The resilience of the Eastern Partnership: what role for the Visegrad countries?

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) is largely questioned as to whether its instruments (such as the EaP), are fit for their purpose, and whether they are resilient. The EaP specifically has been considered a step forward towards further differentiation of the EU's relations with its neighbours, as well as an instrument with the potential to stimulate transformation in the Eastern neighbourhood. Nonetheless, looking at a decade of EaP implementation, the EU's performance was contested by developments in its 'neighbourhood', such as the Russia-Ukraine war, Moldova's downturn from a success story to a captured state, the slow pace of progress and even back-sliding in Armenia or Georgia or the recent human rights violations in Belarus.

To provide the EaP with flexibility and a forward-looking quality, this paper suggests that the EU make use of Visegrad's involvement in the EaP countries, which is specifically visible through its diplomatic activity on the ground. In connection with this, it is recommended that the V4 invest in developing three main roles for themselves – those of policy entrepreneurship, aid diplomacy brokerage and 'pragmatic cooperation' promoters - and in this way transpose their experience to the EaP.

Introduction

Resilience is a central theme for many governments and international organizations who use it as part of their strategies and programmes (such as the EU, the OECD, the UN, and the Red Cross). While this umbrella notion refers to societies, institutions, policies and democracy, this paper understands the overarching term in reference to both policy and democratic resilience. In reference to the EU's neighbours specifically, the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) identifies building state and societal resilience as one of its key priorities. The choice of resilience over security is due to the widespread use of resilience in EU foreign policy circles as the capacity to adapt, respond, react to, and bounce back in the aftermath of shocks and crises. Similarly, policy resilience is described as the given policy's capability of processing shocks and coping with change, which results in designing more effective policies. For this to happen, a process of assimilation of new information based on previous accumulated experience should take place, which should then be applied in a manner that leads to adjustment of policy goals and mechanisms.

In the case of the EU's EaP neighbourhood, policy and democratic resilience are intertwined: democratic resilience (the ability of states and societies to reform) is linked to EaP policy resilience (the ability to withstand and recover from internal and external crises). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the umbrella framework for the EaP, at first remained immune to change: the 'Colour Revolutions' in the post-Soviet space and the global economic crisis did not affect the policy despite the clear need for it to adapt to such changes. Subsequently, under the pressure of the Arab uprisings in 2011 and a series of other critical events, such as Russia's aggressive behaviour in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, the policy was revised twice in four years (2011 and 2015). The 2015 revision chose the goal of resilience-building as a substitute for democratization.

Considering the most recent revisions at the EaP 2021 summit, the current policy is seen as the most progressive one[1]: the new agenda builds on resilience, recovery and reform structured around the pillar of democratic governance[2]. At the same time, EU monitoring reports outlined that in the Eastern dimension of the EaP, although countries like Ukraine or Moldova showed some progress in democratization reform, a series of challenges remains and hampers achieving the set goal - resilience. This is due to, *inter alia*, several political crises in Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus.

The Visegrad Group, represented by the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia (established in 1991), was motivated by these countries' common desire to overcome their

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[1] IIR-Prague seminar "The Resilience of the EaP: the role of Visegrad countries", December 14, 2021
[2] Statement by Petra Gombalová Kyslingerová, Head of the Division for the Regional Eastern Partnership, Regional Cooperation and the OSCE at the EEAS, at the AMO public event on December 14, 2021

communist legacies, and to move beyond their historical animosities, and the belief that joining their efforts would facilitate achieving their foreign policy objectives of becoming EU members. Despite criticism of their position in the migration crisis, the divergent visions of some of their current or recent ruling political elites and democratic backsliding processes in them (esp. in Hungary and Poland), Visegrad remains the most valuable example of how a regional cooperation among four states achieved its post-communist transformation goal.

