death struggle with the Mongols but rather lost large Russian-speaking

¹ F. Dostoevsky, “Piccola bestia,” *A writer's diary* Vol. 1 (2 Vols): 1873–1876, trans. Kenneth Lantz, Evanston, Ind.: Northwestern University Press, 1994, p. 606.

areas to their western, Christian neighbors, the Poles and Lithuanians and the aggressive military religious institutions called the German Orders.²

These cyclical “warming up” and “cooling down” periods in relations may lead us to conclude that it is not so much Russian political systems but geopolitics that has influenced Russian relations with Europe. What is it if it is not continental geopolitics that forces Russia time and again after another defeat to return to Europe in its thoughts, reconsider new plans for cooperation and even begin implementing them in full reliance on its European partners?

The idea of rapprochement with Europe, the desire “to be like Europe” declared openly by the fathers of *perestroika* in the 1980s, had long been in the minds of Russians. It has been grounds for discussions between Slavophiles and Westerners since the 18th century. Each time Russia suffers defeat and takes offence, trying to find partnership with the East, she returns and resumes dialogue with Europe.

The origins of modern Russian European policy

The aim of this article is not to evaluate the politics of Mikhail Gorbachev, whose rule is mainly associated with collapse of the USSR. For better or for worse the entire continent was faced with the need for regional reintegration in 1991. The European Economic Union had much work before it and Moscow faced new challenges. Central Europe just changed the direction of development.

For three decades there had been no progress on the Kremlin’s integration projects. It was as if it had been alternating from one side to another since the 1980s, with the idea of assimilating to European integration as a mode of renewing relations between the former USSR republics, or of developing closer relations with Europe in general. Some hotheads even suggested that Russia should apply to join the European Union. In 2008 this idea was the basis of the election campaign of one of Russia’s presidential candidates. Now we must say that Europe had a lucky escape and the candidate received only 1.3 per cent of the vote. The situation

² H. G. Koenigsberger, *Early modern Europe 1500–1789*, London: Longman, 1987, p. 17.

became more complicated when the reforms began. As A. Bogaturov³ – well-known Soviet and Russian foreign policy analyst – writes, “The period between 1992 and 1993 was an amazing time. The Russian leadership avoided clearly stating its national foreign policy interests, choosing instead to identify them with the interests of democratic countries, generally the “world community of democracies.” Moscow attempted to persuade its foreign partners – despite their disbelief – to acknowledge that supporting Western initiatives was, in fact, the main foreign policy goal of the Russian Federation.

Documents from the early stages of New Russian statehood, the Russian foreign policy conception signed by President Boris Yeltsin in 1993, appear vague in content and too detailed on structure. They contain all the Federation's main concerns and determine the strategic importance of regions and countries in the world for Russian politics. European relations are fifth on the list after the countries of the “near abroad,” the main international organizations and the US. Still with hindsight, it is clear this priority was never observed. The foreign policy of that period might be characterized as reflexive and lacking in initiative. Another question might be whether the opposite was at all possible in that particular geopolitical situation.

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However, Russia's position concerning the war in Yugoslavia turned out to be a surprise to the West. Especially “Primakov's loop” when the Russian minister for foreign affairs turned his plane around over the Atlantic ocean on the news from his American counterpart that they were ready to bomb Yugoslavia. Russia signaled to the United States and Europe that from then on relations with Russia should be perceived more conceptually. It is important to mention at least two more factors here that will help us understand Russia's current behavior. First: during the Yugoslav conflict Russia found an ally in China and together they managed to reframe the Balkan conflict. In the modern history of Russia it was the first time Russia

³ A. Bogaturov, “Tri pokolenija vneshnepoliticheskikh doktrin Rossii,” [Three generations of Russian foreign policy doctrines] *Mezhdunarodnye processy* Vol. 5, January–April 2007. Available online: <http://www.intertrends.ru/thirteen/005.htm> [accessed on July 29, 2015].

had turned to an Asian ally in search of geopolitical balance. Second: Russia showed the world that it was capable of surrendering its geopolitical interests when war and peace were thrown into the balance. (In fact, it had already shown this in 1991 when it had to solve the dilemma of whether to let the USSR republics go free, or continue to keep them together at the cost of war and global stability. Indeed, Russia, sacrificed its national interest (for instance, keeping Yugoslavia in its geopolitical sphere, could – without doubt – have been in Russia’s geopolitical interest) to help the USA and NATO solve the Balkan problem “Western-style,” and save face after the West had initiated the first continental war in post-Second World War Europe.

