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RHETORICAL STRATEGIES, INSTITUTIONAL DILEMMAS: THE VISEGRÁD GROUP AND THE BALTIC COOPERATION FACING THE EU AND NATO ACCESSION PROCESS

LUCIANA-ALEXANDRA GHICA

Academic and policy literature frequently supports the idea that the process of accession to the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization might have triggered the emergence and development of functional regional cooperation in the former communist space. In this article, using the cases of the Baltic Cooperation and Visegrád Group, I argue that, far from being enhanced by the EU and NATO enlargement processes, the regional dimension rarely found itself at ease with the institutional requisites for accession to these two Western organizations.

Keywords: European Union; NATO; Baltic Cooperation; Visegrád Group; enlargement.

Since the fall of communism, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe¹ have created or engaged in over a dozen regional intergovernmental schemes of cooperation and various other smaller regional programs and activities. Although not equally interested in developing regional arrangements with their neighbours, all Central and East European states have involved in the process, with an average participation rate of three agreements per country. The speed to which this phenomenon has developed, as well as the fact that it emerged in an area where long-term non-defensive cooperation had never been the norm has puzzled many historians and political scientists during the last two decades. Most frequently, academic and policy literature advances the idea that the process of accession to the European Union and NATO might have triggered the emergence and development of functional regional cooperation in the former communist space.² In this article, I argue that the relation between

¹ Although there are many references to Central and Eastern Europe, as well as various criteria to distinguish it from the rest of the neighboring space, there is no agreement to what exactly it covers. For the purpose of this research, the notion refers to the former communist space.

² For some of the most notable contributions in this field, see OTHON ANASTASAKIS and VESNA BOJIČIĆ-DŽELILOVIĆ, *Balkan regional co-operation and European integration*, London School of Economics and Political Science, The Hellenic Observatory, London, 2002; Andrew Cottey (ed.) *Subregional cooperation in the New Europe: Building security, prosperity and solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea*, Macmillan, London, 1999; Duško Lopandić, (ed.) *Regional cooperation in South Eastern Europe: The effects of regional initiatives*, European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, 2002; DIMITAR BECHEV, “Contested Borders, Contested Identity: The Case of Regionalism in South East Europe”, *Journal of South East European and*

regional intergovernmental cooperation and the accession process to these two organizations has been more complex. In fact, far from being enhanced by the EU and NATO enlargement processes, the regional dimension rarely found itself at ease with the institutional requisites for accession, in other contexts than the rhetorical ones.

In order to investigate this issue, I chose two cases of regional intergovernmental cooperation – the Visegrád Group (V4) and the Baltic Cooperation (BC). The Visegrád Group is a regional initiative that has brought together Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary and Poland since 1991. Its original purpose was to support the withdrawal of these countries from the Warsaw Pact,³ and offer a framework for common defence in front of a potentially retaliatory USSR.⁴ With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and after the European Community and NATO membership had been set as major foreign policy goals for the former communist states, the focus of this arrangement shifted towards softer security concerns, such as economy, civil society, ecology, culture, and communications. The Baltic Cooperation is a loose framework of cooperation among Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania originating in their 1990 declaration of independence from the USSR.⁵ Although initially oriented towards political and military security, since the second half of the 1990s the three partners have also preferred less problematic fields for their collaboration.

The Visegrád Group and the Baltic Cooperation have been highly similar in many respects. They were established among a small number of neighbouring countries and have never expanded their membership. They were created around the same period initially to answer mainly the participants' common political and military security concerns. These concerns slightly varied in the

Black Sea Studies 4, 1, 2004, pp. 77-96.; MILICA UVALIĆ, "Regional cooperation and the enlargement of the European Union: Lesson learned?", *International Political Science Review* 23, 3, 2002, pp. 319-33.

³ Created in 1955 at the initiative of the USSR, the Warsaw Pact had been a regional military security aimed to counterbalance the Western security alliances, most notably the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, since its establishment, it had proved to be also a strong instrument through which the Soviet Union could control its European satellite countries. In the immediate aftermath of the regime change in 1989 and the early 1990s, the denouncement of the Warsaw treaty, was thus the most important political act to declare military and political independence from Moscow. For a comprehensive collection of documents on its history, including the increasingly tensioned relations between the USSR and the other East European communist regimes, see VOJTECH MASTNY and MALCOLM BYRNE (eds.), *A cardboard castle? An inside history of the Warsaw Pact, 1955-1991*, Central European University Press, Budapest, New York, 2005.

