

BACKGROUND REPORT

PRAGUE PRAŽSKÝ
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V4+

**Cooperation of CE countries in response to
situation in Russian Federation and in
Ukraine**



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Imprimatur: Šimon Presser
Graphics: Jan Hlaváček

Model V4+

Published by Association for International Affairs for Prague Student Summit.
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1 Introduction

The conflict in Ukraine that escalated into Russian annexation of Crimean peninsula influenced the whole world. Countries of Central and Eastern Europe are now living in uncertainty of what would happen next, if this apparent Russian expansion continued further. Countries that are arguably most vulnerable to aggressive policies of the Russian Federation are the Baltic States, Georgia, and possibly the V4 states. Should these countries start gathering national and international forces in attempt to deter further Russian aggression, to be able to protect themselves or to prepare themselves for conflict with Russia? Or should they follow the path of negotiations and rebuilding relations with the Russian Federation? And what should be the role of Visegrad four and Germany in this difficult situation?

2 Situation in Ukraine and Russian annexation of Crimea

During the last few years Ukraine slowly started to change its course to move more westward and was undertaking steps to become a part of the western world. But in the beginning of 2014 the Ukrainian government with president Viktor Yanukovich decided not to sign the Association agreement with the EU and to strengthen relations with the Russian Federation instead. This decision resulted in massive protests in streets of Kiev and president Yanukovich was eventually removed from his position by the parliament after leaving the country.

Generally, the situation in Ukraine was very unstable at that time and Russia seized the opportunity to stabilize their influence in Ukraine and specifically on Crimean peninsula with 58.3% inhabitants of Russian ethnicity.¹ The peninsula is now effectively part of the Russian Federation. In March 2014 unmarked soldiers occupied important places in Crimea – airport, harbors, and even the seat of Crimean Parliament. Members of Crimean Government were called off by the Supreme Council of Crimea soon after voting of confidence was invoked and the confidence was not entrusted to the government. This act is still disputed as it happened under supervision of Russian soldiers. New Crimean government was installed with head of the Russian Unity party, Sergey Valeryevich Aksyonov, acting as prime minister. Council expressed intention to declare independence of Crimea with possibility of later accession to the Russian

¹ Crimea. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-24]. Available at:
<https://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Crimea.html>



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Federation. This act was resented by the whole western world² and even identified as an act of war by the Ukrainian government.

On 16 March 2014, a referendum was declared in the region of Crimea, asking the inhabitants whether they want to join Russian Federation or to preserve its status as a part of Ukraine, but with greater autonomy.³ None of the choices was, however, an option to preserve Crimea's former status as a part of Ukraine.⁴ Objectivity of this referendum was very unconvincing, however the result was that 93%⁵ of valid votes were in favor of joining Russian Federation⁶.

Shortly after the referendum was held, all EU member countries claimed that separation of Crimea is unacceptable under international law. European parliament rejected the referendum and the UN Security Council voting on this matter ended up with 13 countries condemning the referendum, China abstaining and Russia vetoing. When the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 68/262⁷ on the matter of Ukrainian territorial integrity, 100 countries voted in favor, 58 abstained and only 11 voted against. Among these Russia, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and few more.⁸

Following the Crimean annexation, in the east of Ukraine (Luhansk and Donetsk mainly) demonstrations in opposition to new Ukrainian government were being held and during April these anti-maidan tendencies escalated into an armed conflict between separatist forces of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and the Ukrainian government. These separatist republics decided in March 2014 to create a federation of so called Novorossiia (New Russia)

² Ukraine: Putin signs Crimea annexation. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-24]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26686949>

³ Is Crimea's referendum legal? [online] [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26546133>

⁴ Why the Crimean referendum is illegal. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-24]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/14/crimean-referendum-illegal-international-law>

⁵ Crimea crisis: Foreign leaders condemn 'Russia's destabilising actions' as 93% vote in referendum for secession. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/crimea-crisis-foreign-leaders-condemn-russias-destabilising-actions-as-93-vote-in-referendum-for-secession-9195939.html>

⁶ Crimea applies to be part of Russian Federation after vote to leave Ukraine. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/17/ukraine-crimea-russia-referendum-complain-result>

⁷ Available at:

<http://www.germania.diplo.de/contentblob/4446020/Daten/5094947/ungvreskrimannexion.pdf>

⁸ General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region. [online]. [cit. 2015-02-03]. Available at: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>



and their goal is to define themselves as Russians and not Ukrainians. The name refers to a historical territory which has been part of the Russian empire from 1774 to 1917 (Then it became part of Ukrainian People's Republic). In late August 2014 Russian artillery, personnel and what has been called „humanitarian convoy“ by Russians, has crossed the Ukrainian borders without permission of its government.⁹ This has been called by Ukrainian officials a „stealth invasion“¹⁰. On 5th of September 2014, an order of ceasefire was signed by both involved parties. This treaty is known as the Minsk protocol¹¹, but it has been violated by both sides of the conflict nonetheless. Moreover, in the beginning of 2015 OSCE monitors reported „a rise in tensions“¹² within the conflict.