There was then another period of remission in Russian–EU relations during which the West pursued its policy of Eastern Enlargement. This is in fact a policy of Russia conceding a former sphere of influence and was judged highly by the West who praised Russia for its new democratic image. Indeed, Russia again showed itself to be a country capable of putting continental peace and stability above strategic interest.

Russia’s EU relations

An agreement on Partnership and Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the European Union was signed in 1994. It could be called a universal guidebook involving all areas of potential Russian cooperation with Europe – from economy to culture and education. However, it could only be ratified and adopted in 1997 once disagreement over the military action in Chechnya had been settled. A system of joint committees that included Russian and EU experts and politicians was set up in order to implement this agreement.

However, implementation was postponed till the beginning of the 2000s because of the Balkan war and Russian default. Movement began with the St. Petersburg summit in 2003 at which Four Areas for cooperation were adopted.⁴ These were

⁴ “Evropa i Rossija: stroitel’stvo strategicheskogo partnerstva,” [Europe and Russia: building a strategic partnership] Delegation of the European Commission to Russia. Available online: http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia/eu_russia/political_relations/political_framework/index_ru.htm (accessed on July 29, 2015).

1. the establishment of a common economic space;
2. a common space of stability, security and justice;
3. a common space of international security;
4. a common space for scientific research and education including cooperation in the cultural sphere.

At the 2005 Moscow summit road maps for implementing the four projects were adopted.

The fact that this progress in EU–Russian relations was achieved against a background of EU Eastern Enlargement including Russia's immediate neighbors – Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia – is to be taken into consideration. The extensive talks between Russia and leading EU states over the possible outcomes of enlargement helped bring Russia to this joint step with the European Union and its former allies (and even republics) in hope of wider European integration, and a potential partner to Russia in what might have been a very achievable future.

However, the mid-2000s saw the beginning of a turbulent period in EU–Russia relations. The newcomers to the European Union overloaded the EU with problems they thought should be settled with Russia, but which they could not solve bilaterally. In 2006 Poland vetoed the new agreement between Russia and the European Union. According to a number of Russian experts on EU relations, this move – although initially treated as a mere technical obstacle⁵ to developing dialogue – “not only became a serious problem for Russia–EU relations, but was also a symptom of a progressive disease affecting the EU's political mechanism.”⁶ The disease was caused by EU Eastern enlargement which had rendered the European Union too diverse and meant that achieving agreement was more difficult. After 2004 the former USSR republics felt it appropriate to share their personal hostility towards the USSR with the “European family” thus obliging it “to defend” the republics against Russia.⁷

Poland was followed by Lithuania who vetoed the new agreement on account of claims against Russia. As a result the European Union had to delay the agreement until the time was right. Unfortunately the time is still not right. In 2009 the European Union took definite steps to freeze relations

⁵ Russia had refused to import Polish chicken on sanitation grounds.

⁶ D. Danilov, “Rossija – ES: osobennosti politicheskogo dialoga,” [Russia–EU: features of political dialogue] in O. U. Potjemkina, ed., *Evropejskij sojuz v XXI veke: vremja ispytanij*, [European Union in the twentieth century: testing times] Moscow: Vec mir, 2012, p. 538.

⁷ Ibid

with Russia because of Russian involvement in military conflict on the border of North and South Ossetia (Georgia). Nonetheless, this was a very positive period in economic relations between Russia and the European Union. The second half of the 2000s might be considered a time of extensive alternative gas and oil pipeline construction directing attention away from important political issues in relations.

It seems that towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s the Eastern Partnership became more important for the EU. This policy had

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been described by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an unfriendly gesture, contradicting the spirit of good-friendly relations between the EU and Russia, and forcing former republics to choose between two different integrations. In the spring of 2010, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that the European Union's "Eastern partnership" could damage relations between Russia and Partnership countries, especially the integration structures formed within the CIS.⁸ "Moscow sees the Eastern Partnership as an attempt

to weaken Russian influence in post-Soviet space and offer former Soviet republics a different development model."