⁴ Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration [English translation], Visegrád, 15 February 1991.

⁵ Declaration on Unity and Cooperation by the Republic of Estonia, Republic of Latvia and Republic of Lithuania [English version], Tallinn, 12 May 1990.

two cases. For the Visegrád countries, security was framed mainly in relation with the participation to and the existence of the Warsaw Pact. Instead, for the Baltic republics, the security rationale was dictated first by the need to gain independence from the Soviet Union. However, in both cases, achieving this primary security goal meant also the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from the territory of the member states.⁶ Furthermore, once the political and military security threats diminished, both transformed into multisectoral agreements, covering various fields of collaboration, though political dialogue has remained their focus. Among all the Central and East European regional initiatives, the Visegrád Group and the Baltic Cooperation are the only arrangements whose all participants are currently full members of both the European Union and the NATO. All Visegrád and Baltic states acquired EU membership in 2004. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are NATO members since 1999, while Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia became NATO members in 2004.

The two cases also differ. Most significantly, this happens with respect to the rhetoric and factors that have favoured the group cohesiveness. While the Visegrád members have strongly legitimized their cooperation in identity terms, the Baltic Cooperation never intended to develop or produced a sense of collective (regional) identity. Furthermore, the EU and NATO accession processes had different weights for the agendas of the Baltic states and the Visegrád countries. For the Visegrád Group countries, whose harder security concerns had been partially solved by the mid-1990s, the European Union became faster the more urgent priority. Instead, for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the vicinity of an unstable and often politically aggressive Russian Federation has meant a higher concern for the political and military security priorities. This translated into the fact that the NATO membership has been often perceived as the most important foreign policy target.

The Visegrád Group: A pragmatic strategy

From the very beginning, the Visegrád partners presented themselves to the Western partners as the more advanced states in the former communist camp. Beyond the political rhetoric, there was some truth in this. In Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, civil society had been more active and

⁶ The Soviet troops left Hungary and Czechoslovakia in mid 1991, while from Poland and the Baltic states they withdrew only in 1994. For an interesting analysis of the way in which this difference affected the military reform in these countries, see for instance JEFFREY SIMON, *Hungary and NATO: Problems in civil-military relations*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2003; and JEFFREY SIMON, *Poland and NATO: A study in civil-military relations*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2004.

stronger during the communist rule.⁷ Much of the resistance was based on the idea of no compromise with the regime, at least in principle, a fact which associated the opposition and dissidence movements in these countries with an image of moral superiority.⁸ During the last decade before the end of the Cold War, Hungary had experienced a more liberal regime compared to most of its neighbours. Poland and Hungary were the first to start the democratization process, organizing roundtable negotiations and free elections. The Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel and the Polish President Lech Wałęsa also enjoyed much prestige in the Western political, diplomatic and media circles due to their role in the disintegration of the communist regimes. These experiences enhanced the idea that the three countries were genuinely committed to democracy and its values, particularly when compared with the other former communist states. Furthermore, at the time of the break up with dictatorship, the three countries were slightly more advanced economically than their fellows in Comecon.⁹

Nonetheless, the logic of presenting themselves as leaders has been double-edged, mostly with respect to the EU enlargement process. For the three former communist countries, the acknowledgement of the fact that they were more economically advanced was considered a promise for enlargement, which caught the European Community political leaders into a rhetorical trap.¹⁰ On the other hand, treating the Visegrád states as a group could have meant a serious delay in the accession, which could have been postponed until the weakest of all would have been prepared.¹¹ From this perspective, strengthening the regional cooperation links might have meant a further delay in the EU accession, a problem quickly

⁷ See, for instance, VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU, *Reinventing politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel*, Macmillan, New York, 1992.

⁸ BARBARA FALK, *The dilemmas of dissidence in East-Central Europe*, Central University Press, Budapest, 2003; TIMOTHY GARTON ASH, *We the People: The revolutions of 1989, witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*, Granta, London, 1991.