What is most notable about Visegrad today is the way the group embraced the principle of *pragmatic cooperation* – to move beyond intra-Visegrad tensions and pursue their external regional cooperation objectives. According to some Visegrad civil servants, identification of the states' common interests and synchronizing their strengths instead of focusing on the tensions is the way forward. Therefore, *the working assumption* of this research is that Visegrad's role for EaP resilience resides in its capacity to re-engineer itself, namely by using its external dimension (in this case, the EaP) and acting as a platform of pragmatic cooperation[3]. Through its aim to encourage an optimum cooperation with the EaP neighbours and oversee their democratic development, Visegrad demonstrates its ability to capitalize on its members' common European integration learning experience and adapt to their changed context. Their common support of the transition process in the Eastern neighbourhood, namely in an area where the Visegrad countries have demonstrated their pro-European credentials and their support for local stakeholders in times of crises and the EU sanctions against Russia, speaks about their pragmatic cooperation.

Against such background, the aim of this research is to understand the role of the Visegrad Group for the EaP's potential flexibility and forward-looking quality, *i.e.*, to recognize where and how the Visegrad countries can provide the EaP with resiliency based on a learning process from past experiences. To do so, the paper starts with a presentation of the state of the art of the democratization efforts in three EaP countries – Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus, and subsequently zooms in on the Visegrad diplomatic activity in relation to the three EaP countries. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations and suggestions for further reading.

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[3] Consultations with Alica Kizeková (IIR in Prague) and Jana Juzová (EUROPEUM in Brussels); and discussions with scholars and policy experts at the IIR seminar "The Resilience of the EaP: the role of Visegrad countries", held on December 14, 2021.

Analysis

Democracy in Eastern Europe: how 'deep and sustainable' is it?

The EU-EaP cooperation builds on political and economic norms which refer to deep and sustainable democracy, including an independent judiciary, independent media, human rights and a sustainable economy. The 2020/2021 EaP Index that measures political and economic norm convergence, talks about the extent to which institutions and policies in the Eastern European EaP countries come closer to the EU and, subsequently, are becoming more resilient (according to the EaP's set objective). Whereas Moldova and Ukraine seem to be demonstrating progress in this regard (Table 1), compared to previous years, their current scores indicate inertia. Belarus scores are at the bottom of the index and its struggle to reform remains consistent.

Table 1. Convergence to EU democratic rules and norms: EaP countries

Sector	Approximation indices (1=best performer; 0=worst performer)					
	Moldova	**Ukraine**	Georgia	Armenia	Azerbaijan	**Belarus**
Democratic & Economic Governance (aggregate scores)	**0.70**	**0.70**	0.65	0.63	0.44	**0.49**
Democracy and Good Governance	0.71	0.69	-	-	-	0.31
Market Economy and DCFTA	0.66	0.78	-	-	-	0.45
Source: Author's compilation based on EaP Index 2020/2021						

Moldova

Even before the EaP, the democratization in Moldova has been a slow and long-lasting process: reports showed that despite progress on institutional reform, this process has stagnated. Positive trends in the country regarding the reform of democratic institutions, the involvement of civil society, access to information, and transparency of the decision-making process were praised by the Commission and evaluated as 'fully in line with key commitments accepted under the ENP Action Plan'. Yet, the rule and norm adoption, but specifically the implementation process was led by inertia with delays in enforcing the new legislation till 2015. Moldova's biggest shortcoming was the fact that its justice is

dependent on political powers, namely the ruling elite. Against the background of certain positive democratization trends with outputs such as obtaining a visa-free regime with the EU, Moldova managed to transform from 'the most willing reformer' into a 'country of odd contrasts'. As empirical research showed, in 2014 the contrast was between the arrests of 5 judges on corruption charges and the $1 billion bank fraud which led to a structural power concentration under one oligarch. The little progress in norm and rule implementation led to the suspension of the EU's macro-financial assistance to Moldova in 2018. The constitutive effects of the 'deep and sustainable' democracy in Moldova are yet to be seen: against the background of the recent political change of the Moldovan government and the head of state being committed to an anti-corruption crusade, Moldovan institutions and elites remain locked in a phenomenon that is referred to by scholars as a '*post-Sovietness' modus operandi*.