On the eve of the 2013 Vilnius summit EU–Russia relations were quite positive in the economic sphere, but less so politically. By then Russia had become the EU's third trade partner after the USA and China. In 2012–2013 Russia's trade output with the European Union reached 49.7 per cent.⁹

Towards the beginning of the 2000s Russian foreign policy strategy towards the European Union shifted from the idea of joining the EU that had been popular in the early 1990s towards establishing a common economic and humanitarian space stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. "This area

⁸ RIA Novosti materials, May 13, 2010. Available online: <http://www.rian.ru> (accessed on July 29, 2015).

⁹ O. Potjemkina, "Rossija i Evropejskij sojuz: k edinomu prostranstvu ot Atlantiki do Tihogo okeana," [Russia and the European Union: a common space from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean] *Русский вопрос* [Russian Issues], No. 3, 2013. Available online: <http://www.ruskiivopros.com/index.php?pag=one&id=530&kat=6&csl=63> (accessed on July 29, 2015).

presumes a high level of integration and symmetrical and equal relations in all spheres of cooperation.”¹⁰

Thus, notwithstanding all the internal and external difficulties, we can see that the dominant Russian geopolitical strategy pointed towards Europe. One assumption about Russian integration policy, or rather the lack of visible results in this direction, might be that Russia herself was delaying closer integration with Asian countries who saw better prospects in joining the European integration schemes. As Olga Potjemkina from the RAS Institute of Europe writes, Russia had set its main hopes on the possibility of interacting in two integration processes in the post-soviet region – the EU and the EAES,¹¹ and constructing a free trade zone at the point where they intersected. “From this point of view, the worsening relations between Russia and the EU on the eve of the November 2013 summit and the fact that the Association Agreement with Ukraine was not signed in Vilnius, could have been viewed as a no-joy result of cooperation, but was in fact – concurrence of Russia and EU on post-soviet space. This might be called “a zero sum game:” Russia was defending its “sphere of privileged interests,” and the European Union “its circle of friends.” “The latter sounds more elegant, but both are one and the same.”¹²

In one of his articles, Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed Russia's disappointment with the pace of proceedings to abolish short-term visas for Russian and EU citizens. Given that both sides were technically ready, he declared the visa regime between Russia and European countries as anachronistic.¹³

Expert Russian opinion was that,

Neither the shaping of the political culture of Russian–European consensus, on a very high level within the Union itself, nor the mutual acknowledgement of the requirements and interests will be able to achieve the level required to produce visible results for Russian–EU cooperation beyond long lasting coordination and multiple rounds of talks. At the same time there have been growing levels of business contact, and between specialists and expert groups. This resulted in the

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Eurasian Economic Union.

¹² Ibid

¹³ S. Lavrov, “State of the Union Russia–EU: prospects for partnership in the changing world,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, July 9, 2013.

two sides developing a mutual trust and understanding of each-other's aims and tasks that had been greatly lacking at the political level.¹⁴

Some Russian experts, especially those in the Central European region, have proudly claimed that Russia has moved far in separating pragmatic interests from politics. The current crises in EU–Russian relations show that the distance between the two groups of interests has become too large for the necessary balance to be maintained. The conclusion therefore is that for both Russia and the European Union developing a new type of political relations or at least a culture of these relations has always been no less important, particularly before its absence ruins the seemingly more successful pragmatic relations.

After the Vilnius summit

This lack of political culture in relations, or intolerance, and deficit of responsibility for the fate of the region and continent as a whole were fully manifest on the eve of the Vilnius summit and during preparations for the Association Agreement with Ukraine. It would not be an exaggeration to state that one of the main triggers of the Ukrainian political crisis was the EU's Eastern Partnership Policy. The European Union did not invite Russia to discuss the prospect of joining the economic talks, while Russia was ready to extend EU–Russian plans to create four common areas linking Ukraine, Moldavia, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EU had provided these new countries with restructuralization plans that would widen the gap between them and Russia. Thus, these countries, geographically located between Russia and the EU, had been transformed from potential areas of cooperation into areas of confrontation and instability.

