

Opportunities and Challenges for V4 plus Japan Relations in the Post-Brexit EU¹

Boštjan Bertalanič (Josai University)

Abstract

This article traces the historical development of Visegrad 4 (V4) plus Japan relations through the various stages of EU reforms after the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, it evaluates the potential opportunities and prospects that await in the coming years of the post-Brexit era for the V4 plus Japan cooperation format. The basic proposition of the article is built on the notion that the EU dimension of the V4 identity represents one of the key determinants for the V4 plus Japan framework, including its scope, intensity, and direction of cooperation.

Key words: Visegrad 4 (V4), Japan, European Union (EU)

Introduction

The first time I considered the relationship between the Visegrad Group and Japan was during my early college days in the 1990s. A visiting Japanese professor who knew that I was majoring in political science approached me with a question about the significance of the Visegrad Four (V4) initiative for Japan. At that time, Slovenia, my home country, was considering becoming the fifth member, and I was aware of the public discussion concerning the potential risks and benefits of joining another regional format soon after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Based on Slovenia's decision to remain outside of the group and somehow understanding the reasons for that, I imagined that the V4 was part of the political transition related to the post-Cold War reordering of Europe and that when this ended, so would the initiative. As for the role of Japan and its relationship with the Visegrad Group, I was not able to say much.

¹ This paper was presented at the 2018 EAJRN (Europe Japan Advanced Research Network) Conference titled "EU-Japan Future Partnership: Ready for the Big Bang"?, held on June 8-9, 2018, in Stockholm, Sweden.

However, now, almost two decades later, I find myself addressing similar questions, and my answers have, of course, changed. Since the early 1990s, the global order as well as the geopolitical situation in Europe has evolved. The Visegrad Group is more relevant than ever. Quite opposite to my predictions, it further strengthened its presence in the EU and has managed to reformulate the concept of Central Europe. My understanding of Japan's relations with Central and Eastern Europe has evolved as well. In the past few years, my association with the Josai Institute for Central European Studies (JICES) in Tokyo has put me in a position where I am exposed to various initiatives and cooperation programs between the V4 and Japan.² Although the Institute has worked as a bridge between Japan and the Visegrad Group mostly in the areas of education and academics, it has also played an assisting role in the official relations between the V4 and the Japanese government. Furthermore, the Institute has gradually developed into one of the main centers for Japanese and foreign researchers pursuing knowledge not only on the V4 but on the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe as well. The Institute has also acted as a catalyst for the formation of a network of researchers from Asia and East Asia who have been sharing experiences about relations between Asia and Central and Eastern Europe. In this regard, Professor Nobuhiro Shiba, the Institute's Deputy Director, emphasized, on several occasions, that the idea that Central Europe should not be limited to the Visegrad Group, but it must encompass the neighboring countries as well.³ I believe the Institute has succeeded in providing a forum where a diverse group of researchers, scholars, and officials from both Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) and Japan can meet and discuss current issues and questions constructively. Nevertheless, the centrality of the V4 in our activities has not changed.

Among several issues the Institute has recently addressed, Brexit, with its possible impact on the future of Japan's relations with the EU and the Visegrad Group, has been at the center of our attention. In this sense, the Institute has taken an active part in several recent events where the implications of Brexit for the future of the V4 plus Japan framework have been discussed. For example, in February 2018, the Institute cooperated

² "Josai Institute for Central European Studies (JICES)," accessed June 3, 2018, <http://www.josai.jp/en/jicpas/jices/>.

³ Nobuhiro Shiba, "Josai Institute for Central European Studies, Message from the Deputy-Director," accessed June 1, 2018, <http://www.josai.jp/en/jicpas/jices/message/d-director.html>.

with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFAJ) to organize the annual V4 plus Japan Seminar on the political and economic implications of Brexit for Japan's relations with CEEC.⁴ The event in Tokyo was followed by the "Think Visegrad Mid-Term Conference" organized by the Hungarian Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT) in Budapest. More than forty experts from the V4 and other parts of the world, including Japan, gathered to discuss, among other things, the future of the Visegrad Group in the Post-Brexit EU. Two months before that, in December 2017, the Institute participated in the conference titled "V4 after Brexit: A New Opportunity for Japan and Europe?" also organized by IFAT. The present article is partially a result of my personal involvement in these discussions, especially those concerning the future of the V4 plus Japan cooperation after the finalization of Brexit.