⁹ Literature on this issue usually presents the Visegrád Group as *significantly* more advanced than all the other communist regimes. However, macroeconomic indicators for the late 1980s do not show a radically different picture when compared to the other communist economies. In fact, in many respects, the S.F.R. Yugoslavia was as much as an economic leader as Czechoslovakia or Hungary. One may indeed notice a more service oriented approach to economic growth, particularly in Czechoslovakia. This view on the economic development of the Visegrád countries may be rather a “contamination of the past” with the view on these states economic situation in the first half of the 1990s, when on average they performed better than most of the other former communist states. For a good overview of the macroeconomic indicators, see, for instance, Vienna Institute for Comparative Economic Studies, *Comecon data 1989*, Macmillan, London, 1990; and Vienna Institute for Comparative Economic Studies, *Countries in transition*, Wiener Institut für Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche, Vienna, 1996.

¹⁰ FRANK SCHIMMELFENNIG, “The Community trap: Liberal norms, rhetorical action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union”, *International Organization* 55, 1, 2001, pp. 47-80.

¹¹ MILADA ANNA VACHUDOVA, “The Visegrád Four: No alternative to cooperation?”, *RFE/RL Research Report* 2, 34, 27 August 1993, p. 46.

spot by the leaders of the Visegrád Group and rhetorically used for consolidating their countries' position in the race for Western organizations membership.

For instance, the Czechoslovak and Hungarian governments strongly opposed Poland's proposal for a minimal institutionalisation of the political arrangement among them, even if modelled after the European Community. Particularly the Czechoslovak and later Czech governments resisted such developments, claiming in late 1992 and early 1993 even that the EC initiated this proposal in order to stall the access of these countries to the Western institutions. At that time, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Krystof Skubiszewski openly denied the interference of the EC in this plan of institutionalization.¹² However, in an interview with the author, former Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Bronislaw Geremek suggested that the proposal had belonged indeed to the Polish government but it partially aimed to answer an idea allegedly coming from EU circles. This idea was that cooperation at regional level among the former communist countries could prove their commitment to democracy, hence their democratic credentials necessary to be accepted as part of the "democratic club of the Western world".¹³

Interestingly, this argument was often used in relation with the establishment of regional cooperation schemes among the former communist states. Many policy-makers and scholars, irrespective of their institutional or national affiliation, hold the view that the development of international regionalism in post Cold War Central and Eastern Europe might have been a suggestion coming from the European Union. However, none of them can indicate at least one text originating in the Community institutions that requested the countries of the region to cooperate in the early 1990s. In fact, until the adoption of the Stability and Association Process, no major political EU document explicitly encourages the Central and East European countries to cooperate regionally.¹⁴ More plausibly, this could have been an idea developed within the European chancelleries and think tanks at the end of the Cold War, when many visions about the reorganization of the European security emerged. One of the potential configurations placed the former communist countries within a third group between the West and the Soviet Union. At that time, for some circles within the European Community, this may have been an easier choice for the Community as it did not require to accommodate new members,

¹² VACHUDOVA, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

¹³ BRONISLAW GEREMEK, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, interview with the author, Oxford, 17 May 2006.

¹⁴ The Stability and Association Process is a strategy of the European Union adopted in the early 2000s to cope with the instability of the Western Balkan space in the aftermath of the 1999 war in Kosovo. Even in this case, the references to regional cooperation are mostly to the existing regional initiatives in South Eastern Europe, such as the Stability Pact and the SEECP, and emphasize the idea that regional dialogue and cooperation may help the partner countries to find easier practical solution to problems common in the region.

particularly in a period in which the organization was in the middle of a deep institutional reform process.¹⁵

At the same time, the view that cooperation at regional level among the former communist countries could prove their commitment to democracy was a “free-floating idea” within the realm of international politics. In its essence, it belongs to the democratic peace theory sphere, because it is a reversal of the proposition “democratic states are more likely to cooperate,” which is corollary of this theory.¹⁶ Even if they were not aware of all the intricacies of the democratic peace arguments, it is probably safe to presume that many of the political leaders and diplomats of those times were accustomed with lay versions of these arguments through interaction within international institutions founded on principles related to democratic peace, most notably the United Nations.

