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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kriz, Z., Urbanovska, J., & Brajercikova, S. (2019). The Visegrad countries as an example to emulate? German expectations within the Eastern partnership. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 19(1), 83-101. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-61710-8>

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# The Visegrad Countries as an Example to Emulate? German Expectations within the Eastern Partnership\*

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## Abstract

The Central European countries have been members of the European Union (EU) since 2004. During the process of their transformation towards democracy and market economy, the four Visegrad countries (V4) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – were strongly supported by Western European EU members, particularly Germany, which was especially interested in the EU Eastern enlargement. Later on, Germany undertook a similar approach in assisting the transformation towards democracy and market economy in the countries included in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, forming the Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy. Unlike in the past, however, current Berlin policy-makers are no longer willing to support an Eastern enlargement of the EU. Nevertheless, Germany expects the V4 to intensively engage with the EaP countries (i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and to share their experiences from the political and economic transformation they underwent. The V4 countries, having regularly stressed the importance of deeper and wider cooperation within the EaP, have proved able to meet German expectations concerning their role in the EaP project. In a period marked by

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\* The article was written as part of the project “Germany and Out-of-Area Military Operations: Civilian Power, Trading State or Middle Power?” Registration number 17-12243S, supported by the Czech Science Foundation.

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numerous disputes between the V4 states and Germany (with the migration crisis at the top of the list), the convergence of Germany's preferences with those of the V4 countries within the EaP initiative is an encouraging sign of a continuing intensive and deep cooperation among Germany and the V4 countries.

**Keywords:** Germany, Visegrad countries, the Eastern Partnership.

## Introduction

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Visegrad Four (V4) countries (i.e. the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) turned to the West for political and administrative models, for economic and technological advancement, as well as for security. As a result, V4 countries have been thoroughly transformed and to a certain degree have started to serve as a source of inspiration for other post-communist states. The Central European countries became members of the EU at a time of crucial institutional, political and economic EU reform. They are aware of the fact that their active engagement in European affairs and in the European common foreign, security and defense policy is possible only in close cooperation with Germany. Kristína Mikulová, speaking on Central Europe's pivot to Germany, points to the fact that "Central Europe's pivot to Germany is not yet complete and perhaps never will be, given the complexity of state-to-state relationships in the multi-layered EU context, and the tug of nationalist interests in some parts of the diverse region, but the cooperation between Central Europe and Germany is undoubtedly deepening."<sup>1</sup> The migration crisis that erupted in 2015 generated serious disputes between Germany and the V4 countries and significantly burdened mutual relations; however, from the long-term perspective, it has not destroyed the link. Many possibilities continue to exist for Central European countries and Germany to prove an intensive cooperation exists both at the bilateral and at the multilateral level, with the Eastern Partnership (EaP) project being one of them.

The EaP is a joint initiative which involves the EU, its member states and six Eastern European countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine – with a goal to build a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation. The EaP was established as a specific Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which contains a bilateral and a multilateral track. It was launched, based on a 2008 Polish proposal, at the Prague Summit in 2009. The EU is committed to building strong and mutually beneficial relations with all six partners, irrespective of their individual level of ambition in their relations

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<sup>1</sup> Kristína Mikulová, "Central Europe's Velvet Power: Can It Reinvigorate EU Foreign Policy?," *World Affairs* 176, no. 3 (2013): 65.

with the EU. Bilateral relations are based on differentiation whilst the multilateral EaP structure offers an inclusive framework involving all six partner countries.<sup>2</sup> Germany perceives the EaP as an initiative that is conducive to German interests, but at the same time as one that could undermine them. Berlin would like the EaP to be an instrument that brings the partner countries closer to the EU economically but not politically. Moreover, Germany has set its own bilateral cooperation with partner countries in the East above the joint projects of the Eastern Partnership.<sup>3</sup> The EU membership of the six above-mentioned countries has not been on the list of German goals.

German foreign policy has its specific features formed by special role concepts, especially by the concepts of civilian power, middle power and trade state. Civilian power promotes multilateralism, institution-building and supranational integration and tries to constrain the use of force in international relations through national and international norms. The ideal civilian power initiates and promotes multilateral co-operation, which is a policy based on the assumption that national interests are interdependent. Moreover, civilian power is typical of value-based foreign policy. It promotes good governance, democratisation and sustainable development.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of the middle power suffers from a lack of definitional clarity. Generally speaking, middle powers are states with a special status in the international system because they are neither powerful enough to be great, nor insignificant enough to be minor.<sup>5</sup> In terms of their behavior, they are characterized by their willingness and effort to engage in global matters using international institutions. This stems from the need to overcome comparative differences in material resources of influence in comparison with resources possessed by superpowers. Middle powers rely on their credibility and make use of the advantage of their technological skills, experience and national resources. Multilateral cooperation plays a primary role in their foreign policy, while their multilateral *modus operandi* stresses the need to act diplomatically

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<sup>2</sup> "Eastern Partnership," European External Action Service, 2016, accessed February 5, 2018, <https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/easternpartnershipen>.