Ukraine

Whereas Ukraine was the first of the EaP countries to initial the AA, several reforms in the areas of democracy and the rule of law still required more tangible results. Under the leadership of President Yanukovych, Ukraine entered a phase of 'rhetorical integration'; the Ukrainian leadership embraced anti-democratic trends and tightened its control over civil society, and freedom of the media and of assembly; hence the state of civil unrest that emerged in Ukraine. The pace of adaptation accelerated after 2014 with the newly elected President Poroshenko, and the newly formed government led by Prime-Minister Yatzenyuk. The 2016 EU progress reports emphasized that Ukraine had carried out unprecedented reforms across several sectors of the economy and society, while its democratic institutions had been further strengthened. Although Ukraine has till 2024 to implement many of the AA/DCFTA-related democratization reforms, one of the main hampering challenges in this regard is its corruption-related practices. Corruption, coupled with the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine, slows down the reform tempo, with numerous changes pending in the domains of transport and infrastructure, the financial sector and customs reforms[4]. Ukraine has not left behind its (formal) institutional Soviet heritage yet and its democratization changes represent a form of window-dressing: civil servants still deal with bureaucratic technicalities instead of implementing the EU reform agenda as Soviet style procedures are still in place (especially when we compare them with European procedures or standards)[5].

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[4] Consultation with Dr. Maryna Rabinovych based on her 2022 forthcoming research on the "EU-Ukraine 'deep' trade agenda: the effectiveness and impact perspectives"
[5] Interviews conducted with diplomats and civil servants in Ukraine (2011, 2013 & 2016)

Belarus

Belarus has the poorest scores in the measured variables (see Table 1) and it shows a low level of convergence to democratic rules and norms. Two years after it participated in EaP activities, the human rights situation in Belarus deteriorated in the aftermath of the presidential elections in December 2010 (which were won by Lukashenko) when Belarus was labelled as the ['worst of the worst'.](#) In 2011-2012, [travel bans](#) on Belarus were imposed by the EU, including an arms embargo and a ban on the export of equipment that could be used for internal repressions. In 2014, according to the [Freedom House report](#), Belarus was included on the list of the most repressive countries in the world. In 2016 its human rights record qualified it as [a 'black hole' on the European map](#) in the European Parliament report. In the aftermath of the most recent presidential elections, which were held in 2020, an unprecedented wave of protests began in Belarus due to [widespread reports of electoral fraud](#) and a new set of [sanctions was imposed by the EU](#) against Belarussian authorities. [International reports](#) confirm that since 2020 Belarus is experiencing the most dramatic democratic backsliding since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In June 2021 Belarus has suspended its participation in the EaP and today there appears to be no end to the Belarussian crisis, as currently there is an unprecedented clampdown on the country's civil society, independent media, and middle class[6]. The case of Belarus shows how the authoritarian regime of Lukashenko becomes more resilient, embedded in Soviet nostalgia, and becomes a prominent example of the reversibility of democratic changes.

The Visegrad diplomatic community in Eastern Europe

The V4 and good governance promotion in times of crises

On the ground, as [diplomats emphasized previously](#), the Visegrad countries are key actors in making the EU commitments to Eastern Europe stronger. At the recent [V4 ministerial meeting on the EaP](#) in Spring 2021, the Visegrad ministers reiterated their support for the EaP countries, a commitment confirmed, *inter alia*, through the goals of their [International Visegrad Fund](#). Poland and the Czech Republic are expressly supporting Moldova and Ukraine's European aspirations in the common meetings with the EU Delegation[7] as well as vis-à-vis the decision-makers of these countries. Due to the nature of the overall EU-Belarus relationship, which historically went through a period of isolation, the V4

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[6] Consultation with Dr. Ryhor Nizhnikau based on his 2022 forthcoming research - "Catch 2020: Explaining bad performance of EU's Belarus policy"
[7] Interviews conducted with diplomats in Moldova & Ukraine (2015 & 2016)

diplomatic activity in this regard is kept to a minimum. Given the latest developments – the EU's sanctions and Belarus' suspension from the EaP framework – the V4 support the EU common approach on the ground by relating to the general political lines set in Brussels.

