

# Military Training and Education: an Opportunity for V4 Co-Operation

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**Abstract:** *The Visegrad Group needs success stories if its defence co-operation is to develop. The recent differences between Poland and the rest of the region, as well as the closing window of opportunity to improve interoperability through the ISAF mission, make the hunger for concrete examples of co-operation even more urgent. Education and training projects are not only comparatively easily to implement in terms of time and money, but also represent a way of bringing the region's civilian and military leaders closer together in terms of strategic thinking. Regional defence collaboration is also one of the ways to materialize NATO's Smart Defence agenda. For the whole region, the way to keep Visegrad defence cooperation alive is not straightforward and certain, but it is likely to prove rewarding in the long term. It presents not only a chance to keep the whole region better prepared militarily, but also to build a more cohesive strategic awareness, thanks to intensive communication at all levels.*

**Key Words:** *military training, exercises, defence cooperation, defense planning, education, armed forces, Visegrad, interoperability, modernization, NATO*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent eruption of hostilities in the eastern parts of Ukraine, have had damaging psychological consequences on the cohesion of the Visegrad Group, which might, in turn, result in a slow-down of the regional defence co-operation. Poland's heightened threat perception and its determination to adjust foreign, security and defence policies to today's new reality have turned out to be in sharp contrast to the hesitations of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. The Baltic and Nordic countries seem, now, to be more natural partners to Poland in terms of strategic thinking and defence geography. Yet, it would be a mistake not to further invest in the Visegrad defence co-operation (VIDEFCO) and, instead, let it fade out.

Despite all the differences in wording and political messaging vis-à-vis Russia, the deeds of Poland's three partners suggest that, at the end of the day, they know where they belong. To this end: At the NATO summit, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia all promised to significantly increase their defence budgets and invest in military modernisation; they have repeatedly agreed with the adoption of the EU's sanctions against Russia; and Slovakia is helping Ukraine in bypassing a major part of its import needs through a reverse gas flow. Also, the three countries are committed to this regional co-operation more than ever before: They know it increases their influence in Europe and, more importantly, that it is critical tool for upgrading their militaries. For Poland, the way to keep VIDEFCO alive is not straightforward and certain, but it is likely to prove rewarding in the long term. It presents not only a chance

to keep the whole region better prepared militarily, but also to build a more cohesive strategic awareness, thanks to intensive communication at all levels.

Regional defence collaboration is also one of the ways to materialize NATO's Smart Defence agenda. It makes sense in many areas, ranging from acquisitions to air-policing. The countries of the Visegrad region have a lot in common: similar capability gaps; shared historic experience; and perceived regional identity. Moreover, defence collaboration between these countries has been very high on the political agenda in the last couple of years; political leaders already work together on their positions and working groups are meeting to find solutions to the region's problems. Even though much has been identified in terms of possible co-operation areas, a more in-depth look is needed to recommend specific projects.

In 2012, the Central European Policy Institute (CEPI) published the Defence Austerity in the Visegrad Region (DAV4) report, authored by the region's senior security and defence experts, including acting and former chiefs of defence, deputy ministers, ambassadors and think-tankers. The document identified fundamental principles of successful regional defence co-operation and provided the Visegrad governments with a list of prospective project opportunities.

It included projects in the fields of training and education, such as joint centers for helicopter pilots and countering IEDs, and tighter collaboration among defence academies, eventually leading to their merger. Report argued that joint projects in the fields of training and education would raise less sensitivity than cooperation in other military activities, yet two years later duplicities and low-quality still afflict this segment.

This paper aims to reignite the debate by providing thought-provoking ideas on how we can produce the needed military skills more effectively and more efficiently. It is timely for several reasons. The VIDEFCO now needs successes stories more than ever before to rebuild trust: Poland aims to come up with a plan to reform of its entire military education system next year. Also, the end of the decade-long ISAF mission, which to some extent substituted missing training opportunities at home, is upon us. It is imperative that the region and the alliance remain vigilant and coherent, especially when the security environment is deteriorating.