<sup>3</sup> Justyna Gotkowska, "Germany and the Eastern Partnership," *OSW Commentary Centre for Eastern Studies*, issue 37 (2010): 1, accessed February 5, 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary370.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian Harnisch and Hanns W. Maull (eds.), *Germany as a Civilian Power? The Foreign Policy of the Berlin Republic* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Robert W. Murray, "Middlepowermanship and Canadian Grand Strategy in the 21st Century," *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 14, no. 2 (2013): 90.

only in a small number of special matters, balancing their national interests and potential opportunities for spreading their influence.<sup>6</sup>

A trade state, defined by Richard Rosecrance, focuses on economic gains and welfare and abstains from territorial expansion or autarky.<sup>7</sup> Its main goal is to promote free trade. Free trade is a guarantee for economic development and growth. A trade state is interested in intensive economic relations with other states and is interdependent both economically and in the areas of security and defence. The primary goals of a trade state are national welfare, improving its status in international politics through intensive cooperation with other states within international institutions and organizations, as well as the allocation of resources in its domestic politics within the functional trading system. Its defence spending is low, as it can negatively influence its economy; consequently, its membership in defence and security alliances and organizations is rather formal, and without active engagement.<sup>8</sup>

This article deals with German expectations of the role played by the V4 countries in the EaP initiative. The study defends the argument that despite some discrepancies between V4 countries and Germany in recent years, with the migration crisis topping the list, the activities of the V4 states within the EaP are in line with German expectations to a significant extent. Moreover, the attitudes of V4 states and Germany concerning the conception of the EaP are largely compatible with each other. In other words, V4 policies towards the EaP do not represent a bone of contention with Germany that would disrupt the intensive German-V4 states cooperation.

In order to identify German expectations of the V4 countries towards the EaP, the authors conducted 35 interviews with German policy-makers as well as foreign and security policy experts. Ten out of the total number of interviews were conducted with members of the German Parliament (Bundestag) between March and July 2015, ranging across a wide spectrum of German political parties. The remaining interviews were realized with members of the German foreign and security policy community and were conducted from October 2017 to September 2018. This group is formed of experts of the European Council on Foreign Relations Berlin, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, Bundeswehr University Munich, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Berlin, and the Hanns Seidel Foundation Munich.

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<sup>6</sup> David A. Cooper, "Somewhere between Great and Small: Disentangling the Conceptual Jumble of Middle, Regional and 'Niche Powers'," *The Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 14, no. 2 (2013): 26.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State. Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

## Germany and the Eastern Partnership

After the unification, Germany had to look for a new, long lasting, functioning order in Europe as a whole. It had to secure its stability and prosperity in the national, European and international framework, and it had to face global problems. One of the proper political and economic solutions was to guarantee the transformation process in the East not only through help and cooperation but also through the export of norms and institutions, i.e. applying a milieu-shaping strategy in the East. This project included the idea of the EU and NATO Eastern enlargement. For Russia and other post-Soviet republics (Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova), it meant pursuing an inclusive partnership/association policy with the EU as well as cooperative security. Germany and the V4 had the same approach about the EaP countries. Germany is interested not only in the stability of this region, but also in the external EU border, and it tries to secure wealth and peace in this region. In Germany's view, the EU could apply similar instruments in its support of the EaP countries as it did to the Central European countries in order to prepare them for further EU integration. These instruments include twinning, free trade areas, state administration reform and others. Germany promotes setting an EU mechanism for bilateral assistance and multilateral cooperation with the EaP countries, and it also promotes defining a form of cooperation that does not prevent future EU integration. On the question of the EaP countries' full membership to the EU, Germany does not want to block future EaP countries from achieving membership. However, it stresses the importance of the focus on the readiness of these countries and a proper analysis of the degree to which they share common values such as democracy, freedom and human rights. EU foreign policy should be led by active engagement and aspire to strongly influence the policy of neighboring states. Germany welcomed the initiative of the new member states such as Poland in the creation of the EaP. It showed its interest in cooperation with the six EaP states because it wanted to spread European values and to ensure economic prosperity in the Eastern European and Southern Caucasus region. Moreover, Germany makes a provision for Russia's special position as a partner with its own interests in the region. For Germany, cooperation with EaP countries plays a key role; however, an EU enlargement including the EaP countries is not on the table.<sup>9</sup> Especially against the backdrop of the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, Germany stresses that the Association Treaty with Ukraine does not aim to foster EU membership and

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<sup>9</sup> Vladimír Handl, *Německo v čele Evropy? SRN jako civilní mocnost a hegemon eurozóny (Germany at the head of Europe? FRG as civilian power and Eurozone hegemon)* (Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2011), 32, 224-225.

does not provide a timetable for future Ukrainian EU integration. After the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea, Germany was initially reluctant to impose sanctions on Russia. Despite a very strong business lobby, Germany finally forged a consensus on anti-Russian sanctions in the EU and has become a proponent of them.<sup>10</sup>