In both Moldova and Ukraine one important area where local pro-democratic forces require external observers is the democratic elections, which are often rigged. Every year the Polish MFA recruits, prepares and dispatches election observers to post-Soviet states such as Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus. Czech parliamentarians are taking part in election observation missions from the European Parliament in Moldova, while in Ukraine they were joined also by Polish and Hungarian colleagues in such missions. Through such actions, the V4 reiterate the need for conducting the necessary comprehensive reform process in the EaP. The V4 diplomatic activity is also of high importance in times of crises: the Czech Republic has agreed to establish an official office in Prague for the Belarusian opposition, and a similar office is already present in Poland. In NATO, Poland steps up and lobbies for additional forces to be deployed to Ukraine to counter Russia's moves, and it also offers support to Moldova in its conflict with Gazprom in the 2021 gas crisis. Furthermore, the illegal Belarusian migration crisis is being dealt with through a deployment of border patrols from Poland and the Czech Republic.

Visegrad diplomats are becoming like-minded as to the question of the reforms that Moldova and Ukraine must undertake and as a result, they echo the EU messages to these countries[8]. On their part, there is support for the development of an independent justice system, an independent media, a green economy, rule of law and human rights as well as digitalization[9] in these countries: for example, the Czech Republic has made a voluntary contribution to the Council of Europe for developing the Action Plan for Ukraine to support the country in implementing Council of Europe standards on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. To support the EaP countries' gradual integration into and access to the EU market, and help them fight the consequences of the coronavirus epidemic, the Visegrad countries have developed the specialized V4EastSolidarity program in April 2020. After the Polish President joined the celebration of Moldova's 30th year of independence, a special post to support the implementation of democratic reforms in Moldova has been created in the Polish Prime-Minister's office - the Prime Minister's Plenipotentiary for Supporting Reforms in the Republic of Moldova.

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[8] Interviews conducted with diplomats in Moldova & Ukraine (2011, 2013, 2015 & 2016)
[9] Interviews conducted with diplomats in Moldova & Ukraine (2015 & 2016) and consultations with Alica Kizeková (IIR in Prague)

Visegrad as a donor community: the aid diplomacy of the V4

The diplomatic activities of the Visegrad countries in Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus indicate their involvement in providing development aid assistance, monitoring, and evaluating the progress on the reform agenda of the host countries, as well as building bridges and creating partnerships with local stakeholders.

In its Strategy on Moldova, the Czech Republic emphasizes the importance of channelling its efforts towards democratic reforms and approximation to the EU. On the ground, the Czech embassies set out to work as facilitators in the implementation of EU development projects[10]. Whereas Ukraine and Belarus are not partner countries for development aid, there is a Czech engagement in supporting the development of civil society and infrastructure in these countries, which includes Czech companies taking a role in the modernization of infrastructure and the small-scale projects in the area of education and health in Ukraine.

For the Polish counterpart, from the beginning of the EaP, developing civil society, promoting democracy, and fostering free media and human rights were some of the main guidelines for providing aid. Today, the aid organization Polish Aid is directed at assisting the Moldovan administration in implementing reforms, as well as supporting the development of entrepreneurship and improving the living conditions in rural areas in Moldova. The list of Polish priorities for Ukraine is more comprehensive in this regard as aid assistance is directed towards the implementation of the AA and specific support of the reform process there, including the fight against corruption and the development of a crisis management system. Belarus also remains a country of importance for Poland; there Poland promotes and supports good governance, respect for human rights and the application of democratic principles.