Whether or not the idea of strengthening regional cooperation among the Visegrád countries initiated within EU, it might have served the EU interest in delaying the accession process until both the new members and the EU itself were prepared. In this sense, the Czechoslovak position was right. However, by the time the Czechoslovak and later Czech leaders claimed that the European Union was encouraging the Visegrád cooperation in order to delay or even deny the accession of the Central European countries to this organization, the EU leaders were already preparing the document through which they acknowledged the possibility of enlargement for the former communist countries as long as they fulfilled several political and economic criteria.¹⁷ For this reason, the Czech aggressive position may be read rather as part of a strategy to differentiate the Czech Republic as a leader even within the Visegrád Group.¹⁸ Similarly, Poland aimed to distinguish itself as a “good pupil at the democratization lesson” answering the allegedly EU push for further cooperation within the Visegrád framework.¹⁹ Such rationales quickly created a rhetoric competition among the Visegrád partners. This competition grew when the governments realized that the EU enlargement process was individual and that the European Union did not favour a group approach for the access negotiations.²⁰

Apart from the rhetoric dilemmas, regional cooperation also generated

¹⁵ FRANK SCHIMMELFENNIG, *The EU, NATO and the integration of Europe: Rules and rhetoric*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

¹⁶ For good reviews of the democratic peace theory arguments, see for instance BRUCE RUSSETT, *Grasping the democratic peace: Principles for a post-Cold War world*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993; and MICHAEL BROWN, SEAN M. LYNN-JONES, and STEVEN E. MILLER (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 1996.

¹⁷ EUROPEAN COUNCIL, Conclusions of the European Council on relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Copenhagen, 12-13 June 2003.

¹⁸ VACHUDOVA, *op. cit.*, p.41.

¹⁹ BRONISLAW GEREMEK, interview with the author, Oxford, 17 May 2006.

²⁰ GÉZA JESZENSZKY, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, interview with the author, Budapest, 12 April 2006.

institutional problems in relation to the EU accession process. This was most visible at economic level. In 1992 the Visegrád countries established an economic cooperation framework of bilateral arrangements among themselves - the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). This should have helped the participants integrate better their economies and prepare them for European Community membership.²¹ However, the CEFTA often hindered the EU accession process. For example, the traditional market of Hungarian pharmaceutical products in Poland was severely hit by the access of German products, which according to the pre-enlargement arrangements were tax-exempted.²² Similarly, the agriculture sector of the Czech Republic was frequently caught in-between the EU and CEFTA arrangements. The Czech agriculture policy was modelled on the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Community, which meant, among others, export subsidies and high tariff barriers. Such provisions impeded the liberalization of trade in agricultural products within CEFTA.²³

In short, strengthening the regional economic links might mean a serious setback in integrating economically within the European Community. For such reasons and by common consent, the economic cooperation of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia within the framework of CEFTA remained underdeveloped. This was also the result of the divergent national interests of the member countries. For instance, Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic, less sympathetic towards political cooperation supported the economic collaboration within CEFTA. At the other end of the spectrum, the Polish government strongly encouraged political cooperation but was afraid that CEFTA could become a new Comecon. Slovakia highly isolated politically and with the most feeble economy of the four, supported both the political and the economic regional cooperation as a means to remain in the leading group.²⁴ As for Hungary, whose economy closely followed the Czech one, the strengthening of economic relations among the Visegrád countries through formal institutions was perceived as a delay in the EU accession. Therefore, the Hungarian government insisted that each country be judged according to individual merits and efforts.²⁵

A relatively similar situation occurred also in the case of the NATO enlargement. At the time of the formal establishment of their grouping, the Visegrád countries emphasized their common security goals, which in the early 1990s meant mostly having at least a privileged relation with the NATO and

²¹ The Visegrád Group, *Central European Free Trade Agreement*, Krakow, 21 December 1992.

²² JOHN FITZMAURICE, "Regional co-operation in Central Europe", *West European Politics* 16, 3, 1993, p. 393.

²³ VACHUDOVA, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²⁴ MARTIN DANGERFIELD, *Subregional economic cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe: The political economy of CEFTA*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2000, 35-6.