Labor migration, economic development and capital transfer also play important roles in the EaP. International scientific exchange predominantly took place during the 2007-2013 period within the framework of Erasmus Mundus and Tempus, which supported scientific mobility with further migration. While the Erasmus Mundus program focused on mobility activities and on encouraging partnerships between institutions from the EU and from the partner countries, Tempus IV focused on the reform and modernization of higher education systems in the neighboring region. Neighboring countries and Russia benefitted from a budget of around EUR 670 million during the 2007-2013 programming period for the Erasmus Mundus and Tempus programs. As part of the EU's strengthened ENP and mobility policy, the financial allocation for the 2011-2013 period almost doubled compared to preceding years, through a sizeable top-up that came following the 2011 review of the ENP. In total, 5,187 students (undergraduate, master's, doctorate and post-doctorate levels) and staff members from the Neighborhood East countries, which are Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and 6,221 from Neighborhood South countries, benefitted from scholarships within the framework of Erasmus Mundus Partnerships between 2007 and 2013. Within Erasmus Mundus Joint Programs, 695 EaP nationals benefitted from mobility to follow a joint Erasmus Mundus master's or doctorate.<sup>11</sup>

Some authors have examined the facets of migration and remittances and explored the role of emigrants as actors in development and partnership throughout the world.<sup>12</sup> Remittances have the most positive effect in terms of

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Pond and Hans Kundnani, "Germany's Real Role in the Ukraine Crisis. Caught Between East and West," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2015), accessed February 5, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/eastern-europe-caucasus/germany-s-real-role-ukraine-crisis>.

<sup>11</sup> Ganna Kharlamova and Oleksandr Chernyak, "The EU and the Eastern partnership: scientific network and macroeconomic effects via bilateral relations," in *EU Relations with Eastern Partnership: Strategy, Opportunities and Challenges*, eds. Carlos E. Pacheco Amaral, Gaga Gabrichidze, Ioan Horga, Anatoliy Kruglashov [et al.], International Conference (Editura Universității din Oradea: Chișinău, Chernivtsi, Tbilisi, 2016), 300.

<sup>12</sup> Judith van Doorn. "Migration, remittances and development," *Labour Education* 4, no. 129 (2002): 48–53; Richard H. Adams JR. and John Page, "Do International Migration and Remittances Reduce Poverty in Developing Countries?," *World Development* 33, no. 10 (2005): 1645–1669; Ganna Kharlamova and Kateryna Taran, "Migrant networks for human capital forming in Ukraine," *Bulletin of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Economics*, no. 117 (2010): 46-49; Ganna Kharlamova and Maria Naumova, "Міграція як складова процесу формування людського капіталу України" (Migration

boosting human development in the countries where the state perceives migration as an effective labor export strategy. Regarding the impact of migration on the economic development of the EU, it is apparent that the balance of costs and benefits is positive for both sending and receiving countries. Costs can be reduced, and benefits maximized using appropriate policies that facilitate mobility and integration of migrants and their families, and that help manage the economic consequences of large remittance flows. Labor migrants from the EaP countries could help the member states of the European Union to fill skills gaps at all levels over the next few years, as the demographic transition intensifies in Europe. For the EaP, economic development is primarily affected by whether the elimination of visas will impact the migration levels from the Eastern European states to the V4 countries and the EU member states. Visa abolition will not dramatically increase migration from the Eastern European countries to the EU member states, although the immediate effect of visa abolition might result in a slight increase of migration stocks in the V4 and EU countries.<sup>13</sup>

The Riga summit in 2015 was a key event for the Eastern dimension of the EU's foreign policy. The strategic significance of EU's Eastern policy has been highlighted by Russia's pressure on Armenia to not sign the Association Agreements, the ongoing instability in Moldova, a new foreign policy style in Belarus, the Maidan in Kyiv, the invasion and annexation of Crimea, and finally the Russian-Ukrainian war in the Donbas. It was expected that Germany, as the strongest economic power in Europe and the leader in Europe's sanctions policy on Russia, would be one of the driving forces at the Riga summit. This was, however, not the case. As Gustav Gressel put it, "German foreign policy machinery is still both too progressive and too conservative to come up with new policy ideas for the ENP."<sup>14</sup>

On the one hand, Germany has opted for tightening economic cooperation with the partner countries by signing deals on deep free trade areas and harmonizing part of the legislation of these countries with the *acquis communautaire*. On the other hand, Germany does not want the EaP to evolve and turn into an initiative that offers the partner countries prospects of membership and antagonizes Russia. Therefore, Germany has tried to counteract any elements of the EaP that would help it develop in the aforementioned direction. Moreover, Germany has set its own bilateral cooperation with partner countries in the East above the joint projects of the Eastern Partnership. In doing so, Berlin's guiding principle is that German

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as warehouse of process shaping people's capital in Ukraine), *Економіка та держава*, no. 4 (2010): 32-36.

<sup>13</sup> Kharlamova and Chernyak, "The EU and the Eastern partnership," 304-305.

<sup>14</sup> Gustav Gressel, "Germany and the Eastern Partnership: the view from Berlin," *ECFR Riga Series Views from the EU* (2015): 5.



money allocated for the projects on development cooperation in the East should first and foremost bring political and economic benefits to Germany. Consequently, German foreign policy towards EaP countries is based on the following presumptions: Firstly, EaP countries are attractive to German exporters and investors because of their prospects for economic growth and a growing domestic demand, cheap labor force, geographic proximity, cultural bonds and the fact that German companies have broadened their knowledge of the region and its specific character. Secondly, the EaP should not become a pre-accession instrument that would fuel membership expectations among the partner countries and their “advocates” in the EU member states. Germany stresses that this initiative should be perceived exclusively as part of the ENP and be bound by its confines. Berlin therefore objects to any declarations and actions within the EaP framework that may emphasize the exceptionality of the partner countries in their relations with the EU, and which could eventually become an incentive for negotiations concerning their possible accession in the future. Thirdly, the EaP must not antagonize Moscow or jeopardize the strategic partnership between the EU and Russia. Germany has been guided by the “Russia first” principle, although this approach has backfired with Germany’s support for the EU’s greater economic involvement in the Eastern neighborhood and bilateral activity in these countries.<sup>15</sup>