No country in the region would operate on its own in the case of crisis within or outside NATO borders. The ability to collaborate with allies in the theatre of operation – the 'interoperability of forces' – is therefore of utmost importance. This not only includes compatibility of equipment and ammunition, but also removing language barriers and adopting common operational procedures. It will be too late to start teaching allied forces to fight together once conflict breaks out.

## **2. SPEAKING ONE LANGUAGE**

The whole process of education and training in the Visegrad countries needs to be organized in a way that only one set of standards is used. It would be a waste of energy and resources to prepare a soldier according to national standards and then retrain him before deployment. It would not only limit our ability to contribute to crisis management operations, but also diminish our readiness for NATO Article V situation. The Visegrad countries therefore need to approximate their educational programmes so that the skills of their graduates are fully compatible. "NATO commands need interchangeable soldiers," a seasoned commander said to us. Common regional curricula and procedures based on NATO standards should be adopted. In this regard, any international co-operation – be it a joint course or an exercise – is desirable because it improves the use of NATO standards.

We need to speak one common language. Co-operation both in school and on the battlefield is not possible if soldiers cannot communicate with each other. In an international environment, English is a must. Visegrad countries, therefore, need to pay much more attention to improving the language skills of their soldiers and civilian staff through advanced language preparation as well as training and professional courses in English. In addition to English, familiarizing respective Visegrad staffs with other V4 languages on a basic level should be encouraged and institutionalized to improve mutual understanding. Since language education capacities are generally insufficient in the Visegrad countries, particularly when it comes to professional military English, pooling and sharing projects, such as the creation of a joint language institute, should be seriously considered. Translations of terminology from NATO English to national languages might be coordinated or conducted jointly at least between the Czechs and Slovaks, where the language barrier is almost non-existent.

Increased mobility of students and teachers would significantly reduce language barriers and accelerate approximation of educational and training standards and, therefore, should be given priority. EU-wide mobility through the 'military Erasmus' programme – which is currently underused due to financial reasons – should become a default part of student and teacher development.

To achieve positive effects of co-operation further beyond the financial limits of teachers' mobility, video conferences should become a standard way of teaching, not an exception: There is no reason not to start actively using a tool that is not only effective but also low-cost and readily available.

International exercises, especially large NATO and EU exercises are a great way to expose people to English and promote common standards, too.

Thanks to their geographic proximity, the Visegrad countries also should establish a more affordable intra-regional mobility programme among themselves, which would allow them to rotate students and teachers without significant additional travel costs. A legislation change would be needed in order to equalize the classification of intra-regional and intra-state travels so that financial barriers – such as the unnecessary but expensive foreign travel per-diem allowances – would be removed.

To support such an efficient exchange programme, the Visegrad countries might decide to establish a joint mobility fund that would guarantee its proper functioning and adopt barter mechanisms, such as reciprocally providing board and accommodation to students and teachers. The co-operation ideally also would include students and teachers of civilian universities in the region.

### **3. REASONS FOR NATIONAL SPECIALISATION AND JOINT PROJECTS**

There are many areas in which one or more countries in the region could specialize and provide cutting-edge education and training. These might include helicopter training, engineering, explosive ordnance disposal, protection against weapons of mass destruction, Special Forces and others.

It is true that specialization may lead the respective countries to close some of their existing courses and training centers, or at least transform them to provide other services. However, if co-operation follows the principle of global balance, the four countries will benefit from running unique courses and centers, mutually providing services to each other. Moreover, by reducing overcapacities in education and training infrastructure – which are significant in the region due to the massive force reductions over the last two decades – countries will be

able to allocate needed resources elsewhere, including in improving other educational and training activities or into modernization projects.

As a positive side-effect of specialization within the region, focusing on certain services while excluding others can lead to higher quality, which might, in turn, attract other allied and partner countries aiming to satisfy some of their training and education needs. In addition to the military and financial benefits, having such internationally recognized assets also would present strong diplomatic and branding tools.