3 Germany and Visegrád Group Cooperation in response to Ukraine Crisis

The Central Europe region's reaction to the Ukraine crisis, and by extension Russia, can be in a simplified form described along two main streamlines that reflect the nature of the organizations that are the cornerstones of European security architecture – security/defense policy in the NATO and economic policy in the EU.

3.1 NATO's reaction to Ukraine Crisis: Reassurances and different view on Russia

The main issues along which the policies of the Visegrád countries and Germany revolved around can be summarized as 1) permanent NATO bases requests (threat perception), 2) strengthening of NATO's eastern flank (rhetoric discourse reassurance vs. deterrence), and 3) arms deliveries to Ukraine (conflict escalation vs. raising costs for Russian aggression). The unifying issue here is the underlying assumption of the respective states with regard to the un/changed nature of Russian place in European security order – is the Ukrainian crisis a mere

⁹ 'Russian' Troops Surge Into Ukraine As Donetsk And Luhansk Elections Reveal Winners. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/russian-troops-surge-ukraine-donetsk-luhansk-elections-reveal-winners-1717678>

¹⁰ Ukraine Says Russian Forces Have Launched Stealth Invasion in East. [online]. [cit. 2015-02-04]. Available at: <http://mashable.com/2014/08/27/ukraine-southeast-russia/>

¹¹ Available at: <http://mfa.gov.ua/en/news-feeds/foreign-offices-news/27596-protocolon-the-results-of-consultations-of-the-trilateral-contact-group-minsk-05092014>

¹² Ukraine crisis: Separatist leaders elected in Donetsk and Luhansk in 'sham' vote. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-crisis-separatist-leaders-elected-in-donetsk-and-luhansk-in-sham-vote-9837474.html>



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“flu” in the relations between Europe and Russia or is the Russian aggression a “game changer”?

Considering the first issue, the requests for new NATO bases, the national positions differed greatly. Poland and other Eastern NATO member states signaled quite early on that the annexation of Crimea means a direct threat to their national security and requested permanent NATO bases to enhance their security. The Czech and Slovak governments, on the other hand, explicitly expressed the view that recent Russian aggression does not constitute a direct threat to their countries ergo no bases are necessary. The Hungarian government maintained “radio silence” on the issue¹³ but Orban did make even more controversial remark shortly after the Crimean annexation demanding autonomy for Hungarians living in Ukrainian Zakarpattya.¹⁴

The well-known German skepticism vis-à-vis the possible permanent NATO bases in the eastern member countries is based on the “sanctity” of the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 document which was not to be violated in order to keep the structures that are supposed to “bound” Russia to cooperate within the European security order. But even Germany engaged actively in a policy of reassurance towards the eastern “frontline” NATO states.¹⁵

The NATO summit in September 2014 then produced a workable compromise that accommodated the interests of both sides within NATO and resulted in the factual strengthening of the NATO`s eastern flank. The creation of NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) on the territory of several Eastern allies (the Baltics, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland), which then commenced in the beginning of the 2015, is a part of a series of steps¹⁶ aimed at reassuring the NATO`s Eastern members. Hungary and Slovakia, in this order, asked for NFIUs as late as February 2015.

The rhetoric of the government officials that accompanied these steps then hinted that different threat perception did not subside. While Germany and the Czech Republic, Slovakia

¹³ Daniel Hegedüs. How should Europe respond to Russia? The Hungarian view. *ECFR*, Commentary, 22. 1. 2015.

¹⁴ András Rácz. From pragmatism to bear hug: Hungary`s Russia policy on the eve of the Ukraine crisis. *Visegradrevue*, 29. 12. 2014, <http://visegradrevue.eu/from-pragmatism-to-bear-hug-hungarys-russia-policy-on-the-eve-of-the-ukraine-crisis/>.

¹⁵ For concrete actions see: Justyna Gotkowska. A Weak Link? Germany in the Euro-Atlantic security system. *OSW*, Point of View 47, January 2015, p. 27.

¹⁶ See the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) here <http://www.aco.nato.int/readiness-action-plan.aspx>; Moreover, the Czech Republic pledged its special operations unit for newly formed VJTF within the NATO Response Force. The Slovak president offered to establish NATO logistics center in Poprad, later denied by PM Fico. Hungary promised to contribute its Gripens to the NATO Baltic air-policing mission.