The Ukrainian crisis has had major consequences for the region. The EaP helped precipitate the Ukraine conflict and now serves as a durable platform for the European Union to counter Russia’s projection of power.<sup>16</sup> According to several German foreign policy experts, Germany behaves as an agenda setter, as a middle power special. Its interest was to negotiate the Minsk Protocol in the so-called Normandy Format with France and Poland. The same experts have also stated that Germany has used its well-developed diplomacy in the Ukraine crisis.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the Ukrainian crisis did not make space for cooperation between the V4 and Germany in the context of the V4’s active engagement in the transformation process in Ukraine, with the exception of Poland. Germany and Poland have been the two European Union member states most deeply involved in advising on and assisting structural reforms in Ukraine. The informal division of labor seemed to be that Germany has taken on energy, financial, and economic issues, while Poland has looked after administration and decentralization. Frequent consultations and visits took place between

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<sup>15</sup> Gotkowska, “Germany and the Eastern Partnership,” 13.

<sup>16</sup> “With Ukraine in Crisis, EU Courts Russia’s Periphery,” *Stratfor* (2015), accessed February 5, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/ukraine-crisis-eu-courts-russias-periphery>.

<sup>17</sup> Record from interview 3. Interview with an expert of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, October 25, 2017; Record from interview 4. Interview with an expert of the Bundeswehr University Munich, May 9, 2018.

German and Ukrainian officials and politicians, and plenty of working and advisory groups were busy on the issues involved. However, this was happening as part of a bilateral policy, which paid little attention to the ENP's instruments because they were perceived as too weak and too slow.<sup>18</sup>

Currently, the cooperation between European countries and the Eastern partners is influenced by several crises and problems the EU has to face. Populist success in the French, German and Austrian parliamentary elections, rule of law crises in Eastern Europe, and rising separatist movements have all been parts of the overlapping crises. These processes reflect the member states' divergent visions of the balance between the EU's foundational values, on the one hand, and security and stability, on the other hand. The imbalance between security and values, as well as nationalism and integration, inevitably influences the EU's external policies, such as its policy vis-à-vis Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. In anticipation of the EaP Summit in November 2017, it was important to discuss the challenges arising from the EU's overlapping internal crises, and to look into the opportunities to tackle them.<sup>19</sup>

A very important step in the area of economic cooperation was achieved on the occasion of the EaP summit, where EU leaders met with their six Eastern partners to agree on the future priorities of their partnership and developed the joint working document "Eastern Partnership – focusing on key priorities and deliverables," the Eastern Partnership's 20 Deliverables for 2020. The priorities focus on four key areas of cooperation in order to achieve stronger economy, governance, connectivity and society. Regarding the strengthening of the economy, both the investment and business environments, as well as unlocking the growth of potential Small and Medium-sized Enterprises', are to be improved. New job opportunities at the local and regional levels shall be created, digital markets shall be harmonized and intra-regional trade among partner countries and the EU shall be supported as well. In terms of stronger governance, EU and EaP officials agreed to strengthen the rule of law and anti-corruption mechanisms, to support the implementation of key judicial reforms and public administration reforms and to guarantee stronger security cooperation. Stronger connectivity means extending the TEN-T core networks and transport, increasing energy supply security, enhancing energy efficiency and use of renewable energy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, political representatives of both sides expect further progress on Visa Liberalization Dialogues and Mobility Partnerships, in order to strengthen investment in young people's skills, entrepreneurship and employability, to establish an EaP European school and last but not least to integrate EaP and EU

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<sup>18</sup> Gressel, "Germany and the Eastern Partnership," 5.

<sup>19</sup> Maryna Rabinovych, "The Eastern Partnership and the various EU crises," *New Eastern Europe* (2017), accessed March 4, 2018, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2017/11/15/eastern-partnership-various-eu-crises/>.

research and innovation systems and programs.<sup>20</sup> Although the EaP is getting very low marks as a security promotion and democratization tool, from a purely functional viewpoint it is moving forward and advancing its economic mission vis-à-vis the frontrunners — Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Meanwhile, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan are staying at arm's length, with their leaders and elites unwilling to sign on to Brussels' political conditionality.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the ongoing rule of law crises in Poland and Hungary invoked a debate within the EU, aimed at critically reflecting on the EU's experiences of value-promotion in Central and Eastern Europe. Germany is trying hard to make this a constructive and cooperative relationship, but there are the fundamental difficulties associated with the authoritarian and populist turn in Eastern Europe.<sup>22</sup> These domestic policy turns, particularly in Poland, might have a significant negative impact on mutual cooperation even in the Ukraine case. It seems Germany has lost its strategic Central European partner, since Germany originally relied on Poland as an important partner in the sphere of defense and security.<sup>23</sup>