Via the Slovak embassies, the agency Slovak Aid dedicates its activity on the ground to supporting smaller-scale projects such as those related to sustainable use of natural resources in Ukraine; food and agriculture, water and sanitation, and clean energy in Belarus; and education and good health, the environment and climate change in Moldova. Hungary is not active in aid diplomacy; it mainstreams its support for the three EaP countries via the V4 East Solidarity Program, which is aimed, *inter alia*, at fighting COVID-19.

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[10] Interviews conducted with diplomats in Moldova, Ukraine & Belarus (2013, 2014, 2015 & 2016)

Key Recommendations

In proposing the recommendations[11] below, this research takes into consideration the criticism regarding the Visegrad Group, its internal tensions, and dysfunctionalities as a platform for reaching a common position[12]. In Eastern Europe, its members were not always politically aligned with each other: regarding Ukraine the V4 have divergent positions on Russia's interference there (especially Hungary's position differs from the others), and regarding Moldova (but also Ukraine) Poland pursues a 'go-it alone' tactic: it reflects the country's propensity to act individually and, to a certain extent, in competition with others. On top of this, all the V4 countries are facing serious problems of corruption and media freedom, with Hungary and Poland being extreme cases in this regard since they are dealing with substantial democratic backsliding, which makes proposing democratic resilience recommendations for them a challenging endeavour.

Therefore, the suggested recommendations build on the '*pragmatic cooperation*' principle that the V4 have embraced in their external actions. The V4 may not be a role model for democratic resilience in the present moment but it can be useful in increasing the EaP's resilience. Visegrad should capitalize on the active roles that Poland and the Czech Republic are taking as key promoters of the EU integration agenda. As the Czech Deputy Minister and the Ambassador of Poland to Moldova emphasized, the V4 can put aside their differences in foreign policy and identify areas of engagement that would demonstrate their attitude towards the EaP countries.

It is recommended that the Visegrad Group maintain their political capital as key EU stakeholders in the EaP countries by developing three main roles: those of policy entrepreneurship, aid diplomacy brokerage and pragmatic cooperation promoters. This is to be done in areas where they set their differences aside and where Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia can transpose their experience to the EaP as follows:

The V4 to assume the role of EaP policy entrepreneurs:

The daily activity of V4 diplomats regarding the EaP countries includes closely monitoring the developments on the ground and providing support to them to get them closer to the

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[11] Concrete recommendations for Hungary are not included as Hungarian diplomats were non-responsive during the fieldwork, and recently Hungary has set aside the V4 external democratic support.

[12] Consultations with Alica Kizeková and Petr Kratochvíl (IIR in Prague); Jana Juzová (EUROPEUM in Brussels); and Petr Havlíček (AMO).

EU (Moldova and Ukraine) and to democratic standards (Belarus). In their national strategies, the Visegrad countries' efforts are aligned and committed to the EU agenda as set out in the EaP policy. Poland and the Czech Republic became like-minded on the question of reforms that must be undertaken by Moldova and Ukraine, while all the V4 states echo the EU messages on the sanctions on Belarus.

What Visegrad managed to achieve, despite its internal tensions, is using in its external component its ideational resonance that motivates the V4 platform to engage in dialogue and communication, and the V4 states find an added value in their external cooperation. Moreover, the V4 share common historical experiences, both amongst themselves and with the three EaP countries. To capitalize on this, Visegrad should make use of the Polish and Czech potential to assume an active role in the EaP's policy framing and implementation.

Poland and the Czech Republic:

- At the level of policy framing, they should invest in producing common policy principles and a strategic vision for the EaP that would be inclusive of the sensitivities of the specific challenges that Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus are facing.
- They should make strategic use of the 2022 Czech EU Presidency and the 2024 Polish EU Presidency and streamline a long-term vision for the EaP.
- They should coordinate their agendas to push for a membership perspective at least for the Association Trio, in which Moldova and Ukraine are included[13].