The present article has two aims. First, I would like to trace the historical development of V4 plus Japan relations through the various stages of EU reforms after the end of the Cold War. Second, based on my personal involvement in the more recent debates and events about the future of V4 plus Japan relations after Brexit, I would like to evaluate the potential opportunities and prospects that await in the coming years for the V4 plus Japan format. The basic proposition of the article is built on the notion that the EU dimension of the V4 identity represents one of the key determinants for the V4 plus Japan framework, including its scope, intensity, and direction of cooperation. I also assume that the economic dimension of the partnership forms an inherent part of the Visegrad Group's EU dimension. I acknowledge the importance of the historical, geopolitical, and sociocultural determinants as well; however, given the impact of Brexit on the future development of the EU and its effect on the cooperation of V4 plus Japan, I will limit my analysis mostly to the EU context.

This article is organized into two sections. In the first section, I trace the major historical developments of Japan's relations with the V4 countries over the past twenty-five years. I suggest that the EU accession process be set as the main point of reference for tracing the key stages in the development of the V4 plus Japan cooperation framework. Here, I differentiate between the EU pre-accession and accession stage and the EU post-

⁴ Josai University, "Josai Co-Hosts Visegrad Group (V4) plus Japan Seminar 2018," accessed June 1, 2018, http://www.josai.jp/en/news/2018/20180209_e.html.

accession stage. In the second section, I will assess, in terms of their potential costs and benefits, the opportunities and challenges that Brexit presents for future relations between the V4 and Japan.

1. V4 plus Japan: Historical Context.

1.1. V4 plus Japan Relations in the EU Pre-Accession Period (1991–2003)

*Eastern Europe might as well have been on another planet during most of the history of the European Community. The existence of the Cold War and the hostility of the Soviet Union towards Western Europe helped cement European Integration. [. . .] In 1989, as the Cold War came to an end, the [European] Commission assumed responsibility for coordinating Western assistance to Central and Eastern Europe.*⁵

As Desmond Dinan emphasized, Eastern Europe has always been a determinant of European integration, despite half a century of ideological divisions. Moreover, when the Cold War ended, Eastern European priorities became clear. In the case of the former members of the Warsaw Pact, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland resuscitated the six-hundred-year-old Visegrad Triangle at the beginning of the 1990s and attempted to increase their political weight on their way to the European Union (EU) and NATO as a bloc.⁶ Their common history represented the base from which they began pursuing economic prosperity (in the EU) and security (through NATO). Membership in the EU (and NATO) for them represented the long-awaited “return back to Europe.”⁷

To distance them from Russia and ensure their process of democratization and transition to a market economy, Western countries provided various forms of assistance and guidance to the former Soviet Bloc countries. The EU played a decisive role and supported the Visegrad Group’s transition, mostly through the PHARE aid program (Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy), special trade and cooperation agreements,

⁵ Desmond Dinan, *Europe Recast: A History of European Union* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 257.

⁶ Andrea Schmidt, “Friends Forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration,” *Politics in Central Europe* 12, no. 3 (2016): 137.

⁷ Karen E. Smith, “Enlargement, the Neighbourhood, and European Order,” in *International Relations and the European Union*, ed. Christopher Hill and Michael Smith, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 300.

and the European Union Association Agreements (AA) that eventually led to EU membership.⁸

Japan also played its part. After the end of the Cold War, the Japanese government was quick to provide assistance to the CEEC for their political and economic transitions. For example, in 1991, Japan was one of the founding members of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The Japanese government also made considerable efforts to build preferable relations with countries in the years preceding EU enlargement and support the deepening of European integration. From 1994, the economic climate of the Visegrad Group began gradually improving, which eventually led to an overall strengthening of investments and economic development (Figure 1).

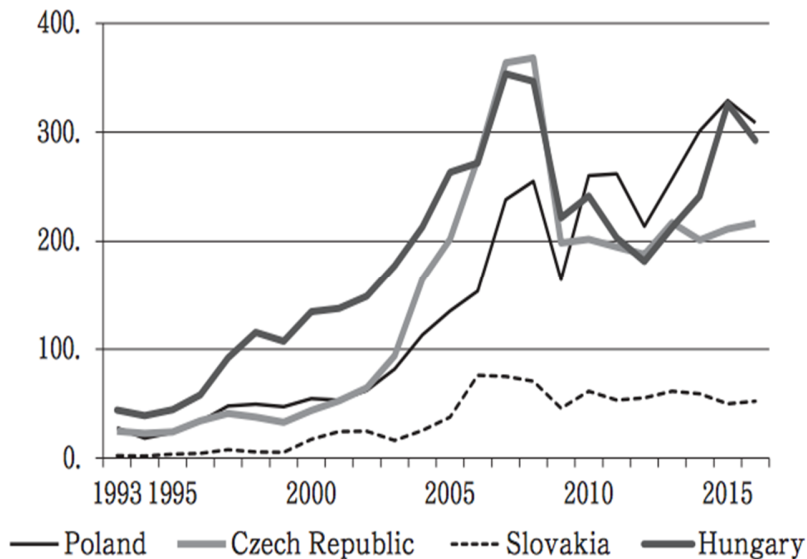


Figure 1: Trade turnover between Japan and the Visegrad Group between 1993 and 2016 (per billion Japanese yen).⁹

Hungary and the Czech Republic were already successful at attracting foreign investments in the mid-1990s. Poland and Slovakia were deemed to be riskier investment climates; however, as their EU accession processes became secured, the investment climates of the three members improved considerably. Slovakia was the only member that

⁸ Ibid., 301–4.

⁹ Sylwia Matusiak and Takashi Masuyama, “The Trade Relations between Japan and Visegrad Group Countries,” 城西大学経済経営紀要 36 (2018): 44, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/120006455256/en/>.

lagged behind.¹⁰ By 1996, Japanese-affiliated companies already operating in Western Europe started moving their operations into Eastern Europe and consequently strengthened their investments in the region. Towards the end of the 1990s, major Japanese automotive companies also moved in and further expanded their operations. Other manufacturing industries soon followed. Companies like Sony and Matsushita Electric announced plans to build full-scale factories in some of the V4 member states. By the time the European Commission launched the Agenda 2000 and fast-tracked several CEEC—including all V4 members—for EU membership, the Visegrad Group had already successfully redefined its position in Central Europe.¹¹ In 1999, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary also became members of NATO.

As the benefits of EU (and NATO) membership (i.e., market access, standardization of business procedures and rules, security) were becoming clearer,¹² the Japanese government began considering the opportunities offered by the Union's enlargement to the east. In support of business and based on strategic calculations, political leadership initiated closer political dialogues with CEEC, especially the Visegrad Group. In August 2003, Prime Minister (PM) Junichiro Koizumi visited Poland and the Czech Republic and signed the “Joint Statement towards Strategic Partnership” with both countries, which stipulated the modality of long-term bilateral relations.¹³ Among the several issues PM Koizumi raised during his visit to Poland and the Czech Republic was the need to further strengthen consultation and cooperation between Japan and the Visegrad Group. His initiative later evolved into what we now call the V4 plus Japan framework.

¹⁰ Marin A. Marinov, Svetla T. Marinova, and Ken Morita, “Internationalization of Japanese MNCs in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Journal of East-West Business* 9, no. 3–4 (2004): 49–51, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marin_Marinov2/publication/232922056_Internationalization_of_Japanese_Multinational_Corporations_in_Central_and_Eastern_Europe/links/5484970f0cf24356db60e01e/Internationalization-of-Japanese-Multinational-Corporations-

¹¹ G. D. Hook et al., *Japan's International Relations: Politics, Economics and Security*, Sheffield Centre for Japanese Studies/Routledge Series (Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 321–22.

¹² Richard E. Baldwin et al., “The Costs and Benefits of Eastern Enlargement: The Impact on the EU and Central Europe,” *Economic Policy* 12, no. 24 (1997): 125–76.

¹³ “MOFA: Diplomatic Bluebook 2004,” accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2004/index.html>.

1.2. V4 plus Japan Relations in the EU Post-Accession Period (2004–2016)

In 2004, as the EU experienced its “big-bang” enlargement with the addition of ten new member states, Japan’s relations with the Visegrad Group entered a new stage of development. During the first period, which spanned from the end of the Cold War until PM Koizumi’s visit to Poland and the Czech Republic in 2003, relations were driven mostly by the business community from the bottom up. As the V4 nations moved closer to becoming members of the EU, and as economic relations with Japan strengthened, a gradual need for greater institutionalization of the framework emerged. For example, during the October 2004 visit of Hungarian PM Ferenc Gyurcsány to Tokyo, “[b]oth sides expressed their appreciation of the results of the regional cooperation under the framework of the Visegrad Group [. . .] and their intention to further promote dialogue within the framework of V4 plus Japan.”¹⁴ PM Koizumi was pleased with the overall progress, and it was from this point forward that the V4 plus Japan framework was upgraded and began a progressively more structured dialogue. From the 2004 Foreign Ministers’ Political Consultations in Bratislava, the V4 plus Japan foreign ministers and political directors comprised the main pillar of cooperation between the two sides.

By 2007, PM Shinzo Abe had formed his first government and introduced several initiatives in an attempt to promote a more strategic and proactive Japanese foreign policy. PM Abe’s “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” was promoted as a new pillar of the Japanese diplomatic strategy. Surprisingly, PM Abe did not share Koizumi’s views about the progress made in relation to the Visegrad Group. Even though cooperation between the two further expanded into policy coordination concerning official development assistance

¹⁴ Junichiro Koizumi, “Joint Statement Between Japan and the Republic of Hungary, Speeches and Statements by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi,” accessed June 2, 2018, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/koizumispeech/2004/10/25seimej_e.html.

(ODA) and tourism, the new strategy still described the V4 plus Japan framework as weak.¹⁵

After less than a year in power, PM Abe suddenly resigned. The collapse of Lehman Brothers and the consequent global financial crisis exacerbated domestic political instabilities, and Japan slipped into a period of turmoil. In his speech at Humboldt University in Germany in May 2009, then PM Taro Aso attempted to resuscitate the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” and, echoing the words of Abe, pledged to strengthen cooperation with the V4 nations. However, during the general election for the House of Representatives in the summer of the same year, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost the election to the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Contrary to public expectations, DPJ proved to be unfit for government and brought even more confusion into Japan’s domestic and foreign affairs. Due to the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, some of the planned events with the Visegrad Group had to be rescheduled. Nevertheless, foreign ministers met in Budapest, where they began discussions on the prospect of opening negotiations on a free trade agreement between the EU and Japan. Among other topics, they explored the possibility of cooperation in energy efficiency and the development of renewable energies.¹⁶

In 2012, it was again PM Abe (during his second term in office) that reinvigorated relations between both sides. A decade after PM Koizumi’s initiative, PM Abe followed in Koizumi’s footsteps and visited Warsaw for the tenth anniversary of the V4 plus Japan cooperation. The Warsaw Summit concluded with a launch of a new initiative labeled the “Partnership Based on Common Values for the 21st Century.” The Summit marked a new evolutionary stage in the relationship and further expanded cooperation into areas such as security, science and technology, and environmental and energy policy. The leaders also emphasized the importance of keeping up high-level dialogue on a regular basis, mostly through V4 plus Japan summits and foreign ministers’ meetings. They also expressed their intention to call for periodic dialogues between the V4 Presidency and Ambassadors of Japan accredited to the V4 countries and dialogues between the V4 Ambassadors accredited

¹⁵ “MOFA: Diplomatic Bluebook 2007,” chap. 1, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2007/index.html>.

¹⁶ Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Tokyo, “Visegrad Group and Japan,” accessed June 3, 2018, https://tokio.msz.gov.pl/en/bilateral_cooperation/politics/visegrad_group_and_japan/.

to Japan and Japanese authorities. Furthermore, both sides expressed their intention to establish the V4 plus Japan Policy Planning Dialogue to consult and coordinate on major international issues. The Warsaw Summit concluded by designating 2014 as the V4 plus Japan Exchange Year and appointing goodwill ambassadors to assist in the active promotion of people-to-people exchanges in culture, education, and tourism.¹⁷ Two successful seminars in Tokyo followed: a seminar on Eastern partnership (2013) and one on security (2014).

As a result, V4 plus Japan cooperation diversified and expanded. Under the second Abe administration, domestic politics consolidated, and Japan gradually adopted a more proactive diplomatic strategy that prioritized the further strengthening of relations with European institutions, especially its regional frameworks. For example, the 2014 MOFAJ annual diplomatic report emphasized that:

Japan needs to further broaden Japan-Europe relations by strengthening cooperation with European-based institutions such as the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and European regional frameworks such as the Visegrad Group plus Japan (V4+Japan) and the Nordic-Baltic Eight plus Japan (NB8+Japan).¹⁸

By 2015, when the ministers of foreign affairs of the Visegrad Group and Japan met for the sixth time, the dialogue evolved further and began showing signs of strategic coordination, especially on issues of central importance to the EU-Japan dialogue. Topics including COP21, security cooperation with NATO, migration issues, and the prospects for finalizing the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) topped the partnership agenda.¹⁹ EU internal problems like the UK's decision to leave the Union (Brexit) did not appear on the agenda until 2017. Brexit, however, became the lead topic of discussions under the current 2017/2018 Hungarian V4 Presidency, which organized several events in

¹⁷ "Visegrad Group plus Japan Joint Statement: Partnership Based on Common Values for the 21st Century," June 16, 2013, Warsaw, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000006466.pdf>.

¹⁸ "MOFA: Diplomatic Bluebook 2014," chap. 2, accessed May 31, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/pp/page22e_000566.html.

¹⁹ "Joint Press Statement of the 6th Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group plus Japan, Luxemburg, 5 November, 2015," accessed June 3, 2018, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000109210.pdf>.

which the impact of Brexit on the Visegrad Group's relations with third-party states was evaluated.

2. V4 plus Japan in the Post-Brexit Period: Challenges and Opportunities

In December 2017, the Hungarian Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT) convened a conference titled “V4 after Brexit: a new opportunity for Japan and Europe?” One of the main conclusions that I was able to take away from this event was that the V4's relationship with Japan depends on the future positioning and status of the V4 within the EU. Brexit will probably create a new power balance within the Union and consequently affect the V4 members (and their relationship with Japan). We can already see this happening in terms of internal divisions in the V4 regarding how to address Brexit. This brings me to my beginning proposition that any serious consideration of the future development and direction of cooperation between Japan and the Visegrad Group must be considered within the context of the latter's EU identity. The EU membership of the V4 countries was the original and most important determinant that charted the evolution and growth of their relations with Japan. As the relationship evolved, it became less asymmetrical and shifted into a weak partnership. The evolution of the V4 plus Japan cooperation into a strong partnership requires that both sides establish a structured, multilayered, and diversified dialogue, identify common interests and goals, and begin working on policy coordination in all key areas, including security, economic, and scientific cooperation. This relationship has come a long way from its asymmetrical one of the 1990s, when, although a rudimentary dialogue was established, it was not strategic, and lacked significant policy coordination.

During the abovementioned discussions about the future of the V4 plus Japan framework in the post-Brexit era, two sets of opportunities have been consistently mentioned. In the economic area, all V4 members nurture high expectations for the implementation of the EPA. The trade pact is regarded as a guarantee for the further strengthening of economic relations between the two sides. Additionally, with the possibility of a withdrawal (complete or partial) of the UK from the common market, V4 members expect a significant redirecting of Japanese foreign direct investments (FDI) from