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and Hungary stressed the utility of these steps as *reassuring* for the eastern NATO members, the countries in question stressed the *detering* potential of these steps vis-à-vis Russia.

In this respect, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary followed the old German foreign policy principle of “non-provocation” towards Russia on NATO`s eastern flank. In terms of security policy have these three countries clearly moved away from Poland and other eastern countries and closer to Germany`s position.

Third issue that illustrated this divergence in security policies of Central European countries that became visible because of the Ukrainian crisis is the possible delivery of arms to Ukraine. Whereas Poland sees the arms deliveries as a possible tool should the negotiations with Putin fail, Germany plus other Visegrád countries oppose the arms deliveries as such and argue that this step would only lead to the escalation of the conflict in the eastern Ukraine. The “only diplomatic solution to the Ukrainian crisis” mantra that is voiced by Europe almost unisono does discount the possible need to raise the costs of the Russian aggression by other tools than only economic sanctions relying on the assumption that our restraint will create a way for Putin to back down and save his face at the same time.

3.2 EU reaction to the Ukraine crisis: Sanction policy

As hinted above, the primary tool for Europe`s signaling to Russia that “line” had been crossed became the EU`s sanction policy. The initially agreed sanctions after the Crimea annexation were then significantly widened after the commercial airliner MH17 was downed above the pro-Russian rebels territory and the failure of the first Minsk ceasefire negotiations. These sectoral sanctions target Russia's oil industry, financial sector and the military/arms industry.¹⁷

In the negotiations the Czech government tried to protect the interest of Czech exporters, particularly in the machinery and heavy industries sectors. Slovakia and Hungary voiced special concerns with regard to banking sector sanctions. While Slovakia was not able to block the sanctioning of the Russian Sberbank`s affiliates with strong position in the Slovak capital market, Hungary has key interest in avoiding sanctions that would ban EU companies to take

¹⁷ Jeroen Jansen. EU sanctions against Russia: New targets and state of play. *DLA Piper*, 11. 2. 2015, <https://www.dlapiper.com/en/us/insights/publications/2015/02/eu-sanctions-against-russia/>.



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loans in Russian banks since that could be the end of the planned extension of the nuclear power plant in Paks that is both built and financed by Russian companies.¹⁸

The Visegrád countries minus Poland did not threaten to break the EU's unity with regard to sanction policy but rather voiced its skepticism about the sanctions' effectiveness to change Putin's policy. Germany, even though it has the most to lose in economic terms, emerged as a strong proponent of the sanctions policy cancelling arms deal with Russia even prior to their agreed inclusion in the sanction regime. That signals that even if Germany is not ready to "rattle sabres" thanks to its "culture of restraint" on military matters, it is ready to assume leadership, although reluctantly, when security architecture in Europe is violated.

So although the three Visegrád countries moved closer to Germany with regard to NATO policy, in general they are seen as too hawkish in the case of Poland, as following the Russian script in the Hungarian case, Slovakia as too pragmatic and the Czech Republic as bizarrely incoherent.¹⁹

4 Economic sanctions

International community condemned the annexation of Crimea and as a reaction, USA and EU countries imposed economic sanction on the Russian Federation. The result of sanctions can be observed a few months later - Russian GDP is expected to shrink by 0,8 percent in 2015 and we have so far witnessed a currency collapse in January.²⁰

The sanctions include limitation of Russian export to western markets and cancellation or suspension of military contracts. Targeted areas were state finances, energy (specifically oil), military and intelligence.

Another part of sanctions was blacklisting of president Putin's „inner circle“ – Russian officials, military commanders and heads of firms suspected of sabotaging Ukrainian economy, which

¹⁸ Mateusz Gniazdowski, Jakub Groszkowski, Andrzej Sadecki. A Visegrad cacophony over the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. *OSW*, 10. 9. 2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-09-10/a-visegrad-cacophony-over-conflict-between-russia-and-ukraine>.

¹⁹ Vladimír Handl. Germany and the Visegrad Group: An open question? *Visegradrevue*, 11. 12. 2014, <http://visegradrevue.eu/germany-and-the-visegrad-group-an-open-question-2/>.