The Czech Republic:

- It could benefit from its current position (against the background of the democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland) and create V4 partnerships with other EU member-states (e.g. Sweden, Germany) in the external democracy support in the EaP.
- At the level of policy implementation, it should focus on concrete activities and joint programs where the transfer of know-how takes place, such as the establishment of a V4-EaP practitioners' network[14].

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[13] They have set a precedent in this area when they made the integration talks with Croatia a priority on the EU agenda.
[14] The Czech Republic has experience with such experience-sharing platforms from its relations with European development agencies.

Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia:

- They need to coordinate the efforts made by the [Solidarity Fund PL](#), [Sharing Slovak Expertise](#) and the Czech Department of Human Rights and Transition Promotion Policy.

The V4 to assume the role of aid diplomacy brokers in the EaP:

Unlike other EU member-states, Visegrad has upscaled its regional cooperation to deliver development assistance for the EaP countries as an institutionalized organization since 2000. Such a cooperation between member-states is crucial for the functioning of the EaP, especially when cooperation experiences are uploaded to the EU level. Visegrad exhibits various examples of formulating a common approach regarding the EaP and implementing it. The setting up of the common Fund serves as a comparative advantage for the V4 states' strategic cooperation based on similar interests despite the political tensions within the V4.

The Czech Republic

- Given the focus on Moldova in its strategy, institutionalizing a special post within key state institutions to support Moldova's democratic reforms and approximation to the EU would strengthen its profile.
- It should give substance to its role of an aid diplomacy broker, and the staff of the Czech embassy in Moldova should increase (from 3 to 5 employees).

Poland

- Since EU diplomatic actors as donors are criticized, Poland should stop using the 'go-it alone' tactic and upload the Polish Aid know-how during the common EU meetings to diminish the agenda overlap between different diplomatic actors.
- It should invest in coordinating the Visegrad development agencies for an open donor cooperation, experience-sharing, and leadership purposes.

Slovakia

- Given the introduction of the posting of a development <u>diplomat</u> in Eastern Europe, it should promote it as a way forward in strengthening the role of aid diplomacy brokers.
- It should increase its development support to Eastern European countries to consolidate its agenda.

The V4 to assume the role of 'pragmatic cooperation' promoters:

Being in and out of a crisis is an Eastern European constant. Whereas the EU is criticized for being too hesitant or slow in reacting to the ongoing developments in Moldova, Ukraine, or Belarus, the V4 countries could embrace a proactive portfolio in this regard. To reap the benefits of the 'pragmatic cooperation' principle, the Visegrad countries should strengthen the coordination amongst themselves on the ground, especially since all of them have diplomatic representations in the EaP countries (unlike other EU member-states).

Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia

- For facilitating the EaP switch to sustainable economies, they should develop gradual sectoral integration steps for the EaP by creating joint actions.
- To help the EaP countries recover from shocks, and deal with long-term systemic stress, change and uncertainty, they should invest in local stakeholders' capacities (esp. those of non-state actors).
- They should invest in sharing and pooling resources on the ground, e.g. training schemes for the advancement of vibrant civil societies.

To do so,

Poland and the Czech Republic

- Sould share the V4 coordinator role on the ground, through which they would encourage thematic cooperation areas between the four Visegrad states, information-sharing, and agenda-setting.

The Czech Republic

- In areas of common interest, it should strengthen its V4 position by embracing a central role in maintaining the V4 political capital and promoting the 'pragmatic cooperation' principle.
- During the 2022 EU Presidency, it should make use of its diplomatic capital on the ground by developing a Visegrad EaP Action Plan on Resilience and streamline it.
- It should strengthen its agenda on Eastern Europe by promoting common V4 actions in areas where the EaP countries are the most fragile such as cyber-security dialogues and developing a green strategy.

Further reading

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Acknowledgements

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