

TURKEY & THE V4: PATHS FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE COOPERATION

The Visegrad Group (V4), comprising of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, is not among Turkey's top foreign policy interests. Nevertheless, V4 can offer many opportunities—from their place in the EU to their economic potential—which make it worthwhile to mutually invest in expanding cooperation between the Group and Turkey. Present economic, trade, and cultural ties form a springboard from where future endeavors, such as energy projects, can be set into motion. However, it remains to be seen whether a multilateral framework can create a more beneficial platform for V4-Turkey relations than the prevailing bilateral format between individual V4 member states and Turkey.

Tamás Kozma and Péter Dobrowiecki*



* Tamás Kozma is an International Relations Manager and Research Fellow at the Antall József Knowledge Centre, Budapest. Dr. Péter Dobrowiecki is Head of the Visegrad-European Union (EU-V4) Office at the Antall József Knowledge Centre, Budapest, Hungary.

Relations between the European Union (EU) and Turkey have long been subject to scholarly interest. However, relations between certain EU sub-regions and Turkey are not studied nearly as much. This article seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the relations between the Visegrad Group as well as individual V4 countries—namely the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—and Turkey. However, the task is rendered difficult by differentiating between the multilateral V4 framework and the bilateral ties between individual V4 countries and Turkey. In addition, the V4 countries are all members of the EU and this increases the complexity of the analysis, as the V4 as such, cannot be wholly dissociated from the EU-Turkey framework. Despite these technical-analytical difficulties, there are several areas in which V4-Turkey cooperation can be upgraded and dialogue deepened.

Historical Roots, Shared Goals—The Visegrad Cooperation

The global framework of the Cold War forced the Visegrad Countries and Turkey into opposing political blocks. After the dissolution of the bipolar world order, the international system of alignments dramatically transformed. Common foreign political goals of the newly elected democratic governments in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland led to the realization that a joint regional platform would not only strengthen the position of the freshly independent Central-European states within Europe but also act as a catalyst in their progression towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Thus, inspired by the 1335 Congress of Visegrád, the framework of a loose partnership was established, which led to the official founding of the Visegrad Group on 15 February 1991. The original tri-country cooperation reached its current form in 1993 after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Rather than focusing on the occasional bilateral disagreements of the member states, the V4 became the primary facilitator of Euro-Atlantic integration. With only one truly joint institution—the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) created in 1999—the group set out to gradually realize its foreign political goals. By 2004, the originally set out task was achieved: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia all became members of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). With EU and NATO membership attained, a public debate questioning the necessity of maintaining partnership began to emerge. Although critical voices never dissipated, the group established itself as an increasingly adept facilitator of regional partnerships in Central Europe. While maintaining its positive dynamism as a regional platform in the EU, the Visegrad countries are becoming valued and sought-after partners for cooperation in adjacent regions of the Eastern Neighborhood and Western Balkans.¹ At the same time, it has to be acknowledged

¹ Tomáš Strážay, “Possibilities of Cooperation between the V4 and the Maghreb: Reality Check,” *Raising Awareness—Finding Common Ground: The V4 and the Maghreb*, ed. Erzsébet N. Rózsa, Máté Szalai (Budapest: Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 2014), pp. 68–69.

that the V4 cannot be characterized as a monolithic group, as in many cases the member states have different goals and/or priorities.

“The global framework of the Cold War forced the Visegrad Countries and Turkey into opposing political blocks.”

Table 1: The Visegrad Group and Turkey in 2016²

	Area (km ²)	Population (thousand)	GDP (current USD in million)
Czech Republic	78.870	10.561,63	195.305,08
Hungary	93.030	9.817,96	125.816,64
Poland	312.680	37.948,02	471.364,41
Slovakia	49.035	5.428,70	89.768,60
V4 total	533.615	63.756,31	882.254,73
Turkey	785.350	79.512,43	863.711,71