The response, from Russia's perspective, was Russian reintegration of Crimea – a final signal to the West following the collapse of the agreement achieved in Kyiv through Russian mediation on February 21, 2014. To understand and evaluate the one-sided concessions Russia has made since 1991 it is worth looking at the map of Europe and counting the areas of former Russian influence given up within a quarter of a century in a spirit of good will. There remains the question of whether the European expert community driven by the euphoria of a quarter of a century of Russian

¹⁴ O. Potjimkina, "Rossija i Evropejskij ...," [Russia and the European Union...] op. cit.

concessions failed to understand that there was a “limit” or “breaking point” in Russia’s patience, or was deliberately ultimately seeking to draw Russia into confrontation. However, none of this would save the situation after what happened in Ukraine.

It is worth mentioning that the United States and the European Union decided to introduce the first sanctions against a number of Russian statesmen on the same date – March 17, 2014. On that day foreign affairs ministers in the European Union agreed to introduce sanctions against Russian and Ukrainian officials whom they considered “guilty of violating the territorial integrity of Ukraine.”¹⁵ Four days later, on March, 21st, this list had been extended. Canada and Australia were both more active in introducing sanctions than the US had been. Notwithstanding the fact that it was much more sensitive about sanctions than the countries listed above, the European Union did not even try to oppose the decision and joined the transatlantic mainstream.

One of the main triggers of the Ukrainian political crisis was the EU’s Eastern Partnership Policy.

On March 17, 2014 Russia introduced corresponding sanctions against representatives of the American establishment. Eleven days later, on March 28th, the sanctions were extended to include representatives of the European Union. On August 6th, the Russian President introduced an embargo on some agricultural products, foods and raw materials from EU countries who had introduced economic sanctions against Russian individuals and companies.¹⁶ This proved to be a double-edged weapon as it affected European countries – especially in Central Europe, since they trade more in agricultural products with Russia than with Western Europe – and Russia alike, since the latter’s food supplies had in recent decades been linked to imports from the very countries under sanctions.

¹⁵ “Hronologija vvedenija sankcij protiv rossijskih grazhdan i kompanij,” [Chronology of sanctions against Russian citizens and companies] *RIA Novosti*. Available online: <http://ria.ru/spravka/20150216/1046144422.html#ixzz3gcWz5L9q> (accessed on July 29, 2015).

¹⁶ “O primenenii otdel'nyh special'nyh jekonomicheskikh mer v celjah obespechenija bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii,” [On the application of certain special economic measures in order to ensure the security of the Russian Federation] Decree of the President of Russian Federation.

Russia and the Visegrad Group

Russian experts on Central Europe are always bemused by statements, made from time to time by their colleagues and by some Central European politicians, accusing Russia of trying to provoke disagreement among the Visegrad Group countries. Frankly speaking, in the mere twenty-five years of Visegrad Group existence, Russia's skeptical attitude towards the V4 as an element in European policy in the region has hardly changed. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not include the Visegrad Group on its list

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of international partner structures that pursue active cooperation with Russia. This can partly be explained by the fact that the Visegrad Group does not have this kind of organizational structure. Indeed, the presidency of the Visegrad Group rotates annually from country to country, and the only institution with a permanent office is the International Visegrad Fund, located in Bratislava.

One of the main reasons for Russia's skepticism may be that Moscow, which lacks a strategy in relation to Central and Eastern Europe, is naturally unable

to develop a policy on the Visegrad Group. Nevertheless, up to mid-2013 bilateral links with Poland and Hungary were improving, and relations with the Czech Republic and Slovakia had traditionally been good, compensating for Russia's lack of links with the Visegrad Group at the structural level. Since the Visegrad Group was formed, Russia has treated its initiatives with detachment, yet has analyzed them in terms of their impact on its security and prospects for economic development. From this point of view Russian experts could not neglect, for example, the formation of the 3000-strong Polish-led international battalion to be completed by 2016. The energy projects mentioned in the Eastern Partnership Program also demonstrate the Group's interest in expanding its geostrategic influence and forming its own stable segment of the European market in the region.

The Visegrad Group does not yet seem strong enough to be immune to internal and external threats. Although it has existed for almost a quarter of a century, many of the territorial disputes in the region have not been resolved,

nor has the habit developed of defending common interests in Brussels, and furthermore there is practically no common vision of the prospect of this kind of regional interaction. The current crisis in Ukraine has revealed that behind the external PR of Visegrad Group unity, there are significant differences in interests and assessments of the situation. Moreover, three members of V4 are intensely watching the maneuvering over the potential outcome of the Polish parliamentary elections following the conservative swing at the presidential ones.