²⁵ VACHUDOVA, *op. cit.*, p.45. This evaluation was confirmed by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, Géza Jeszenszky, in an interview with the author, Budapest, 12 April 2006.

possibly acquiring the organization's membership. Externally, the Visegrád countries were already perceived as a group. For instance, in 1993 former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski encouraged the four partners to apply jointly for NATO membership.²⁶ Especially in American political and diplomatic circles, apparently also partially due to the strong Polish and Hungarian American lobbies,²⁷ Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and to a lesser extent Slovakia were considered the potential first new members of the Alliance.²⁸ However, far from being coagulator of common action, NATO was the subject of one of the first major disagreements between the four partner countries. In 1994, at a summit organized by the United States in Prague with the Visegrád states for introducing the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP), the Czechs adopted an individualist attitude justified by the conviction that the Czech Republic was more advanced economically and politically than the other three. The Polish delegation accused the Czechs of having "hijacked the summit" but this did not impress the Czechs too much because several months later, Václav Klaus rejected both a closer cooperation within the Visegrád group and a formally common application for EU membership.²⁹

Although political meetings continued to take place periodically within the V4 framework, between 1994 and 1999, when the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland acquired NATO membership, the political declarations and other documents that the organization produced suggest a diminishing concern with strengthening the Visegrád cooperation, simply acknowledging the usual technical issues discussed at the reunions. Furthermore, the number of reunions was significantly more reduced during 1994-1999 compared to 1990-1993. In addition, the subjects addressed after 1994 in the V4 format were less important for the joint political action of the group.³⁰

This decline continued after 1999, but that year marked the adoption of a new strategy within the Visegrád Group. With the NATO membership already acquired and the EU membership very close, apart from supporting the efforts of Slovakia to reach the same targets as the other three partners, the V4 needed to redefine its rationale. It did so in a landmark Prime Minister summit in Bratislava in May 1999. On that occasion, the Visegrád countries defined the guidelines for further cooperation after accession to NATO and the European Union. The document openly states in the first paragraph that the main area of substantive

²⁶ BRONISLAW GEREMEK, interview with the author, Oxford, 17 May 2006.

²⁷ GALE A. MATTOX, "United States: Stability through engagement and enlargement", in GALE A. MATTOX and Arthur R. Rachwald (eds.) *Enlarging NATO: The national debates*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 2001, pp.15-33.

²⁸ MARTIN A. SMITH and GRAHAM TIMMINS, *Building a bigger Europe: EU and NATO enlargement in comparative perspective*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000, pp. 45-9.

²⁹ COTTEY, *op.cit.*, p.78.

³⁰ For instance, in 1997, the official chronology of the organization records only one major event, a reunion of V4 Red Cross committees.

cooperation between the partners should be “the maintaining of the Visegrád regional profile (‘image-PR’): consultations and issuing, as and when the need arises, of joint statements on issues of common interest, regular meetings of V4 ambassadors”.³¹ In other words, the four countries publicly acknowledged that the Visegrád label was an asset useful for other foreign policy purposes.

This approach became even more visible after the 2004 EU accession, when a new redefinition of the content of the cooperation placed culture and education in the forefront, with the Visegrád “single civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values and common roots in diverse religious traditions” as the key concept.³² Instead, with respect to cooperation within the EU and NATO, the four partners no longer aimed at having joint statements but only “consultations and co-operation on current issues of common interest”.³³ In short, within the EU and NATO, it seemed that the Visegrád mission partially finished with the accession. Indeed, after 2004 there are significantly less joint actions and many more reunions in the newly branded V4+ format (i.e. Visegrád countries plus neighbours, commonly Slovenia). This happens mostly within the framework of the European Union. Joint declarations of the V4 are even rarer within the NATO, where each country seems to have an individual approach, with Poland being the most visible in this respect.

The Baltic Cooperation: An non-engaging commitment

The way in which the Baltic Cooperation (BC) evolved in relation to the EU and NATO enlargement has some similarities with the evolution of the Visegrád group. Mostly, before enlargement, the BC was used for political consultation in relation to the accession process to the two organizations but not for developing strong links among the participants. Like in the case of the Visegrád cooperation, the EU enlargement led to a competition among the three countries, with the more economically advanced Estonia behaving relatively similarly to the Czech Republic. Its strategy succeeded and, unlike the other two Baltic neighbours, it was included in the first wave of candidate countries with which the European Union decided to begin negotiations in 1997, the so-called “Luxembourg group.” Instead, in the NATO enlargement process, Lithuania took the lead. It was the first to apply for a NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) and it pursued an individualistic approach to NATO membership, hoping even to be nominated for that in the 1997 NATO Madrid summit, together with the

³¹ The Visegrád Group, *Contents of the Visegrád Cooperation approved by the Prime Ministers’ summit*, Bratislava, 14 May 1999.

