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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Olenchenko, V., & Mezhevich, N. M. (2021). The Visegrad Group and the Baltic Assembly: coalitions within the EU as seen through Russian foreign policy. *Baltic Region*, 13(3), 25-41. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2021-3-2>

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THE VISEGRAD GROUP AND THE BALTIC ASSEMBLY: COALITIONS WITHIN THE EU AS SEEN THROUGH RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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Received 8 Desember 2020

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2021-3-2

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Today Russia has difficulty doing business-as-usual with EU states. It seems that the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) and the Baltic Assembly/Baltic Council of Ministers (BA/BCM) have contributed substantially to this state of affairs. Overall, the tensions between Russia and the EU are building up – another tendency that did not arise on the Russian initiative. This article aims to address the question of whether Russia should establish direct relations with the V4 and the BA/BCM as tools to overcome the mentioned difficulties. On the one hand, these associations date back to before the countries acceded to the Union. On the other, they are products of regionalisation in the EU. In answering this question, we achieve three objectives. Firstly, we look for an appropriate theoretical and methodological framework for the study. Secondly, we produce a comparative description of the V4 and the BA/BCM. Thirdly, we examine the capacity of these associations to pursue an independent foreign and domestic policy. This study uses a comparison method to analyse the activities of the two organisations and identify their significance for the EU.

Keywords:

Visegrad Group (V4), Baltic Assembly / Baltic Council of Ministers (BA/BCM), relations with Russia, regionalism, transregionalism, multilevel management theory, regional approach in Russian foreign policy

Introductory remarks

Eastern European states (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic) and the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) are amongst the closest geographical neighbours of Russia. The history of Russia's bilateral relations with them is rich in significant events from the countries' common past and reflects all the vicissitudes of European development. In the 21st century, Russia is having

To cite this article: Olenchenko, V. A., Mezhevich, N. M. 2021, The Visegrad Group and the Baltic Assembly: coalitions within the EU as seen through Russian foreign policy, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 13, no 3, p. 25–41. doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2021-3-2.

difficulty in maintaining harmonious bilateral relations with these countries, Hungary being the only exception. Problems stem from the fact that these countries are constantly provoking conflicts involving Russia.

Apart from their membership in the European Union and NATO, the Baltic and Eastern European states have sub-associations of their own. Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic are members of the Visegrad group (V4),¹ and Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia are represented in the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers (BA/BCM).² Both sub-associations differ in the degree and potential of integration and, as a rule, operate independently of each other, despite their geographical proximity.

The article aims to explore the following questions. Does the activity of these sub-alliances open up opportunities for Russia to normalise bilateral relations with their member countries? Is membership in sub-alliances a neutral factor or will it further complicate bilateral relations? Does a possible dialogue with the V4 and BA/BCM have the potential of becoming a backup channel of Russia-EU communication?

Previous research on the topic

International cooperation is developing more and more often through integration associations. Within associations, there is a tendency towards fragmentation, which the EU has also displayed. The most illustrative example of it is the recent Polish-Hungarian ultimatum on the long-term budget of the European Union for the period 2021 — 2027.³ Integration is both a goal and a development mechanism that faces external and internal challenges. The EU countries implement their policies following a common European approach. However, this approach assumes a certain degree of autonomy for each country. In addition, the scale and diversity of the countries of the united Europe make the specifics

¹ The Visegrad group was established on January 15, 1991 during a meeting of the leaders of Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia in the Hungarian city of Visegrad. Czechoslovakia on 01/01/1993 split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia — both retained their adherence to the Visegrad accords. The group got its name from the meeting place — Visegrad. In English — Visegrad. Therefore, the group designation V4 is also used.

² The Baltic Assembly (BA) was created on 08.11.1991 during the meeting of the leaders of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia in Tallinn (Estonia) and is intended to coordinate the activities of the three countries at the parliamentary level. In 1994, an additional body was formed — the Baltic Council of Ministers (BCM), expanding trilateral cooperation through coordination at the government level. The BA and BCM meetings are held synchronously. Accepted abbreviation BA/ BCM

³ On November 16, 2020 Hungary and Poland announced the blocking of the long-term budget for 2021 — 2027, although the budget was conceptually adopted by the EU summit on July 21, 2020. Hungary and Poland did not agree with the development of the budget using the rule of law, that is, the allocation of subsidies depending on how the participating countries follow the EU legislation.

of their foreign and domestic policies natural. The interests of groups of countries that are ‘embedded’ in common interests are *de facto* the norm in European and global policy. Busygina and Klimovich, well-known Russian Europeanists, proposed an interesting formula, “a coalition within a coalition”, which perfectly describes this situation [1, p. 7–26].