Countries might not always be willing to completely lose control over specific educational or training capabilities. In such cases, concentration of their resources would make sense: they would have to decide where the multinational asset would be located, but they also would be able to shape its form, staff it with their own professionals, train or educate their soldiers without paying fees and improve the interoperability of their forces. The concept might be attractive especially when sustaining or creating such capacities is too expensive on a national basis.

Still, the Visegrad countries might identify some areas of expertise where they cannot efficiently provide adequate education or training in terms of quality or quantity at the national, or even regional, level.

In such cases, they should explore extra-regional solutions provided by other EU and NATO member countries. The savings should be reallocated to build indigenous niche education and training capabilities.

#### **4. POLICY AND LEGISLATION**

What part of education should be common and what needs to stay national? At what stage of training is a soldier ready to attend an international exercise and what national training should precede it? What are our annual needs when it comes to the number of cadets or promotions to respective ranks? The Visegrad countries need to design a system of education and training where, for the most part, processes are the same in terms of standardization (common curricula, requirements) and implementation (joint courses and exercises).

This does not mean that national specifics would disappear: Poland would still need to teach the conduct of naval operations or the flying of F-16s, capabilities that the other three countries do not have.

The V4 need to determine precisely what could and should be common and what is so specific that it makes no sense to do together. Still, one can imagine that Poland would provide basic education in naval strategy and tactics to its landlocked partners so that their officers are better prepared to plug into the planning and conduct of multinational operations, which very often include naval elements.

Similarly, Poland's Visegrad partners could benefit from being included in the many staff positions for naval operations or exercises that are universal to any operation, such as personnel, funding or intelligence.

To allow co-operation, practical barriers to mobility need to be removed. Today, some courses are recognized by other countries and others are not.

Some of them are not even accepted in civilian life, which makes it more difficult for soldiers to reintegrate into society after retirement.

The respective elements of the education system, therefore, have to be certified according to common standards, and intra-state and inter-state recognition needs to be improved. In addition, on an international level, the quality of education is low due to persisting modernization gaps in the region's armed forces. Both acquisition and training cost money,

and they cannot work without each other. At the end of the day, without modern weapons and well-trained soldiers, the list of possible niche areas of national specialization shrinks and co-operation is more difficult.

It makes no sense to send soldiers on international exercises at the battalion, brigade or division level without having mastered all the necessary skills through training at home. It is this low-level training, sometimes even basic training, which is often restricted by the lack of resources. Countries need to do their homework first.

No plan will work unless it is covered by sufficient resources. Countries should refrain from adopting national personnel policy concepts or agreeing on international co-operation projects without allocating money.

## **5. GOING ONLINE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Preparing soldiers to fight in a 21st century environment without proper online capacities not only limits the quality of education and training, but also wastes time and money. Instead of sending officers to a months-long course during which they lose contact with their work, shorter training events, complemented by distance learning, should be applied. It takes a lot of effort to create an online course, but it is also more efficient and may initiate significant quality improvements, not to mention a positive effect on participants' language skills and their ability to work with online resources.

Moreover, online courses constitute a great opportunity for co-operation: To share the burden and progress quickly, countries might easily agree on the division of work and prepare a course or a complex academic programme jointly. Completion of a certified online course should then be a default requirement for attending any training or advanced education so that these are effective, instead of being burdened by incompetence. To support regionalization of military e-learning, countries should explore the possibility of establishing a regional online knowledge base in co-operation with NATO.

Similarly, online solutions are a must in modern military training. In the 'distributed exercises,' units of any size located anywhere on NATO territory can be involved in large-scale exercises up to the brigade level.

They allow staff officers to teach their operational planning skills by using real data from a running operation, a practice that has been used during the ISAF mission. The bottom line is that you do not have to physically gather soldiers in one place just connect them and let them train at one of the national training facilities.