The Nexus of V4-Turkey Relations

As mentioned above, relations between the Visegrad Group and Turkey are seldom assessed. However, based on the data above, it is reasonable to conclude that the V4 and Turkey are comparable units in international relations, given their comparable area, population, and GDP. Also, over the past couple of years a trend of converging political interests can be identified between V4 countries and Turkey. The 2013 October meeting of V4 and Turkish foreign ministers held in Budapest was an important starting point for the resilience of mutual dialogue over bilateral relations between the individual V4 countries and Turkey.³ This meeting was followed by more summits, both on foreign ministerial and sub-ministerial levels. These consultations highlighted a growing number of issues that are of common interest for both parties, such as increased economic cooperation, energy diversification, or security cooperation. Countries of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans can be considered as focal points of V4 foreign policy. These two groups of countries are also

² The World Bank, “World Bank Data,” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.SRF.TOTL.K2?view=chart>; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?view=chart>; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?view=chart>

³ “Visegrad Grubu Dışişleri Bakanları Toplantısı,” [The Meeting of the Visegrad Group’s Foreign Ministers] *Haberler*, 30 October 2013, <https://www.haberler.com/visegrad-grubu-disisleri-bakanlari-toplantisi-5239632-haberi/>

of high interest for Turkish diplomacy; accordingly, joint efforts towards coordinated initiatives in these regions might prove to be fruitful. The rising relevance of V4-Turkish relations in the past couple of years is due in part to increased political interest aimed at strengthening their ties, and to the fact that V4 countries have gained more significance for Turkey in light of its tensions with many Western European countries. In spite of the ongoing debate between decision makers in Brussels and Ankara, the V4 maintain a more or less consistently supportive stance towards the complete application of the EU-Turkey statement on migration, as they see it as an indispensable tool in the implementation of the EU's south-east Schengen border.⁴ It is also important to stress that due to their former status as candidate states, the V4 understand and support Turkey's EU membership aspirations. This was clearly stated by Polish President Andrzej Duda during his meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Warsaw last October: "I keep on stressing that I hope Turkey's and the EU's paths continue to lead in the same direction and that the membership, Turkey's full membership of the EU, will be the ultimate result of this common direction."⁵

“V4 countries have gained more significance for Turkey in light of its tensions with many Western European countries.”

Trade and Economic Relations in a Nutshell

Trade cooperation between V4 countries and Turkey is predominantly based on individual bilateral relations. Even so, it is worth breaking down the aggregated picture of V4 countries' economies compared to Turkey. The dataset demonstrates that foreign trade relations between Turkey and the V4 have been gradually increasing over the past couple of years. Although three percent of Turkey's total export was directed to V4 countries in 2015, it was not significantly less than Turkey's export to its important Western-European partners, such as Spain or France which accounted for 3.3 percent and four percent, respectively. Turkey's total export to the five⁶ Post-Soviet Central Asian republics equaled 2.5 percent in 2015, thus exceeding the V4. Turkey's import from the V4 countries accounted for 3.5 percent of its total imports in 2015. This figure was close to France's share of approximately 3.7 percent, and exceeded imports from the United Kingdom or Spain, each accounting for 2.7

⁴ "Joint Statement of V4 Interior Ministers on the Establishment of the Migration Crisis Response Mechanism," *Visegrad Group*, 21 November 2016, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-on>

⁵ "President: Poland backs Turkey's European ambitions," *Official website of the President of the Republic of Poland*, 17 October 2017, <http://www.president.pl/en/news/art.593.president-of-turkey-starts-warsaw-visit.html>

⁶ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

percent of Turkey’s total imports. Concerning the FDI flows between the V4 countries and Turkey, the figures remain much less significant, compared to the foreign trade data. According to the statistics of the Central Bank of Turkey, the V4’s share in Turkey’s total incoming FDI accounts for 0.15 percent, while only 0.14 percent of total Turkish FDI flow was directed towards the V4 countries in 2016. However, experts point to the importance of “indirect” capital flows between Turkey and V4 countries, as Turkish investments often happen to enter the region via third party (e.g. Dutch) companies.⁷