³² The Visegrád Group, *Summit Declaration*, Kroměříž, 12 May 2004.

³³ *Ibid.*

Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.³⁴ The three states finally joined at the same time the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance in 2004 but their common positions within the Baltic Cooperation does not indicate in anyway that their consultation within this framework might have had a role in this respect.

What may account primarily for this lack of cohesiveness of the Baltic Cooperation with respect to the EU and NATO enlargement is the different foreign policy focus. For instance, Estonia has strong relations with Finland, Latvia has preferred to develop its relations with Germany, Sweden and Denmark, while Lithuania has closer relations with Poland and Russia.³⁵ Moreover, the Baltic Cooperation has not been the most important regional initiative in which the three republics have involved, the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Nordic Baltic Council (NB8) having been regarded as more significant for all of them.³⁶ The different foreign policy options with respect to the Russian Federation may have also had played a more important factor for the BC cohesiveness than the European Union and NATO accession process. In fact, unlike the 1991 Visegrád Declaration which focused mostly on the “return to Europe” and only subsidiary addressed the issue of distancing from Moscow, which by that time had been solved to a significant extent, the 1990 Unity Declaration that established the Baltic Cooperation was the main instrument for adopting a common position of the three Baltic republics in relation with the Russian government. It is not only the founding text but also the one in which the cohesiveness of the group is expressed most vigorously. Only once the group cohesiveness was expressed as powerfully as in 1990. This happened in 1993,³⁷ when the independence of the Baltic states’ foreign policy was threatened after Russia introduced the concept of its “near abroad” as a way to justify that the NATO should not extend into the Baltic area, still considered

³⁴ Gale A. Mattox and Arthur R. Rachwald (eds.) *Enlarging NATO: The national debates*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 2001; GRAZINA MINOTAITE, “The Baltic States: In search of security and identity”, in C. Krupnick (ed.) *Almost NATO: Partners and players in Central and East European security*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2003.

³⁵ BERND SCHÜRMAN, “Estonia: Confronting geostrategic limits”, in Gale A. Mattox and Arthur R. Rachwald (eds.) *Enlarging NATO: The national debates*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 2001, pp. 219-37; ERIK MÄNNIK, “The role of the ESDP in Estonia’s foreign policy”, in Clive Archer (ed.), *New security issues in Northern Europe: The Nordic and Baltic states and the ESDP*, Routledge, London, 2008, pp. 139-54; ŽANETA OZALIŅA, “European Security and Defense Policy: The Latvian Perspective”, in Clive Archer (ed.), *New security issues in Northern Europe: The Nordic and Baltic states and the ESDP*, Routledge, London, 2008, pp. 115-3; GRAZINA MINOTAITE, “Lithuania’s evolving security and defense policy: ‘not only consumer but also contributor’”, in Clive Archer (ed.), *New security issues in Northern Europe: The Nordic and Baltic states and the ESDP*, Routledge, London, 2008, pp. 155-73.

³⁶ CARL-EINAR STALVANT, “The Council of the Baltic Sea States”, in Andrew Cottey (ed.) *Subregional cooperation in the New Europe: Building security, prosperity and solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea*, Macmillan and EastWest Institute, London, 1999, pp. 46-68.