Some countries have started benefiting from the distributed exercise concept, but others lack the infrastructure to do so. Since NATO classified data, such as satellite imagery, are used during such exercises, the endpoints need to be protected accordingly (including secured data links, rooms and computers). It is highly desirable that Slovakia's unique Lešt' training range and at least one of its command structures are fully modernized and integrated into the NATO network so that they can benefit from scenarios, geographic data and other data that already exist.

Once the minimal physical infrastructure exists within and between all Visegrad countries, common regional scenarios for training national or joint units (such as the V4 battlegroup) should also be prepared to increase interoperability of the region's forces. One of the large Visegrad military bases, such as Poland's Szczecin, which was slated to host the new US deployment into NATO Central Europe, could function as headquarters.

## **6. BUILDING A REGIONAL MILITARY ACADEMY**

The flagship project of co-operation in the field of military education was identified by the original DAV4 expert group report and has been discussed for years: A joint Visegrad defence academy would be a breakthrough in terms of quality and efficiency, as well as an unprecedented political achievement.

The Baltic Defence College, an example of a successful regional defence co-operation, provides military education in the form of advanced courses (not only) for Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian officers.

It would be reasonable to apply the same pattern in the Visegrad region, which today struggles with quality and overcapacity problems.

At the same time, it would be the most difficult of all projects. First, it would need to flow from recognition that the new generation of the four countries' senior military leadership would be instilled with the same fundamentals of security and military strategy, relegating the concept of separate but compatible educations to the past.

This would represent a major 'yes' to building a common security culture in the region. Second, a political decision would have to be made on the location of the institution: It would be a difficult task to choose one, as it would mean a verdict on the fate of the rest. Third, the question of what to do with unused buildings, land and other property – and the consequences for personnel – would have to be resolved.

Fourth, an agreement over how to compensate the other three countries would have to be made. These issues could either be set in the deal on the creation of the joint academy, or included in a much bigger deal comprising other joint projects in defence.

Finally, the countries would have to agree on the kind of education the joint academy should provide. At this point, it might be useful to briefly introduce the region's approach to military education: The Visegrad countries are among the very few countries in Europe having their military schools at university level.

In other words, they comply with the Bologna criteria, provide all three levels of formal education (including the doctoral stage), and are allowed to inaugurate professors. These institutions provide young cadets, in the frame of a civilian equivalent bachelor's degree, with the first stage of their military education consisting of knowledge and skills they need to be commissioned and serve as military officers. In the course of their careers, however, they would need to further develop their skills and deepen their knowledge in order to fulfil the requirements of the promotion process.

This second stage of their education is realized through advanced courses, often run by a specialized university center. It is this second stage of the military education that is provided by the Baltic Defence College, and it is the one that would make sense to integrate into the Visegrad region.

Capacities that are underfinanced and underused lead to low quality. If armed forces are so small that they need to prepare significantly lower number of officers than the educational capacities, the system is financially ineffective and too weak to provide quality services such as highly specialized courses.

A regional school would allow us to fight inefficiencies by creating a critical mass of students and staff motivating positive competition and allowing for specialization. It also would allow countries to save resources spent on buildings and, instead, use them for modern equipment that would be otherwise unaffordable.

Finally, NATO-standardized education, provided in English, would be a welcome contribution to our interoperability.

## **7. STARTING WITH JOINT COURSES AND PROGRAMMES**

A joint school is a difficult project in terms of logistics, money, trust and national pride. Instead of waiting for a decision that might never come, the four countries should start to develop a step-by-step protocol for cooperation. The least they can do is open joint courses for their military officers and for civilian staff. It is not difficult to identify a feasible project: A defence course that would prepare colonels before their promotion to general rank is the best example.

In Slovakia, for example, the number of generals is so low that this course is needed only once every three years. The underused capacity could be offered to other countries in the region and developed together to provide better quality, or the course could be provided to perspective Slovak generals elsewhere with only limited country-specific elements being thought nationally.