Table 2: Turkey’s foreign trade with the V4 countries (in thousand USD)⁸

	Export			Import		
	2005	2010	2015	2005	2010	2015
Czech Republic	290.110	694.077	768.631	698.561	1.327.672	2.218.334
Hungary	379.092	440.766	711.789	946.238	1.382.213	1.305.322
Poland	830.483	1.504.280	2.329.176	1.244.447	2.620.956	2.977.662
Slovakia	122.712	454.744	545.753	378.046	926.722	858.638
Turkey’s total export/ import to/ from V4	1.622.397	3.093.867	4.355.349	3.267.292	6.257.563	7.359.956
Turkey’s total export/ import	73.476.408	113.883.219	143.838.871	116.774.151	185.544.332	207.234.359
V4’s share in Turkey’s total export/ import	2,2 %	2,7%	3%	2,8%	3,3%	3,5%

⁷ Tamás Szigetvári, “Turkish investments abroad, with a special focus on Central and Eastern Europe,” *Centre for Economic and Regional Studies HAS Institute of World Economics*, Working Paper, 2017, p. 19.

⁸ “Exports and imports by countries, 1996-2017,” *Turkish Statistical Institute*, http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreIstatistikTablo.do?istab_id=624 http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreIstatistikTablo.do?istab_id=625

Table 3: FDI flows between V4 countries and Turkey in 2016 (in million USD)⁹

	V4 FDI to Turkey	Turkish FDI to V4
Czech Republic	151	0
Hungary	32	26
Poland	7	14
Slovakia	2	3
V4's total FDI to/from Turkey	192	43
Turkey's total FDI inflow/outflow	130.982	31.006
V4's share in Turkey's total FDI inflow/outflow	0,15%	0,14%

Energy Issues: A Pivotal Point

Miroslav Lajčák, the Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, said in a meeting between V4 and Turkish foreign ministers in May 2015 that “Diversification is one of the key factors ensuring energy security in Central Europe.”¹⁰ Mr. Lajčák’s comments highlight that energy issues are far beyond being purely economic matters; their geopolitical importance equals or perhaps outstrips economic matters. Therefore, the potential shift to new energy sources, source countries, or supply routes can all become game-changing factors for the European energy security landscape, wherein Russia’s role is a crucial element. Thus, the EU’s aspirations to diversify away from Russian gas and import from other regions, such as the Caspian Sea Basin, Central Asia, Iran, or the Eastern Mediterranean might redraw Europe’s and thereby the V4’s energy security map, to some extent.

V4 countries’ energy ties with Russia date back to Soviet times, and to this day, Russian gas is overrepresented in the supply mix of Central Europe. According to a paper published by the Energy Charter Secretariat Knowledge Centre, Slovakia is the most dependent on Russian gas, with 100 percent of its natural gas coming from Russia. It is followed by the Czech Republic and Poland, with 91 percent and 90 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, Hungary is the least dependent country in Central Europe on Russian natural gas, with 80 percent dependency.¹¹

⁹ “Foreign Direct Investment in Turkey by Country (2000-2016),” *Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey*, <https://bit.ly/2Gk950F>

¹⁰ “V4 and Turkey: Shared Interest in Regular Dialogue,” *Visegrad Group*, 12 May 2015, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/v4-and-turkey-shared>

¹¹ Martin Minárik, “Energy Cooperation in Central Europe: Interconnecting the Visegrad Region,” *Energy Charter Secretariat Knowledge Centre*, Occasional Paper (2014), p. 5.

“Hungary is the least dependent country in Central Europe on Russian natural gas, with 80 percent dependency.”

When it comes to assessing Turkey’s position in the regional energy security architecture, it appears to be in a key position. The Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) initiative of the EU aims to transport natural gas from Azerbaijan to Europe, through a chain of pipelines. The longest pipeline within this structure, called the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), will run through the territory of Turkey and—according to the initial estimates—will be able to carry six billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas to Turkey, and a further 10 bcm to European markets annually.¹² However, this is not the only ongoing pipeline project that is supposed to be completed on Turkish territory in the coming years. The TurkStream natural gas pipeline, initiated by Russia, is set to create a new, direct energy link between Russia and Turkey. It is certain that Turkey’s role as an energy transit country will be strengthened through these projects, however, it remains to be seen how the expected gas might reach and benefit V4 countries. This latter prospect has long been part of European energy security discourse and there is a long list of energy infrastructure projects that after a promising start fell through in the past decade. Given their distinct circumstances and interests, the V4 countries’ views on how regional energy projects should be implemented do not fully align, however, diversification can be still identified as an overarching policy goal for the V4. This creates the potential for cooperation with countries in the south-eastern neighborhood, including the Balkans and Turkey. In the past, there were two primary infrastructure projects on the table that addressed Central Europe’s diversification plans from the south-eastern direction. One of them is the so-called “Tesla” Pipeline, which is meant to carry Russian gas through the Balkans to Hungary and Austria. The second one called the Eastring Pipeline aims to connect the natural gas infrastructure between Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, enabling gas flows from the Turkish-Bulgarian border to Central Europe, and vice versa, as the pipeline is planned to be bi-directional. The overall question is whether diversification will apply to the supply routes only, or also to the source country of the natural gas it will carry. In other words, it remains to be seen whether the new energy supply routes will, in fact, enable the flow of gas from producers other than Russia.

Cultural Ties

Over the last two decades, cultural relations between Turkey and the V4 countries

¹² “Two new FSRU Facilities To Be Launched in Turkey,” *Turkish Petroleum International Company*, <http://www.tpico.com.tr/en/news/news/two-new-fsru-facilities-to-be-launched-in-turkey>

have gradually deepened. Although agreements laying out the foundations for further cultural cooperation were, similarly to other domains, signed on a bilateral basis, alignment in the V4 over cultural projects make it possible to speak of a quasi-cultural cooperation between the Visegrad Group and Turkey. Currently, locally-coordinated institutional, cultural, and educational dialogue between the V4 countries and Turkey centers around the philology departments of universities, as well as the Yunus Emre Cultural Centres (*Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*) in Warsaw and Budapest (established respectively in 2010 and 2013) and the Hungarian Cultural Centre (established in 2013) in Istanbul.¹³ These institutes mutually reinforce the educational and cultural work done by the embassies and consulates of the V4 countries and Turkey. Since 2011, the Yunus Emre Centres in the region also coordinate academic initiatives, such as the Turkology project originally initiated by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), that has an impact not only in the given country, but also in neighboring states. Similarly, the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Istanbul often hosts events that involve other member states of the Visegrad Group as well, thereby successfully building the joint V4 image in Turkey. Cultural associations and NGOs, in cooperation with state institutes, are organizing more events and exhibitions that aim to present a joint V4 cultural platform to the Turkish public.¹⁴

“Energy diversification can be still identified as an overarching policy goal for the V4, which creates the potential for cooperation with Turkey.”

Concluding Remarks

The figures presented in this article suggest that FDI flows between the V4 and Turkey have remained so far considerably limited, however foreign trade figures show a constant growth. It remains to be seen whether V4-Turkish economic and trade relations can be scaled up even further. In terms of energy affairs, V4 countries tend to view Turkey as a highly relevant actor for the energy security aspirations and diversification goals of the whole of Europe. However, it is a long-term question whether an interlinking infrastructure system will be constructed and enable larger energy security cooperation between Central Europe and Turkey. In contrast, culture can be identified as an area where joint efforts are less exposed to complex geopolitical conditions. Initiatives and projects show that when common ground is found, all parties involved can benefit from the strengthening of the V4 brand in Turkey.

¹³ The first ever, albeit short-lived, Hungarian cultural institute, the Hungarian Scientific Institute was established in 1916 in Istanbul.

¹⁴ For example see the V4+1= Visegrad-Turkish Culture Festival, <https://www.v4tr.org>

In 2018 the Visegrad Group is celebrating the quarter-century anniversary of the creation of its current V4 format. Throughout the last 25 years, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia all managed to achieve the fundamental goals that were set out in 1993. With NATO and EU membership secured, the group continues to function as an effective tool when it comes to the representation of Central Europe's interests in a wider geopolitical context. During the past several years, a number of dedicated V4-Turkey ministerial meetings revolving around issues of mutual interest have been successfully organized. However, it is important to point out that high-level political contacts and agreements between V4 member states and Turkey are almost always conducted on a bilateral and not multilateral basis. Nevertheless, the joint economic and political potential of the V4—in addition to its geographical position—makes it a suitable partner for future multilateral cooperation with Turkey.