²⁰ How far do EU-US sanctions on Russia go?. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28400218>



means travel bans and asset freezes for them. Paradoxically, president Putin himself was not put on the black list, because western countries still wanted to negotiate with him in person.²¹

In three rounds, trade restrictions and travel bans have been imposed on Russia, followed by a list of prominent Russian politicians and businessmen. Sanctions were later expanded to Russian major energy companies and banks.²²

4.1 Recent events and impact of the sanctions

All heads of V4 countries had condemned the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Poland repeatedly asked NATO for military support as a reaction to the annexation, strongly supported new Ukrainian government and loudly criticised Russian intervening in Ukraine.²³ The Polish feel endangered by recent military actions of the Russian Federation, specifically Russian naval and air force activity in Baltic Sea Region. As Poland's position leaves the country close to Russian space, they don't only rely on help from the NATO countries, but they are preparing on their own.²⁴

Germany as one of the leaders of EU spoke against Russian annexation of Crimea and supported imposing of harsh sanctions on Russian Federation, although this significantly damages German energy market. German exports to Russia were highest in the whole EU and 30% of energy came to German market from Russia.

As an answer to sanctions, Russia limited food imports from EU, which negatively affected V4 countries with loss of a big sales market.²⁵

Some areas of the food export suffer with the sanctions - the areas most affected by the sanctions are meat, fruit and vegetables and dairy products and countries are subsidizing it materially, but for the overall economy the loss in these areas is not that significant. More than

²¹ The Effects of Sanctions on Russia, 8 Months Later. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/effects-sanctions-russia-months/story?id=27336226>

²² Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the alignment of certain third countries with the Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. [online]. [cit. 2015-02-05]. Available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/142174.pdf

²³ Poland tries to rally V4 countries on Russia. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/183965,Poland-tries-to-rally-V4-countries-on-Russia>

²⁴ Poland Prepares for Russian Invasion. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://20committee.com/2014/10/30/poland-prepares-for-russian-invasion/>

²⁵ Russia bans Polish fruit and veg amid sanctions war. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-07]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28603140>



a serious destabilization of the market the situation for V4 countries is a temporary destabilisation, affecting mostly small and medium-sized companies in Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. ²⁶

Besides food and energy, other important economy sectors (machinery, travelling revenues, various materials and manufactured goods) have been influenced, as a result of the previously mentioned fact that Russia is an important trade partner in these fields.

5 Possible further development

5.1 Visegrád Battlegroup

Another possible way of reacting to a possible threat from the Russian Federation is strengthening of the military cooperation of Central European countries and even whole Europe. The questing of security is important beyond any doubt. The decision of V4's defense ministers made in Levoča, Slovakia on 12 May 2011 was to create the Visegrád Battlegroup – a joint defensive group of V4 countries armies, with a purpose to defend the countries and also to train troops. The representants of all V4 countries agreed on creation of this group and in 2014, although there is a certain hesitation whether this will not provoke a reaction from the east as the countries are basically arming. The group will be operational in the first half of 2016 and will be led by Poland. No further details about have been announced so far. In spring of 2014, after Ukrainian crisis, this Battlegroup was supported from the side of the European Union and it is possible for the V4 Battlegroup to even become a rapid reaction force of the EU and possibly the NATO. ²⁷

6 Conclusion

There is a growing fear of Russian expansionism in East and Central Europe. Germany and mainly Poland would prefer forming military alliances and preventive defensive arming, while Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary²⁸ might rather give way to negotiating and rebuilding

²⁶ To Have or to Be: The Dilemma of EU Sanctions on Russia for the V4. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-113-708>

²⁷ Visegrad Countries May Turn EU Battlegroup into Permanent V4 Rapid Reaction Force. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/visegrad-countries-may-turn-eu-battlegroup-into-permanent-v4-rapid-reaction-force>

²⁸ Defying Soviets, Then Pulling Hungary to Putin. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/08/world/europe/viktor-orban-steers-hungary-toward-russia-25-years-after-fall-of-the-berlin-wall.html? r=1>



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or improving relations with Russia.²⁹ However, the development doesn't only lay on the decisions of state representants, but also on economic situation the states and probably most importantly – it dependes on whether Russian Federation will continue with their declered policy of protection of Russians living outside of its borders and renewing and maintaining its percieved sphere of influence.

²⁹ The Czech Republic's trade relations with Ukraine and Russia. [online]. [cit. 2015-01-11]. Available at:http://www.cnb.cz/en/monetary_policy/inflation_reports/2014/2014_II/boxes_and_annexes/zoi_2014_II_box_2.html



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Top partneři

Generální partner
Modelu OSN



Hlavní partner
Modelu OSN



Hlavní partner Modelu NATO



Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí
České republiky

Model NATO is co-sponsored by
the North Atlantic Treaty Organization



Hlavní partner Modelu EU



Partner konference



Univerzitní
partner



Partner zahájení



Partner jednání



Partneři Modelů



Mediální partneři

Hlavní mediální partner



Hlavní mediální partner



Partner Chronicle





**Asociace
pro mezinárodní
otázky**
Association
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Affairs

Pražský studentský summit
projekt Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky