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The development of military cooperation as part of multinational units among Visegrad countries (V4) in 2023

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The geopolitical location of the Visegrad Group countries at the centre of NATO's eastern flank makes them an important keystone in the security processes of the Central and Eastern European region. The military dimension of the V4 cooperation has been its key element since the platform's inception when the countries coordinated their efforts to join NATO. As a result of the war in Ukraine and NATO's policy of adapting to the new security environment, military cooperation among the V4 countries is gaining renewed importance. In 2023, the countries continued and deepened international cooperation in the framework of the European Union Battle Group, NATO's Multinational Division Centre Command (HQ MND-C), and others.

European Union Battlegroups. European Union Battlegroups (EUBGs) are military units of the EU at the tactical level. Their creation was conceived as a result of experience earned from Operation Artemis, the EU-led military mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2003. The groups became fully operational in 2007. The units were to be national or multinational, with around 1,500 troops (although from 2014 the groups were more often brigade-sized) and capable of carrying out Petersberg tasks within a 6,000 km radius of Brussels. The BGs are intended to be the first and primary military force to be deployed in a crisis area. Their readiness for deployment is defined as 5 to 10 days after the unanimous decision of the Council of the EU to launch the operation. Two battle groups should be on standby every six months. The effectiveness of the EU's military formations has never been tested, although there were two opportunities to do so in 2008.

Visegrad Battlegroup on stand-by. In the first half of 2023, the Visegrad Battle Group (V4BG) was on duty under the umbrella of the EUBG. This was the third stand-by in the history of this unit. V4 cooperation in this format was initiated as early as 2013, when, following a joint V4 - Weimar Triangle Summit, officials announced that the V4BG would be established and would become operational in the first half of 2016. The group eventually comprised more than 3,900 troops from the V4 countries and Ukraine. The group was again on standby in the second half of 2019, with a strength of more than 2,200 troops from the V4 countries and Croatia. Poland served as the framework nation for all three standbys. This is mainly due to the country having objectively the largest military potential and its role as the de facto military leader of the region. Prior to the launch of the V4BG, Poland served in the role of framework nation on two occasions; in 2010 as part of a group established together with Germany, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Latvia, and in 2013 as part of the Weimar BG. It should be noted, however, that the Czech Republic has also been relatively active in the EUBGs in previous periods and was even the framework nation for the Czechoslovak BG in 2009.

The development of cooperation within the V4BG after 2013 and the simultaneous cessation of cooperation under the umbrella of the other EUBGs should be seen in the context of the intensification of political relations within the V4 as well as the appreciation of the Visegrad vector in the foreign policy of the respective V4 countries. It should be noted, however, that both the Czech Republic and Hungary were also involved on three and two occasions, respectively, in the standby of other EUBGs during the period 2016-2023.

It has become regular practice to invite contingents from partner countries to cofound the V4BG. The selection of these partners reveals the priorities of the V4 countries and, as in the case of the participation of the Ukrainian contingent in 2016, is even a form of strategic communication and Europeanisation of the partner states. In 2023,

officers from Croatia and Latvia joined the V4BG. The two-time participation of Croatian troops in the V4BG standby should be seen in the wider context of the country's involvement in the process of strengthening NATO's eastern flank, particularly through cooperation with the V4 countries. Contingents from Croatia form NATO's BG Battalion, stationed in Orzysz, Poland, and in Tata, Hungary, as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence. Croatian officers also contribute to the MND-C headquarters in Székesfehérvár, Hungary. Furthermore, Croatia's military cooperation with the V4 is another example of the work of the V4+ format, which pursues the V4 political agenda in non-military dimensions such as EU enlargement policy, especially in the Western Balkans, energy policy, or EU cohesion policy.

Towards Rapid Deployment Capacity. Past experience of EU activity, or rather inactivity, gives rise to criticism of the EU's combat capabilities. As noted above, no EUBG has ever fulfilled its statutory mission, although this is mainly due to the nature of decision-making in the Council of the EU. The failure to meet the requirement to keep two BGs on standby every six months is also a problem. Due to the lack of political will of the EU MS to keep a BG on standby, there have been regular gaps in previous years. In 2023, however, it happened for the first time that after V4BG finished its stand-by, no other unit took over its tasks for the second half of the year. This significantly reduces the EU's credibility in terms of building its own combat capabilities, especially in the context of the ambitious plan to elevate the form of the BG. As envisioned in the Strategic Compass adopted in March 2022, the EUBGs are to evolve into a so-called Rapid Deployment Capability (RDC). The RDCs are expected to have a force of around 5,000 troops, be on stand-by on an annual basis, and be jointly funded at EU level.

Visegrad Group cooperation in NATO initiatives. Cooperation between the V4 countries within NATO's multinational units has also deepened in recent months. On 31 March 2023, HQ MND-C reached initial operational capability. The founding countries of the unit are Croatia, Slovakia, and Hungary, but officers from Poland also contribute to the command. On 31 July 2023, Brigadier General Tibor Kralik from Slovakia took command of the unit. The establishment of the HQ was extremely important in the context of the command structure on NATO's eastern flank. HQ MND-C assumed operational responsibility for the central area between the division-level commands already established in the region, in Elbląg, Poland, and Bucharest, Romania, which are almost 1,200 km apart in a straight line. HQ MND-C has thus become a kind of gap-filler.

In response to Russia's large-scale offensive in Ukraine, NATO decided to create an additional four battalion BGs on the Alliance's eastern flank. Two of these new units have been established in the V4 countries. They are the aforementioned Multinational enhanced Vigilance Activity Battle Group (MN eVA BG) stationed in Tata, and the Multinational Battle Group stationed at the training centre in Lešť, Slovakia (MN BG SK). It is noteworthy that in 2022, the Hungarian government restricted the stationing of NATO units on its territory to the area west of the Danube, but at the same time agreed to the transport of allied troops through its territory without specifying similar restrictions. These restrictions are of rather narrative and symbolic character. From an operational point of view, the permission to transport troops through Hungarian territory is more relevant to NATO activities in the region. However, the decision by Viktor Orban's government does not foster an environment of confidence in V4. The second unit mentioned above, the MN BG SK, is yet another example of intensive cooperation between V4 countries, as the framework state of the MN BG SK is the Czech Republic. In March 2023, MN BG SK achieved combat readiness as a result of the Slovak Shield certification exercises. These exercises were another example of V4 military cooperation as, in addition to the countries forming MN BG SK, units from Poland and Hungary also took part.

Conclusions. In the face of the V4's political problems, which stem primarily from their divergent positions on the war in Ukraine ([Komentarze IEŚ 899](#)), the military dimension remains a constant pillar of the grouping's cooperation. In the first half of 2023, it was even intensified both at the bilateral level, between individual V4 states, and at the level of the V4 as a whole. Moreover, military initiatives are becoming a form of strengthening the V4+ format, which offers the potential to build broader political coalitions in non-military dimensions as well. The need to develop combat capabilities across NATO's entire eastern flank makes military cooperation among the V4 countries occupying its central area increasingly important and likely to continue in the near future.

A constant challenge to the cohesiveness of the grouping, however, remains the question of Hungary's attitude to the security structure in Central and Eastern Europe, including in particular the role of the United States in the region.