Some key elements of military education should be common for the Visegrad countries. These include capabilities that each country has and needs, such as the tactics of mechanized battalion, planning of operations, logistic support of operations and use of air forces. Similarly, a course for military officers, which would focus on defence policy, law, and personnel policy, also is needed in some parts of the region.

Professional development of the civilian staff at ministries should be planned in the long-term and systematically implemented, as well.

To build expert capacities and guarantee their stability in the defence structures, it is important that civilian staff is regularly sent to courses abroad, be it on a rotational basis within the region – or even beyond.

Current capacities in the region are insufficient, which provides an opportunity for joint action, such as the creation of a common multinational course for mid- and senior-level civilian officials.

Building on an existing national security course for future flag officers would be a smart solution, possibly by opening a part of the course to civilians on a modular basis. A specific situation, vis-a-vis the education of civilian staff, is in Hungary, where the military academy has been integrated into the University of Public Service, which already provides education for civilians, thus creating opportunities for collaboration in this field.

Another possibility for co-operation would be the International Staff Officers Course (ISOC) for military officers from the Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries. The course, currently run solely by Slovakia, was set up in cooperation with the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

By stepping in, the Visegrad countries might help to sustain it, building on already developed know-how and providing it to its own junior officers and those of the PfP countries under the Visegrad umbrella.

Besides region-based projects, the Visegrad countries should use Europe-wide possibilities more intensively, such as the European Security and Defence College (ESDC). It works as a network, integrating courses of European schools and providing quality education for civilian and military staff.

It is desirable that an appropriate number of personnel from the Visegrad countries attend these courses.

It also is important that our schools eventually prepare a joint Visegrad course – possibly focusing on regional expertise such as Russia, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans – and offer it to allies and partners.

## 8. SEEKING TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Distributed exercises are a way of reducing costs while increasing quality, but they are not an absolute solution: Soldiers and units of all sizes need to train and participate in live exercises in order to keep their skills in “peacetime.” Together with modern weaponry, proper training is an important prerequisite for sustaining a capable military. This needs to be declared a political priority, especially when the ISAF mission is at its end and NATO is confronted with a deteriorating security environment. Even though much needs to be done at home, a regional approach can help the Visegrad countries to improve their interoperability.

Region-wide live exercises (LIVEX) with boots on the ground are the most visible and useful tools for preparing our militaries to fight in an international environment. The Visegrad countries have already agreed to regularly holding a large NATO exercise in the region. The first event will take place in late 2015 in order to certify the Visegrad EU battlegroup, which will be on stand-by in the first half of 2016.

It is important that this exercise is a success, proving the decision to build a regional battlegroup to be right.

The exercise should be made a high visibility event, attracting political and media attention to defence and regional cooperation.

It is also important that the subsequent exercises build on its foundation – and remain a priority. The Visegrad battlegroup is a good reason for joint education and training (including exercises) in the long term.

The battlegroup’s stand-by period will end by mid-2016, but if this status becomes recurrent, a notion that has been repeatedly stated by defence ministers from the region, annual exercises and other forms of co-operation in education and training would gain another *raison d’être*.

As a practical step in this direction, the Visegrad countries could carry out an online exercise during the battlegroup’s stand-by period if the force is not deployed, which would provide another opportunity to improve the interoperability of the unit.

In the past, the Visegrad or broader Central European region’s attendance at several major exercises was symbolic at best – Steadfast Jazz 2013 and Locked Shields 2014 exercises being sad examples. It is important that all countries not only send appropriate numbers of troops, but also that their expertise corresponds with their training needs – instead of seeking the cheapest possible solution.

2012 DAV4 recommendation to build a Multinational Aviation Training Center (MATC) in the Czech Republic is still valid. It has been decided that the facility will be located near the city of Přerov.

The number of partner countries has reached five – Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and the United States. The Center, which will provide training for pilots of the Mi-17/171S helicopter, is expected to be operational in 2016. Since the life cycle of the Soviet-era helicopters is ending in all of the Visegrad countries, it would be smart to make MATC a facility providing training on the newly acquired types of helicopters. Moreover, representatives of the partner countries are considering expanding the MATC’s mission to include fighter jet training.