the UK to Central Europe. One can sense a relatively high degree of confidence regarding the overall ability to attract and absorb Japanese investments, despite the possibility that the bloc members might have to compete among themselves for the same opportunities. This inevitability raises the question of group solidarity, which, in my opinion, still poses a considerable challenge. The Visegrad countries' solidarity has not been a constant and carries both opportunities and risks. For example, in matters related to migration, the members act as a cohesive unit and present a common front in Brussels. Brexit, on the other hand, proved to be a rather divisive matter. So was, for example, the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. Although the Visegrad Group brands itself as a relatively compact association linked by geography, history, and culture, its Central European identity is still considerably incohesive. Moreover, their interests are not completely aligned, which could eventually lead to divisions. Thus, to enhance the V4's position in the post-Brexit EU, emphasis will have to be "placed especially on the deepening of regional cohesion and trust among the V4 countries."²⁰

In the political domain, the lack of any form of critical self-appraisal regarding the populist-authoritarian turn among some of the group members has been surprising. The gradual distancing of the Visegrad Group from the EU mainstream, and even its disregard of some of the core principles emanating from basic EU values, could push the bloc further away from the core into the periphery of European politics.²¹ In terms of V4 plus Japan relations, this could be an unfortunate development and could lead to a devaluation of the partnership. As for Brexit's impact on the political position of the V4 in the Union, discussions have often hinted at the possibility of the V4 replacing the UK and becoming the third power center of the Union. From Japan's perspective, such a development would most likely increase the overall value and significance of the V4 plus Japan framework; however, given the unstable nature of the Visegrad solidarity, such a development is less likely. Another issue that has not been emphasized in the discussion but has been raised often among US observers is successful V4 cooperation in defense. The successful

²⁰ Tomáš Stražay, "Internal and External Aspects of the Visegrad 4 Cooperation," in *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives under Crisis Conditions*, ed. Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (New York: Routledge, 2018), 216.

²¹ Attila Agh, "The Crisis and 'Regionalization' in the Visegrad States: The Identity Politics of East-Central Europe in the New World Order," in *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives under Crisis Conditions*, ed. Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (New York: Routledge, 2018), 217–32.

formation of the V4 Battlegroup has already led to further planning aimed at establishing a permanent modular force by 2030.²² With the progressive changes that have occurred recently in Japan's security and defense policy, the V4 defense initiatives could provide an additional opportunity for the further expansion of cooperation. This has already been mentioned in ministerial meetings, in which the need for practical cooperation in a wide range of areas including peace support, interoperability, maritime security, nonproliferation, cyber defense, hybrid warfare, crisis management, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief has been reaffirmed.²³

Conclusion

In the present article, I traced the major historical developments of Japan's relations with the V4 countries over the past twenty-five years. I argued that the EU accession process be set as the main point of reference for tracing the key stages in the development of the V4 plus Japan cooperation framework. The basic assumption of the article rests on the notion that the EU dimension of the Visegrad identity represents one of the key determinants for understanding the V4 plus Japan framework, including its scope, intensity, and direction of cooperation. I differentiated between the EU pre-accession and accession stage and the EU post-accession stage and described the gradual development of an initially asymmetrical and simple V4–Japan cooperation framework that gradually evolved into a multilayered strategic partnership.

As for the future challenges and opportunities for the V4 plus Japan relationship in the Post-Brexit period, I summarized the current debate in terms of the economic and political impact of Brexit on the partnership. From the Visegrad perspective, there is a disproportionately positive expectation that Brexit and the EPA will help strengthen the economic relationship on both sides. The political implications of Brexit for the V4 plus Japan framework tend to receive less attention. Although Brexit has put Japan into a

²² Anna Molnar and Zoltan Szenes, "Cooperation or Integration? The New Defence Initiatives in the Visegrad Group," in *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives under Crisis Conditions*, ed. Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (New York: Routledge, 2018), 233–55.

²³ "Joint Press Statement of the 6th Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group plus Japan, Luxembourg, 5 November, 2015."

position where it will have to negotiate a compromise between the UK and the EU, the Visegrad Group countries tend to see the situation favorably. There are indeed several opportunities (e.g., in defense) where political cooperation could be further improved, despite the dangers posed by marginalization, de-Europeanization, and divisions among the Visegrad countries.

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