As a result of these democratic changes, the Union identified the consensual rule of law benchmarks and multiple ideas for monitoring the adherence to values both within the Union and externally. The most important takeaway from the debate was the need for clarity when it comes to what sorts of values the EU should promote and what it seeks to achieve. This trend towards a more precise definition of cooperation goals was then manifested in the above-mentioned EaP's 20 Deliverables for 2020, and in the coming years it will also be extended to the EU's bilateral cooperation with its neighbors. Moreover, in terms of the endangered security and stability in Europe, both security and stability represent the crucial targets the EU seeks to achieve in the neighborhood, given Russia's presence in the region. For the EU it is thus crucial to develop new strategies to engage in peacekeeping in the region, especially in the diplomatic domain, in form of stronger political support for the Minsk process or engaging France and Germany.<sup>24</sup>

To sum up, Germany has indeed been one of the biggest supporters of the EaP within ENP, though it has not sought to alter the nature of political

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<sup>20</sup> "20 Deliverables for 2020: Bringing tangible results for citizens," European Union (2017), accessed March 4, 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/20\\_deliverables\\_for\\_2020.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/20_deliverables_for_2020.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Understanding the Contest between the EU and Russia in Their Shared Neighborhood," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 6 (2015): 340-349.

<sup>22</sup> Record from interview 11. Interview with a professor from Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 29, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Record from interview 12. Interview with an expert of the Hanns Seidel Stiftung München, May 8, 2018; Record from interview 14. Interview with an expert of the Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, May 9, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Rabinovych, "The Eastern Partnership."

relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbors. Instead, Berlin has opted to keep the status quo. The priority has remained on economic integration in terms of the tightening economic cooperation with the Eastern partners who act more in line with the trade state concept than with the concept of civilian power. Democracy promotion typical for a civilian power was not so important from the German point of view. Germany did not want to antagonize Russia with its participation in the EaP, and this aligns with some features of middle power. In order to avoid any antagonism, Germany used its privileged position in the EU to sidestep any EaP tendencies that might transform the initiative into an offer of EU membership. Compared to the intensive engagement of France in the Union for the Mediterranean, Germany remained cautious of increasing the significance of the EaP initiative.<sup>25</sup>

### German Expectations About the Role of the V4 Countries in the Eastern Partnership

It is evident from the interviews with German political representatives that there is a consensus across the entire German political spectrum regarding the V4 role in EaP. Germany views the V4 as states that, depending on the constellation of domestic political forces during the 1990s, underwent more or less successful political and economic transformation towards democracy and market economy. These states are now able to share their experiences with other Eastern European states in their efforts to integrate into European and transatlantic structures. From the German perspective, an active approach in supporting the EaP states could be adopted by providing know-how in the reformation process as well as experience given by each V4 country in a specific way depending on the intensity of their relations – Slovakia and Poland, for example, can share their experience with Ukraine, while Poland can do so with Belarus as well, based on the degree of the development of mutual bilateral relations and geographical location.<sup>26</sup>

Germany expects the V4 to adopt a very active approach to the Ukrainian crisis, in the context of the policy of EaP and the possibility of using the potential and experience of V4 countries in the reformation and transformation process, as well as in the other five states of the Eastern Partnership.

Nevertheless, according to a political representative, the level of activity of the V4 in the transformation processes in the EaP states depends on the level

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<sup>25</sup> Gotkowska, “Germany and the Eastern Partnership,” 5.

<sup>26</sup> Record from interview 7, Interview with chief deputy of the German-Polish Parliamentary Friendship Group (SPD), July 02, 2015. Record from interview 8, Interview with chair of the German-Slovak Parliamentary Friendship Group (CDU/CSU), May 05, 2015.

of democracy itself and the completion of the transformation process in the Central European states. A Bundestag member highlighted the obvious differences in democracy between Poland and the above-mentioned three other V4 states.<sup>27</sup>

One German Social Democratic Party (SPD) Member of Parliament (MP) saw each of the four V4 states as a suitable role model for the EaP countries, as the Central European states have managed to learn from their own reforms.<sup>28</sup> A fellow party member believed that the V4's experience with the transformation process could be used for the states of the EaP because of their ability to share different experiences with unique transformation process development simultaneously, and the cooperation depends on the bilateral relations level of V4 states with the EaP states.<sup>29</sup> An MP of Die Linke, who regarded Poland as the most suitable role model for the transformation process for the EaP states, shared a similar opinion, as Poland has succeeded in transforming itself into a functioning democracy, whilst the other three V4 states do not represent stable democracies. A more important role will be played by the ability of the Eastern Partnership's states to implement essential reforms, and the development of internal affairs in these states seems to be important.<sup>30</sup>

As the chair of the German-Slovak Parliamentary Friendship Group (CDU/CSU) put it, EaP states had to decide on how and whether to integrate into the European structures; yet the proximity of the V4 to the EaP states have been a suitable precondition for both sharing experiences and cooperation between the V4 and Germany in supporting the EaP states in their reformation processes.<sup>31</sup>

Even though it is acknowledged that the V4 countries have considerable potential for sharing their experience with the EaP countries in the transformation process, a reserved attitude is visible in parts of the German security community towards the actual performance of the V4 countries. In this sense, a former DGAP analyst did not perceive a very positive outlook for the development of cooperation between Germany and the V4 in EaP.<sup>32</sup> According to an SWP analyst, similarly, the V4 – despite its favorable geopolitical location – has not served as an engine of Eastern politics, even though some of its states

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<sup>27</sup> Record from interview 6. Interview with the chair of the Polish-German Parliamentary Group (Die Linke), May 6, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Record from interview 5. Interview with the chair of the German-Czech Parliamentary Group of the Bundestag (SPD), June 16, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Record from interview 7.