The main sore point in relations between the Visegrad Group and Russia has always been Ukraine, geographically located between them and both sides, including the Visegrad Group as an organization and the individual Visegrad countries, who obviously have their own geopolitical interests. For a long time, Russia sought to keep Ukraine within its economic orbit with projects such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Customs Union and the promise of the Eurasian Union. It was hard to involve Ukraine in closer forms of cooperation (modelled on the Union State of Russia and Belarus) because of its bi-directional geopolitics.

The European Union has consistently ignored Ukraine's bi-directionalism, seeking to attract the Ukrainian elite by funding projects aimed at planting "European values" in Ukrainian soil, thus setting it in opposition to the pro-Russian sections of the population and arguing that the future of Ukraine lies with the Euro-Atlantic alliance and not with Russia. Undoubtedly, the policy of detaching Ukraine from Russia was rooted in the European Union's expansion projects, and was implemented, albeit partly, through the efforts of the Visegrad Group policy in the Eastern Partnership program.

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V4 in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis

The Visegrad Group has always followed the European partnership program with much greater interest and involvement than the rest of the EU. Therefore, the Vilnius summit and the events that followed were the first

“breaking news” since the Lithuanian presidency in 2013. Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski attempted to bring together the two sides of the conflict in Kyiv at the talks on February 21, 2014. Sikorski’s attempt failed but was followed by an attempt by Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák to arrange talks with Ukrainian politicians, and he and his counterparts from the Visegrad countries visited Ukraine in the last days of February 2014.

On March 4, 2014, the prime ministers of the Visegrad Group released a joint statement expressing concern about the deteriorating situation in Ukraine and the decision of the Federation Council of the Russian Federal Assembly to allow President Putin as Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation to deploy Russian forces on Ukrainian territory against the wishes of the Ukrainian government.¹⁷ They called on Moscow to comply with the terms of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, stressing that “military actions by Russia are not only in violation of international law, but also create a dangerous new reality in Europe.”

That statement reflected the common position of the European Union and NATO, and from then on the Visegrad Group position on Russia was what we might call a regional echo of the Euro-Atlantic strategy.

The Ukrainian crisis has had a greater impact on the Visegrad countries and Russia. In part this is because of their geographical location. There are close connections with Ukraine in terms of cultural and social bonds. Working alongside each other, they pursue projects of a cross-border nature and for general Ukrainian integration and these often compete with each other.

When analyzing the Visegrad Group’s individual and collective approach towards Ukraine and Russia, we can see how this central European community gradually evolved and internal attitudes shifted as the crisis unfolded. Much of this occurred in stages and has less to do with positions on Ukraine (which changed the least) than with attitudes towards Russia whom the USA and Brussels declared responsible for the crisis.

Stage one started with the protests on Maidan Square in Kyiv that went on until the end of March 2014, when the United States and the European Union first imposed sanctions on Russia. Meanwhile, the initiatives of the Visegrad

¹⁷ “Statement of the prime ministers of the Visegrad countries on Ukraine,” March 4, 2014. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/statement-of-the-prime> [accessed on July 29, 2015].

Group countries still sought to retain their regional leadership role against the backdrop of the common Euro-Atlantic strategy.

Stage two (approximately April–July 2014) was the period when the Visegrad Group felt the need to go along with the sanctions as members of the bloc. From that moment onwards, the members of the Group became mere onlookers while two countries – Poland and the Czech Republic – introduced their own anti-Russian sanctions.

Stage three (August–September 2014) saw a reaction to Russia's retaliatory measures that mostly hit Central European countries and the Visegrad Group attempt to assess the effectiveness of Euro-Atlantic sanctions.

Stage four roughly coincides with the Minsk meetings on Ukraine and the search for ways to settle the crisis. It also saw a deepening rift within the Visegrad Group, increasing pressure from the United States and the European Union on Visegrad Group leaders who refused to follow a tougher line on Russia.¹⁸

Indeed, instead of producing the greater cohesion between positions as desired by the Visegrad Group, the Ukrainian crisis brought evident signs of discord in the Visegrad quartet, or – as Polish expert Mateusz Gniazdowski put it – cacophony. In the cacophony, the voices of Hungary and Poland, in particular, whose “historic friendship” had been above suspicion, began to part ways. The major reason for that was the sanctions against Russia – which had to be implemented by each EU member – and when catastrophe struck Ukraine, Hungary had a number of very promising economic and investment agreements with Russia. Both the Hungarian and Polish economies were tangibly affected by the retaliatory Russian sanctions. Thus the Ukrainian crisis and events around it did not strengthen Visegrad unity.