There are objective geographical, economic and political prerequisites for the existence of European sub-regions. The traditional division of Europe into sub-regions includes western, eastern Europe and northern Europe among many others. Political factors, taken in their historical dynamics, led to the emergence of two relatively new groupings, which are the object of this study — the Visegrad group (the V4) and the Baltic Assembly (BA) /the Baltic Council of Ministers (BCM). The Visegrad group is a sub-regional association within the EU. It includes Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic and claims to be a factor influencing the general policy of the EU. The Baltic Assembly (BA) /Baltic Council of Ministers (BCM) is a sub-regional association, which includes, together with other countries of the region, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.⁴

This research is methodologically based on several theories. The post-functional version of regionalism stipulates that regional construction in Europe is based on three pillars: firstly, the functional requirements of regionalism, stemming mainly from interdependence in the field of security and the desire for stability; secondly, ensuring regional integration through the efforts of elites aimed at building the regional identity that resonates with public opinion; and, last but not least, the expansion of institutional structures across regions [2]. Integration associations within the EU can also be analysed from the standpoint of interregionalism (interregional theory), which presupposes the presence of overlapping regional spaces [3]. This is not an abstract geographic or economic space, but a space of political decisions.

Transregionalism provides an opportunity for the formation of a more effective management mechanism compared with those created at the global and regional levels since decision-making at the global level is fraught with difficulty in seeking consensus among the most influential actors in international relations and decision-making at the regional level is usually limited by the boundaries of a particular region [4]. The transregional approach provides a good opportunity to understand the two strategic objectives of the countries joining coalitions. Matthew Doidge, a British researcher, distinguishes between inward-oriented, self-strengthening and outwardly-oriented tasks for lobbying

⁴ The Baltic Assembly (BA) was created on 08.11.1991 during the meeting of the leaders of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia in Tallinn (Estonia) and is intended to coordinate the activities of the three countries at the parliamentary level. In 1994, an additional body was formed — the Baltic Council of Ministers (BCM), expanding trilateral cooperation through coordination at the government level. BA and BCM meetings are held synchronously. Accepted abbreviation BA/BCM.

one's interests regionally and globally [5]. The latter is very important and suggests the possibility of employing the theory of multilevel governance in this research [6–8].

In this article, the theory of multilevel governance is used for the analysis of European coalitions and associations. The theory has been relevant for more than ten years, and there is a lot of literature discussing it. In the classical sense, multilevel governance is based on coordinated actions of the EU, member states and regional and local authorities and in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and partnership, taking the form of operational and institutional cooperation in the development and implementation of European Union policy [9]. Within the framework of the theory of multilevel governance there is an opportunity "...to emphasize the spatial dimension of political governance, as well as the special significance of ties, coalitions and interactions..." [10, p. 14].

The theory of multilevel governance has been used in governance and administration practice for a long time. The Charter of Multilevel Governance of the European Union states that "...on the basis of coordinated actions of the European Union, Member States and regional and local authorities act in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity, proportionality and partnership, taking the form of operational and institutional cooperation in the development and implementation of European Union policy".⁵

The structural policy of the European Union has already resulted in the formation of three relatively independent levels of governance — supranational, national and subnational, within which and between which there is a continuous dialogue and interaction [11]. But are the governance levels limited to those enumerated above? If we consider only the EU as a supranational body, then it is necessary to identify another level, higher than the national state, but lower than the EU. Accordingly, each level presupposes "a system of constant negotiations between governments connected with each other at different territorial levels — supranational, national, regional and local" [12].

Recognizing the *acquis communautaire* (Fr., generally recognized property)⁶ as a set of legal principles, rules and norms developed within the European Union and are subject to mandatory implementation, it is worth noting that there is no direct prohibition on the conduct of domestic and foreign policy by the EU member states in the form of coalitions, quasi-unions, and sub-regional unions. The most active integration processes take place within the European Union, a supranational association that has prerequisites for the transition to the final stage of integration — the formation of a political union. The desire of the Europe-

⁵ Charter for Multilevel governance in Europe, 2020, *CEPLI*, available at: <https://cepli.eu/charter-for-multilevel-governance-in-europe-12026599> (accessed 16.01.2020).