<sup>30</sup> Record from interview 6.

<sup>31</sup> Record from interview 8.

<sup>32</sup> Record from interview 9. Interview with a program worker of the research institute of the DGAP, June 9, 2015.

take a very active part in this policy area, such as Poland partnering with Sweden in launching the EaP project.<sup>33</sup>

When assessing the possibilities of German-V4 cooperation and the German expectations of the role of V4 states as supporters of the transformation of the EaP states, it is necessary to stress the fact that Germany has rethought the importance of the EaP for the EU mainly due to escalating tensions between Russia and European states. For the V4, the EaP has become an essential tool in organizing an institutional forum for discussions about visa policies, agreements about free trade, strategic partner agreements, as well as for promoting democracy and intensifying civic society in the immediate neighborhood of the V4.<sup>34</sup>

## The Visegrad Countries and the Eastern Partnership

Warsaw, a strong supporter of democratization and Europeanization of the Eastern neighborhood, proposed the EaP and still remains committed to the EaP, despite the ongoing domestic political development. In fact, the stabilization of the region and the guarantee of security are the main factors of that involvement.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Poland's perception is not completely shared across Europe. Many countries believe that the EU's expansion to the East formed the root cause of the geopolitical conflict with Russia. This was one reason why, at the Riga summit on the future of the EaP, Warsaw reiterated the progress and commitments that had been made so far, rather than launching new initiatives or articulating far-reaching visions. At the Riga summit, Poland declared that the EU needed to reconfirm its commitments towards the EU's Eastern neighbors, especially towards those who have already signed the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA).<sup>36</sup> Polish development cooperation is based upon both bilateral relations as well as the EU's EaP projects. Among the most urgent problems of the cooperation are intensification of democracy, improvement in governance, better border management, agricultural and rural development and the strengthening of entrepreneurship. Multilateral support is based on common projects, which are financed through

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<sup>33</sup> Record from interview 10. Interview with an expert of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 8, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Vladimír Bilčík, András Hettyey, Michal Kořan and Konrad Popławski, *The V4 and Germany: Potentials, limits and opportunities of a strengthened cooperation*. Long-term analysis within the project Think Visegrad V4 Think-Tank Platform, Think Visegrad. 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Adam Plachciak and Anetta Zielinska, "The Eastern Partnership and the Place of Poland in the Development Cooperation," *Transformations in Business & Economics* 14, no. 3 (2015): 93.

<sup>36</sup> Piotr Buras, "Poland and the Eastern Partnership: the view from Warsaw," *ECFR Riga Series Views from the EU* (2015): 30-33.

the payments made to the budgets of the international organizations. They include specialized institutions, programs and funds that deal with development cooperation. The multilateral cooperation depends on Poland's financial engagement within the European Development Fund. In the area of bilateral cooperation, over 70% of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs financial support has been transferred to democratization or to political and economic transformation in the EaP countries. For each country, specific priorities have been assigned. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, these are supporting disadvantaged groups, environmental protection, agriculture and rural development; in Belarus, they are supporting disadvantaged groups, the independent media, civil society initiatives, youth and education; in Georgia, they are supporting disadvantaged groups, regional development, strengthening the public administration and the local government; in Moldova and Ukraine, they are supporting public security and border management, regional development, strengthening public administration and local government, small and medium-sized entrepreneurship, and job creation. Overall, Poland is the most significant international donor of development aid to the EaP countries of all V4 states.<sup>37</sup>

The other V4 states pick rather selectively from the menu of the EaP, too. For example, Hungary is mostly interested in three of the Eastern partners (Moldova, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan), and even a notion of "the East" means different things for Hungarian decision-makers than it does to their Polish counterparts.<sup>38</sup> According to the Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto, Hungary supports strengthening the European Union's EaP program in order to establish pragmatic and civilized cooperation between Western and Eastern Europe. He also called for a strategic partnership between the EU and Azerbaijan, which was important for securing gas supplies.<sup>39</sup> At the V4 and EaP countries meeting in August 2017, Szijjarto called for the adoption of the most ambitious and courageous forging of alliances at the upcoming summit of EU and EaP countries in November in Brussels. In addition, the V4 states also try to prevent any reduction in the budget available for this purpose in the community's next, seven-year programming period.<sup>40</sup> With relation to the results achieved so far, the Minister listed the visa-free travel agreements concluded with Ukraine and Georgia, as well as the association and free trade

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<sup>37</sup> Plachciak and Zielinska, "The Eastern Partnership," 101-102.

<sup>38</sup> Péter Marton, "The Sources of Visegrad Conduct: A Comparative Analysis of V4 Foreign Policy-making," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 21, no. 4 (2012): 14-15.

<sup>39</sup> "Foreign minister calls for strengthening Eastern Partnership," *Daily News Hungary* (2015), accessed March 4, 2018, <https://dailynewshungary.com/foreign-minister-calls-for-strengthening-eastern-partnership/>.