³⁷ The Baltic Cooperation, *Declaration of the Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Baltic States*, Tallinn, 6 December 1993.

by Russia in its own security sphere of influence.³⁸ After 1994, the relations of each Baltic country with Russia have been different and have not generated similarly strong common positions compared to the 1990 and the 1993 declarations. For instance, from the three countries, only Lithuania managed to sign a border treaty with Russia, mainly due to its special location in relation with the Kaliningrad enclave, as well as due to the fact that Russian oil and gas pipelines transit Lithuania to Western Europe.³⁹ Latvia also partially normalized its relations with Russia, as it has increasingly perceived Moscow no longer as a security threat but as a large neighbour with deep domestic problems that can indirectly affect Latvian security.⁴⁰ Estonia shares a similar view with Latvia but adds to it the particular environmental and nuclear security concerns that have been manifested in relation with Moscow since the 1970s.⁴¹

Despite these different foreign policy strategies and the lack of institutional cooperation, the Baltic states have been treated as a group by third parties, particularly by the United States. For instance, at the initiative of the American administration, the three republics signed in Washington a Baltic Charter. At first sight, this was an open support for the NATO accession. By that time, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania realized that, unlike in the case of EU accession, NATO was a process involving less competition among them and they were even encouraged to act as a group.⁴² However, as Martin Smith and Graham Timmins convincingly argue, the Baltic Charter, which had more economic than political security provisions, expressed rather the US administration's view that "EU enlargement, *coupled with an established and growing US economic and commercial presence in the region*, was the most realistic approach" given the Russian opposition to NATO enlargement in the Baltic area.⁴³ In this way, the Baltic states were pushed to act as a group not necessarily of their own will. Without the enlargement conditionality, the already loose cohesiveness of the initiative diminished even more. Although they agreed to continue cooperating in the BC format also after acquiring the NATO and EU membership, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania do not aim to differentiate themselves as a group within the EU,⁴⁴ a fact that distinguishes them from the Visegrád Group. Furthermore, not only the common positions of

³⁸ IRINA KOBRINSKAYA, "Russia: Facing the facts", in Gale A. Mattox and Arthur R. Rachwald (eds.) *Enlarging NATO: The national debates*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 2001, pp. 169-85.

³⁹ MINOTAITE, *Lithuania's evolving security and defense policy...*, pp. 160-1.

⁴⁰ OZALIŅA, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

⁴¹ SCHÜRSMANN, *op.cit.*, pp. 223-4. On the 1970s and 1980s Estonian actions with respect to these security issues, see for instance JOHN FITZMAURICE, *The Baltic: A regional future*, St. Martin's Press, London, 1992, esp. pp. 118-9.

⁴² MATTOX, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

⁴³ SMITH and TIMMINS, *op.cit.*, pp. 60-1, emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ The Baltic Cooperation, *Joint Statement of the Prime Ministers of the Baltic States*, Kalvi, 15 January 2003.

the Baltic States are very rare both within the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union but these three states seem to currently orient their regional foreign policy agendas closer to the Nordic countries and sometimes to Poland rather than towards strengthening the links among themselves.

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To sum up, the relation between the development of regional cooperation arrangements in Central and East Europe and the EU and NATO accession processes has been a complex one. Most importantly, these processes cannot be convincingly portrayed as triggering the formation of genuine functional cooperation at regional level in the former communist space. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the creation of loose regional initiatives in the area was a quick fix to the rapidly changing European security environment. For the more entrepreneurial governments in Central and Eastern Europe, the promotion of international regionalism seemed to be also an opportunity for a long waited rapprochement to the military and economic security organizations of the democratic West, while freeing themselves from the Soviet control. However, in relation to the EU and NATO accession, strengthening regional ties proved to be a double-edged instrument both on institutional and rhetorical grounds. As shown in the case of the Visegrád Group, the consolidation of regional economic cooperation hindered the economic integration within the European Community and vice versa. At rhetorical level, insisting on being considered as a group in the accession processes meant a delay in acquiring membership, as this could not have been granted until the least developed partner of the group was fully prepared. Coupled with the fact that progress in this preparation was judged solely on individual basis, these factors led to an increased competition among the regional initiatives partners and consequently to a diminishing cooperation within the regional arrangements. This was most visible in the case of the Baltic Cooperation, whose establishment and development was even less motivated by its members' will to involve in building frameworks of functional cooperation among themselves. For these reasons, it is very unlikely that functional regional cooperation develops on the medium run among the Visegrád or the Baltic partners within either the European Union or the North Atlantic Alliance, despite the fact that the partners expressed their desire to maintain their already existing links and have common actions. At most, as the recent dynamic of these initiatives seems to indicate, the two regional identity brands and particularly the "Visegrád cooperation" may be politically activated at any time as a rhetorical instrument.