Since two of the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic and Hungary) are operating JAS-39 Gripen and a third one (Slovakia) seems to be considering a lease of the same-type in the near future, it would make sense.

The MATC pattern – training on Soviet-type weapons – might work in other fields as well. Visegrad countries have considerable knowledge and experience using Soviet-era and



Russian weapon systems still in operation in many NATO partner countries. They could explore the international demand and decide on projects that would be aimed at providing training and also on transferring know-how on the transition to Western weapons systems. A variety of countries within areas ranging from Eastern Europe to the Middle East and Central Asia might need help with their transitions and the Visegrad countries are well suited to providing quality education and training in this field.

There are a number of existing NATO facilities located in the region that could help boost the region's co-ordination in training and exercises – such as the Joint Force Training Centre (JFTC) in Bydgoszcz and, potentially, Multinational Corps Northeast (MCNE) in Szczecin – both of which will play a crucial role in the future as decided at the Wales summit. The Slovak training range Lešť, unique in legally allowing the use of live ammunition, also could serve as a regional facility.

However, this range does not currently provide full service to its customers: Other countries commonly use it but have to prepare most of the exercise documentation, including scenarios, themselves, which decreases the facility's attractiveness.

A customer-friendly solution in combination with Lešť's unique live ammunition feature, and possibly prepared in co-operation with other Visegrad countries, would make it a competitive NATO training site.

## **9. INSTITUTIONALISATION**

The last year has seen significant progress in the formalization of regional co-operation among the Visegrad countries: Prime ministers tasked their defence ministers to prepare a long-term vision and regularly report to them on the progress made. The V4 also is working on a multi-year action plan and a list of concrete project opportunities. To oversee this process, a central coordination body was established at the level of state secretaries and defence policy directors.

Also, the respective defence academies are preparing a Memorandum of Understanding, which should address some of the above mentioned issues.

As a part of the institutionalization process, a specific body should be identified and tasked with coordinating the planning and implementation of projects in the fields of military education and training, based on a joint timetable.

A rotating principle might be applied, according to which an already existing body (such as the training department of the general staff) would always come from the country that, at that time, holds the Visegrad Group presidency.

Another option would be to create specialized working groups, tasked with preparation of proposals for regionally distributed courses and facilities.

Consideration should be given to appointing a senior envoy for education and training to spearhead collaboration in this area. Mutual visibility of training events provided by each nation should be promoted, possibly drawing on existing resources such as the EU's Goalkeeper database.

## **10. CONCLUSIONS**

The countries of the Visegrad region have a lot in common: similar capability gaps; shared historic experience; and perceived regional identity. Moreover, defence collaboration between these countries has been very high on the political agenda in the last couple of years; political leaders already work together on their positions and working groups are meeting to find solutions to the region's problems. The Visegrad Group needs success stories if its defence co-operation is to develop.

The recent differences between Poland and the rest of the region, as well as the closing window of opportunity to improve interoperability through the ISAF mission, make the hunger for concrete examples of co-operation even more urgent.

After so many different political declarations, we are still waiting for one concrete example of a real joint defence or security related project of all V4 countries. We should make an extra mile and reach strong momentum.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of strong political pressure for concrete deliveries. It is politically interesting to talk about regional defence collaboration, but it is not that interesting to invest to that collaboration in reality.

There are attempts to make a step ahead, but there are not satisfactory results so far. We need to look at least for a low hanging fruit.

We need to implement projects that are also interesting in terms of financial results, social impact, etc. Only those projects would be easy-to-be-sold to general public, and thus create so important political support.

The whole process of education and training in the Visegrad countries needs to be organized in a way that only one set of standards is used. Step-by-step continual implementation of introduced proposals would allow successful results and thus improved procedures.

*Note: Authors have not used other documents with the same or similar substance for preparation of this Article. The Article is a result of work of original research group of Authors.*

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