<sup>40</sup> "The V4 regards the forging of eastern alliances as strategically important," Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2017), accessed March 4, 2018, <http://www.kormany-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/the-v4-regards-the-forging-of-eastern-alliances-as-strategically-important>.

agreement with Ukraine. He also spoke about energy security criteria, pointing out that linking the Southern Bass Corridor to Central Europe would be impossible without the Eastern partners.<sup>41</sup>

Slovakia belonged, even in the period prior to its entry into the EU, to the states supporting the idea of institutionalizing a separate Eastern dimension of the Union. Beginning in 2003, the country officially supported democratization processes in the states of the former Soviet Union, with a preferential orientation toward Ukraine and Belarus. Slovakia advocated Ukraine's future EU and NATO memberships and showed its support for the EaP project, as it was welcomed by Slovakia as an opportunity to strengthen cooperation and as a chance to achieve a "new quality" of relations between the East European nations and the EU. In 2008, the then Foreign Minister, Ján Kubiš, stated that the program was perceived by Slovakia as "a very good preparation for the future unification of all of Europe's parts in one European project."<sup>42</sup> Slovakia's involvement was especially underlined in the field of building a free trade zone and a liberalization of the visa regime with Ukraine,<sup>43</sup> which was finally achieved in 2017.

It is interesting to observe how the EaP moved up the list of external relations priorities of the 2009 Czech EU Presidency.<sup>44</sup> Developing the Eastern dimension of ENP had been on the Czech agenda since the beginning, but rather as something that the Czech government was obliged to include due to its geographical position and history, previous activities in the V4 and as a perceived foreign policy priority. Many external factors explain why, as the Czech Presidency approached, the EaP became more important. A strong incentive to turn the EaP into the flagship initiative of the Czech EU Presidency came soon after its start with the gas crisis between Ukraine and Russia that broke out in January 2009, which seriously affected some of the EU member states. The main points that the Czech diplomacy had to repeatedly underline was that the EaP is not anti-Russian, that it does not seek the re-distribution of ENP funds in favor of its Eastern neighbors, that it does not undermine the existing community policies and instruments and, last but not least, that it does not mean a green light for the six countries concerned to join the EU in the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Juraj Marušiak, "Slovakia and the Eastern Partnership," in *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy*, ed. Peter Brezáni (Bratislava: Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2009): 147.

<sup>43</sup> Marušiak, "Slovakia," 147.

<sup>44</sup> Petr Kaniok, *České předsednictví Rady EU - most přes minulost* (The Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union – bridge over the past) (Brno: Muni Press, 2010); Petr Kaniok and Hubert Smekal, "České předsednictví v Radě EU: politický standard, mediální katastrofa" (The Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union: political standard, media catastrophe), *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 17, no. 1 (2010): 39-59.



future.<sup>45</sup> In 2017, the Czech State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Petr Gajdušek, highlighted the fact that the Czech Republic would like to reinforce pragmatic cooperation; at the same time, he argued that the “[c]ooperation must enforce the differences between the individual countries and an individual approach must be applied with relation to every country of the Partnership, but the goal and the opportunities presented must remain uniform.”<sup>46</sup>

As regards Ukraine, the V4 countries are engaged in providing its unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity within the framework of its internationally recognized borders and they declare their absolute support for all the endeavors aimed at de-escalating the conflict at the border and finding a political solution that can be accepted by all the conflict parties involved, while the Minsk Agreements and their full implementation remain a key tool for achieving a peaceful solution to the conflict.<sup>47</sup>

The Riga summit also played a key role in 2015. In the months leading up to the summit, the EU member states and the EaP members negotiated the wording of the statement to be adopted at the end of the summit. Countries including Poland lobbied to include criticism of Russia’s support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Others in Western and Southern Europe, including Germany, opposed any language that would antagonize Russia or support the EU membership aspirations of EaP states. They supported the idea of using the initiative to counter Russia’s influence in the borderlands but did not want to expand the European Union during its time of crisis.<sup>48</sup> However, the Ukrainian crisis remains crucial in the policy of the V4 countries to the European Neighborhood Policy, as the security of Europe – in terms of both defense and energy – is an important accent of the V4 cooperation. The V4 was engaged in strengthening Ukrainian security through NATO activities, and two-dozen Ukrainian soldiers were part of the V4 EU Battle Group.<sup>49</sup>

Despite some critical points in the common attitude between Germany and the V4 states towards Ukraine, Russia and the EaP, the V4 countries undertook some successful steps within their joint V4 project; these focused on the know-how transfer to Ukraine regarding the implementation and successful

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<sup>45</sup> David Král, “The Czech Republic and the Eastern Partnership – from a by-product to a beloved child?,” in *The Eastern Partnership in the Context of the European Neighbourhood Policy and V4 Agenda*, ed. Izabela Albrycht (Krakow: The Kosciuszko Institute, 2010): 12.

<sup>46</sup> “The V4 regards the forging.”

<sup>47</sup> “Joint Statement of the Heads of Government of the Visegrad Group Countries,” Visegrad Group (2015), accessed March 4, 2018, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the>.

<sup>48</sup> “With Ukraine in Crisis.”