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¹⁸ L. Shishelina, ed., “Russia and the Visegrad Group: the Ukrainian challenge,” *Report of the Russian International Affairs Council*, No. 22, 2015, p. 39.

For example, during the summer months, industrial output (on an annualized basis) dropped in Slovakia (by 7.5 per cent in June; 4.7 per cent in July; and 2.7 per cent in August) and in Hungary (by 12.3 per cent in July and 0.5 per cent in August). Similar trends were registered in the Czech Republic. However, the drop cannot be attributed to sanctions alone because seasonal factors were more important.

As for Russia, by introducing retaliatory sanctions, its target was primarily the European Union and not just the Visegrad Group because the sanctions were imposed on Brussels and not Budapest, Bratislava, Warsaw or Prague. However, as close neighbors and being most dependent on trade with Russia, the countries of south-eastern and Visegrad Europe were most exposed. In April 2015, Russia decided to revise its position in relation to the countries that had not imposed sanctions against Russia and had continued to cooperate with the Russian Federation. Within the Visegrad Group, this was above all Hungary whose prime minister had repeatedly declared that imposing sanctions against Russia was like shooting yourself in the foot.¹⁹ Slovakia can also be counted in this group given the pragmatic position of Prime Minister Robert Fico.²⁰

The “personal opinions” of those interested in maintaining European peace and pragmatic relations with Russia attest to the spirit of opposition and criticism that is traditional in that part of Europe. No one wants to see the conflict grow into a war.

Foreign ministers of V4 countries had continued plans for assistance for Ukraine²¹ and to strengthen their own defense in the face of the “common

¹⁹ “Orbán: Az Oroszország elleni szankciókkal „lábön lőttük magunkat,” *Mandiner*, August 15, 2014. Available online: http://mandiner.hu/cikk/20140815_orban_az_oroszorszag_elleni_szankciokkal_labon_lottuk_magunkat (accessed on July 29, 2015).

²⁰ L. Shishelina, ed., “Russia and the Visegrad Group: the Ukrainian challenge,” op. cit., p. 63.

²¹ According to Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák, the Visegrad Group countries shared responsibility amongst themselves for assisting Ukraine with reforms. Thus, Slovakia would be responsible for security system reform and energy security; the Czech Republic for helping build a civil society in Ukraine, as well as reforming education and implementing structural changes in the mass media; Poland would take charge of decentralizing regional and municipal government and reforming the financial sector; and Hungary would be responsible for providing support to small and medium-sized enterprises. “Slovakia to aid Ukraine in energy and Security Reforms,” *The Slovak Spectator*, December 17, 2014. Available online: <http://spectator.sme.sk/c/20052991/slovakia-to-aid-ukraine-in-energy-and-security-reforms.html> (accessed on July 29, 2015).

Russian threat" throughout 2014. Nonetheless, their role in crisis resolution was diminishing and was, ultimately, transferred to the "Minsk Group" and Norman Four.

Russia and the Visegrad Group after the meeting of the "Normans" in Minsk

It seems that Russia's adopting a role in the talks on a Ukrainian settlement had to a certain extent transferred the initiative from Ukraine's immediate neighbors to the West. The Czechs attempted to introduce a different form of regional cooperation with the participation of Austria and Slovakia.²² How should this be assessed? As the next attempt to involve the reconciling Austrian factor in the center of Europe? But how does this relate to Hungarian historical experience? It is unlikely that this configuration will be the solution or replace the slightly lost V4. Elections in Poland also delayed Visegrad coordination over Ukraine for some time. So, it appears that there were many more internal and external factors starting to influence the dynamism and effectiveness of Visegrad cooperation.

