

The role of the Visegrad 4 Member States in Countering Terrorism in the region and in Europe.

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The decision to cooperate on joint efforts to counter terrorism or to pool parts of sovereignty to institute mutual defence policy relating to preventing the rise of radical groups or networks is never an easy task, even between those countries or regions that are **politically, geographically and strategically** close to one another. Matters related to countering terrorism and security are intrinsically interrelated to national defence and foreign policies, which, most governments prefer to decide on their own. But what happens if a security threat, such as terrorism, happens to be a problem that encompasses borders and cooperation between countries which is the only way to go to stand a chance to counter it? How does the situation look in the Visegrad 4 (V4) countries?

Context.

The V4 countries: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary have only been able to decide on their security, foreign and defence policies independently since 1989. Before 1989, none of the four was able to take the decision on this matter on their own, all being under the Soviet control. Once freed from the USSR regime, these countries have all turned westward for assistance and direction – first towards **the European Union, then OSCE and NATO**. Today, all V4 are members of these international security bodies, which provides security shelter from external threats and allows cooperation in case of international conflict.

How are V4 member states faring in terms of regional threats, especially coming from radical groups and extremists? How do V4 deal with counterterrorism policies on a regional level? Is terrorism even truly a threat to V4 member states?

Terrorism Threats in the V4.

It has been reported that V4 seldom report any **police or counterterrorism** efforts related to arrests, trials or convictions of persons or groups that would have links to terrorism. This does not mean that the threat does not exist nor is taken under consideration by the regional governments. It varies in nature to the terrorist incidents in the Western Europe or in the United States. In fact, V4 member states face an ongoing challenge of non-Islamist terrorism, with right-wing extremism and Islamic radicalism present in the region and **increasing in activity** in the recent years. Indeed, comparing with the Western European countries dealing with jihadist attack in the recent years and months, the V4 extremist scene looks **relatively uneventful**. Unfortunately, however, the region is not impervious to extremism and the

V4 member states countries are aware of the fact that they need counter-measures. These measures need to respond in an adequate manner to the type of terrorism that is present in the region specifically as dismissing the necessity to invest in counter terrorism measures. Just because terrorist attacks don't happen as often as they do in Western Europe it would **be naïve and extremely risky**.

Nowadays, V4 have a difficult time to find common ground with other EU member states especially in the context of security. In this climate, if they want to be prepared to counter terrorism and be equipped to act quickly when necessary, the best solution for them is **to boost counterterrorism cooperation** at the regional V4 level. Additionally, due to their geographical, political and societal proximity the V4 countries face similar extremist threats, it is, therefore, reasonable for them to cooperate to counter these challenges together, sharing lessons learnt, best practices and pooling resources.

Indeed, common challenge experienced by the V4 is cross-border extremism, especially coming from the far-right networks, who are very popular in the region. Due to easy traveling options within the region, the far-right groups operating in the area support each other in an active manner, and often travel to meet, organize assemblies and conferences to propagate their radical ideas. **Cross-border Islamic extremism** is also present in the region. As per the case with the far-right groups, the freedom of movement across the EU enables these radical networks to cross borders and travel from the Western Europe over to the V4. Indeed, recently, it has been reported that V4 is becoming a useful transit zone **between the Missile East or Central Asia and Western Europe** for radical and often militant Islamic extremist groups. In this situation, V4 must realize that they play a vital role in stopping the flow of terrorism into Europe, as they are positioned **at a crossroads** and are able to drive a change in the context of the level of terrorist threat in Europe. To achieve this goal, the four countries need to coordinate counterterrorist efforts, reflecting combination of national law enforcement and intelligence bodies.

It is also necessary to mention that, aware of the fertile breeding ground for far right in the V4, many of the extremist networks are keen on influencing or cooperating with the regional radical groups to further the extreme right ideals. This phenomenon is also taking place amongst the Islamic radical groups – as they are more active in Western Europe, aiming to spread their reach towards the East. These radicals often consider that, since in the Central and Eastern Europe region terrorist attacks are less frequent, these countries are less equipped

to prevent terrorism. It is, therefore, **an attractive area** to establish themselves without suffering law enforcement probing.

The growing cross-border movement of extremist groups in Europe makes a priority for the V4 to coordinate strategic efforts to work together to be better prepared to counter the issue.

Countering Terrorism in V4. V4 Cooperation.

The close cooperation and communication between the V4 member states provides for a positive basis to develop and adequate, joint stance against terrorism in the region. The fact that the approach to and the perception of extremism is similar amongst the V4 makes it easier for the 4 to agree on an approach that will sit well amongst all members. The V4 are of similar opinion regarding the need to safeguard the rule of law; they also agree on which groups are considered extremist in nature, which is not always an easy task, especially as many of them fall within the 'grey area' with different countries **understanding extremism in a different way**.

Also, the counterterrorism measures at hand are already similar in nature and implementation methods within the V4. This is partially due to the V4 being members of the international institutions which set standards as to how to address these threats. The agreement on the definition of extremism, the adherence to international CT standards are a useful basis to start from to improve the V4 counterterrorism policy. The cultural and historical proximity are additional advantageous points that will help the V4 in cooperating effectively to counter terrorism. Lastly, the fact that the region grapples with a similar branch of terrorism (**Islamic and far right extremism**) makes it easier to prioritize dealing with this threat rather than terrorism in a more general sense. Most importantly, the V4 still have some time before Islamic and the far-right extremism are as prevalent in the region as they are in Western Europe. The V4 should **seize this opportunity** and act quickly before the situation in the CEE region gets out of hand in the context of terrorism.

What is the Path Forward?

The V4 should prioritize regional cooperation. The regional governments know their political, societal and economic landscape, which does not differ in a distinctive manner all throughout the four countries. As a result, making a tailored counterterrorism

approach responding to the specific extremist threats most relevant to the region is of relative ease.

The V4 should also **expand their coordination** to include Europol as well as the EU institutions that are specifically dealing with CT. Moreover, they should disseminate their stance on countering terrorism through information networks such as is Radicalisation Awareness Network to promote expertise exchange.

Most importantly, the V4 should utilize the fact that they have a largely positive experience cooperating on a political level, which has proven a very difficult area on the EU level. Indeed, the V4 share similar political priorities and stand closely to one another on diverse political issues. Effective political and strategic coordination amongst the V4 should be put to use to further effective CT policies on a regional level. Starting from a point where all 4 countries have a common approach to terrorism and have working relations on political level is not a given on the international arena. This advantage should be used to **set an example to the Western Europe**.

This advantageous starting point along with the important geographical positioning, crucial in stopping the extremist groups' transit into Europe should make the V4 countries realize that they need to be proactive in leading the **CT policy and strategy debate on a European level**. The political agreement between the 4 could set an example that could instantiate increased efforts in achieving the same level of coordination by the rest of Europe and the EU. The V4 need to work to shift the European perception on the region being passively adhering to international and European CT standards; rather, they need to active show that they have the capabilities to steer the counterterrorism debate by providing an example of effective CT planning on a regional level.



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