<sup>49</sup> Lucia Najšlová, “The Countries of the Eastern Partnership in the Czech Foreign Policy,” in *Czech Foreign Policy in 2015: Analysis*, eds. Michal Kořan et al (Prague: Institute of International Relations, Prague, 2015), 197.

completion of reforms launched in the areas of decentralization, management of public finances, fight against corruption, energy efficiency, security reforms, civil society, education, media, as well as economic development and supporting small and mid-sized entrepreneurs.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, the V4 countries possess other tools for the support of democratization and transformation processes in the EaP countries, in particular the Visegrad Four EaP and V4+ programs within the International Visegrad Fund.<sup>51</sup> Via these activities, the V4 contributed to the increase of credibility of the EU and NATO in the eyes of their Eastern neighbors.<sup>52</sup> The International Visegrad Fund continued to support the joint projects of organizations and individuals from the V4 countries and Eastern Europe through several grant schemes aimed at the development of civil society and the building of institutions of public administration, including universities.<sup>53</sup>

At the V4 summit devoted to the EaP in August 2017, the V4 countries reaffirmed their strong support for the EaP as a strategic dimension of the ENP and a key and active factor of stability, security and economic progress in Eastern Europe. They urged the EU to keep the EaP high on its political agenda. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs also called for the adequate funding within the next Multiannual Financial Framework that would correspond to the priorities of the EaP. Additionally, they supported the Eastern Partnership's focus on regional cooperation, inclusivity, common values, mutual accountability, differentiation and its multilateral dimension. They reiterated the need to react strategically to the consequences of the present challenging geopolitical situation, both for the EaP countries and the European Union. In this context, they underlined the necessity of continuing the reforms in partner countries to strengthen their internal stability, resilience and civilian security. They welcomed the new framework agreement with Armenia and called for further progress in the ongoing process of negotiations with Azerbaijan, which they consider a key partner in terms of energy security and regional stability. They acknowledged Belarus' willingness to deepen the EU–Belarus relationship and called for starting further negotiations, aiming at a new framework agreement as soon as possible. Visa-free regimes with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have proved that they bring tangible results for their citizens. Ministers recognized Armenia's and Azerbaijan's desire to continue the visa liberalization dialogue and expect further steps in that direction. They also expressed hope for relaunching negotiations and finalizing the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement with Belarus and welcomed the signing of the Mobility Partnership

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<sup>50</sup> “Joint Statement of the Heads of Government.”

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Michal Kořan, “Debating V4: Divided we fall,” *Cepolicy* (2014), accessed March 4, 2018, [www.cepolicy.org/publications/debating-v4-michal-koran](http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/debating-v4-michal-koran).

<sup>53</sup> Najšlová, “The Countries of the Eastern Partnership,” 197.

with the EU by Minsk. Last but not least, this V4 and EaP meeting stressed the importance of the Eastern Partnership's multilateral dimension in strengthening cooperation among the partners themselves as well as with the V4 and the EU, including territorial, especially cross-border, cooperation. The V4 partners agreed that supporting sustainable development along the EU's external borders, reducing differences in living standards, addressing common security challenges and enhancing people-to-people contacts across these borders could only be effective if cross-border cooperation programs remain high on the agenda.<sup>54</sup> All these results and statements are in accordance with the strategy of the EU foreign policy towards the EaP states, which means that both the V4 countries and Germany are able to find ways for a more intensive and effective ENP.

## Conclusions

The topic of the EaP is still open and up-to-date, yet it is marginalized due to more severe problems and present challenges that the EU must face, such as the refugee and migrant crisis. The V4 countries and Germany seem to be close partners in the EaP case. They all are interested in support and financial aid for and transformation of these six EaP states. Thus, there are many opportunities for cooperation between the V4 countries and Germany in EaP. There is a consensus across the entire German political spectrum regarding the V4 role in EaP. In this respect, V4 states are expected to serve as a source of inspiration, as a success story of political and economic transformation, and should play the role of knowledge providers to EaP states. German expectations are not in contradiction with the V4 states' preferences. In recent years, the V4 countries have indeed shared their experience with the EaP states in the areas of democratization and strengthening the market economy. In other words, they have followed a policy that is generally appreciated by Berlin.

Moreover, the geopolitical location of these states in the center of Europe and their proximity to the states of the EaP contribute to the further development of the aforementioned regional cooperation in the V4+ format. As such, the EaP does not belong to the problematic issues between Germany and the V4, and the involved countries can benefit from it.

The only departure from this common line are Poland's occasional attempts to conceive the EaP as a tool which would promote future EU enlargement, which is clearly in direct contradiction to German current

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<sup>54</sup> "Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group on the Occasion of the Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 and the Eastern Partnership Countries. Strategic challenges of the Eastern Partnership before the Brussels Summit," Visegrad Group (2017), accessed March 4, 2018, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/selected-events-in-2017-17020/joint-statement-of-the-170904.3>.

preferences. Germany encourages the EaP countries to emulate the example of the V4 as regards the process of political and economic transformation, however, the EaP countries are not supposed to expect to join the EU. Poland is aware of the German position and is not ready to seriously promote an opposite idea that would be directed against German interests. Overall, the EaP is definitely not an apple of discord between Germany and the V4 and it does not threaten the intensive cooperation between them.