At the same time, however strange it may sound, the crisis has not had a tangible impact on these countries' relations with Russia. The countries that have sought to improve bilateral relations (Hungary) continue to work towards that goal, although they are having to work against greater odds. The countries with more balanced policies (Slovakia and the Czech Republic) have also try to stay within a framework of political and economic pragmatism. The countries that had committed themselves to confrontation even before the crisis and are the de facto authors of the Eastern Partnership Policy seem to have achieved their goal, i.e. a dramatic deterioration in relations with Russia. It is no coincidence that Russia and Poland are engaged in a verbal war. These are countries whose historical and geopolitical interests most clash

²² On January 29, 2015, the prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Slovakia together with the chancellor of Austria met in Slavkov, Czech Republic, to sign an agreement that provided a new framework for regional interaction in Central Europe. Poland and Hungary were not invited to take part in this leading some analysts to proclaim the beginning of the end for the Visegrad Group. J. Groszkowski, "The Slavkov Declaration: a new format of regional cooperation," *OSW Analyses*, February 24, 2015. Available online: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-02-04/slavkov-declaration-a-new-format-regional> (accessed on July 29, 2015).

over Ukraine. That is why it is within the power of these countries to get the conflicting sides in Ukraine to the negotiating table.

The history of the Visegrad Group has witnessed long periods of stagnation, as occurred in the mid-1990s. However, the Group also saw fit to preserve this format of cooperation; although it has changed somewhat since accession to NATO and in the run-up to joining the European Union. Most probably, the Central European four will manage to come out of this temporary stagnation of practical and patriotic regionalism much sooner than we expect. In any case, the label "Visegrad four" has become one of the few stable phenomena in a Europe "under transition" and one the Europeans will miss should the project end.

Maybe its revival will happily coincide with a rethink of its regional and much broader European role? In addition to joining efforts made by another of Ukraine's neighbors – that is Russia – to settle this crisis, it might be

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inspired by the role of mediator in the two continental integration processes: European and Eurasian.

In any case, the outcome of positive political decisions will always benefit economic solutions. Just one question remains: the winter is approaching and the EU sanction directives are continuing to deepen the Ukrainian trench cutting off the Visegrad countries from direct gas supplies from Russia. It is possible that Germany will

manage to obtain the required amount of gas via North stream, but what about Hungary, Slovakia and the Czechs? Azerbaijan and other countries still lack the pipelines to supply fuel. This is a case when pragmatism should kick-start politics.

It also seems that it is time for Russian diplomacy to part ways with its skeptical approach towards the V4 and look for ways to broaden regional dialogue. Russia is also a neighbor of the European Union. That means that Russia and the Visegrad countries, as well as the European Union, should try to rise above the stereotypes and clichés, the lack of alternative thinking embedded in the numerous "expert analyses" that lead nowhere, and to complete tasks that have proved unsuccessful since 1991. The most important of these is developing and spreading in both directions of a culture of political dialogue and consensus. The second is to embrace this culture on economic

relations, and part ways with the previous delusions of the superiority of bare pragmatism.

For Russia and the Visegrad countries it is very important to think about new patterns of bilateral and regional relations, liberating them and indeed themselves from stereotypes and clichés and moving away from historical offences. Otherwise the mark we leave behind us will be that of a generation that brought nothing new to the Europe of today or tomorrow but an attempt to puzzle out the evident mistakes of our predecessors and the previous epoch. History, like dental treatment should be left to the professionals and not to politicians. Would anyone go to a florist to save their tooth however enlightened the florist might seem? I strongly doubt it.

As a first step Russia would be greatly inspired to receive an invitation from the V4 to discuss international relations and our visions of the future as well as the situation in our common "near abroad." Why do we not consider V4+R as a format for discussion and cooperation? Russia is much closer to the Visegrad region than Japan or Taiwan with whom it has worked out quite stable consultation mechanisms. These might be the first lines sketched on the road map for initiating a constructive dialogue between immediate regional neighbors.

It is clear that NATO membership prevents the Visegrad Group from putting forward too ambitious initiatives in relations with Russia. And Russia has to go its own way in normalizing relations with transatlantic and all-European structures. However, the V4 could become a mediator in regional politics, and Visegrad Europe could, in the coming months, become an effective forum for consultation and roundtables to search for a way out of the Ukrainian crisis, or to rethink the Eastern Partnership having invited Russia to participate; not to mention the urgent need to concentrate on the juncture of two transcontinental projects: European and Eurasian. Hungary is already considering such an opportunity. The Visegrad Group should have its say as an expert in European politics, using its knowledge of the region and helping the parties to find a regionally acceptable solution.