⁶ The designation adopted in the EU for the general concept of legal norms of the European Union.

an Union to preserve and protect the achieved level of integration is quite understandable and logical. Integration associations that exist within the European Union are given much less attention compared with the EU, the most influential economic and political union of today.

The classical understanding of the term *integration* presupposes a process and a solution focused on obtaining a single whole from any parts. Integration in international relations presupposes a process rather than a solution. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of European integration is a vital question. There is no exact answer. At the same time, with small integration unions or consulting associations, the situation looks somewhat clearer. In this case, the goals are specific and pragmatic. There may be some ideological rhetoric, but it is nothing more than an attempt to divert attention from performing systemic economic and political tasks. Hence, another hypothesis discussed in the article — small integration unions and consulting associations have a future since they perform specific tasks, have minimal staff and ample opportunities for multi-level consultations. Moreover, it is the theory and practice of multilevel governance that creates additional opportunities for the study of sub-regional unions.

This issue has been poorly researched in the Russian Federation in the context of the goals of its foreign policy [13—15]. It should also be borne in mind that the topic of the international positioning of the EU, including its sub-unions, has a relatively short history. It goes back to the mid-1990s when a common foreign and security policy of the EU began to be discussed. The decision was consolidated by the introduction of the position of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (1999). The European Union External Action Service (EEAS) headed by the High Representative was formed on January 1, 2011 [16, p. 32].

When assessing the activity of sub-regional unions and associations, one should point out their different legal status. For example, Benelux⁷ is an integral part of the EU and a full-fledged economic, political and customs union, which has been developing in parallel with the EU and is included in the EU structure by Article 223 of the Agreement on the creation of the EEC. The institutions of cooperation mentioned in this article do not have such a status. Brussels initially viewed these bodies as advisory and, most likely, temporary. The former stance has been fully confirmed whereas the latter is probably erroneous. The theory of multilevel governance explains why soft integration aimed at the elaboration of a single economic and foreign policy of the European Union is not a short-term but a long-term one.

Another and more important thesis is that the associations under consideration have gradually acquired new characteristics over the past decades. Having a low formal status, minimum regulations and financial costs, these associations

⁷ Benelux is a union of three states: Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, which entered into a tripartite agreement on 03.02.1958 on political, economic and customs union.

can provide effective and informal consultations. Gardini and Malamud describe this situation as ‘invisible’ interregionalism (stealth interregionalism), which is characterized by the absence of formal institutionalisation of stable interregional ties [17].

Summing up, the Visegrad Group and the Baltic states are of interest for our analysis because their countries are members of both sub-unions. They have inherited most of the European problems after joining the EU (January 1, 2004) and they have been actively participating in the process of fragmentation of the European Union. Each country has its own reasons, therefore, requires individual studies for each case.

The choice of the Visegrad group and the BA/BCM as the objects of study is not accidental since these associations are, in a way, the consequences of the demise of the Soviet Union and the socialist system in Europe. In this regard, it is necessary to understand how Russia should build its relations with the sub-associations of the countries that until recently, used to be politically and economically united with Russia, though to a varying degree. The study of Russia’s approaches to the V4 and BA/BCM may also be of interest as an essential prerequisite for the development of a conception of the countries’ relations with these associations and their member countries. Recent publications of the authors have contributed to this work [18–20].

Let us consider some of the circumstances of the creation of the V4 and BA/BCM. The Visegrad group, as a regional subunit, was established on January 15, 1991. The founding documents set the task of jointly overcoming the communist past, mistrust and hostility, promoting integration into leading European organisations and bringing national elites closer together. In 1993–1998, the association was not active (3–4 events per year) since the prevailing point of view was that countries of the region developing independently could achieve their goals much faster. Since 1998, the V4 has significantly increased the number of activities organised. For example, in 2000, there were more than 25 events, that is, two events per month. The reference to the 2000s was not accidental and made to show that the potential of the V4 has not been exhausted and the group is operating in the same mode and the same scale as 20 years ago. Russian experts give credit to the political activity of the Visegrad group [21].

An additional impetus to the activities of the Visegrad Group was given on May 12, 2004, at the Kromeriz V4 Summit. The declaration of the summit stated that the goals of the accession to the EU and NATO set in 1991 had been achieved. The countries agreed to continue cooperation. In their new capacity, the V4 countries took on a collective commitment to strengthen the identity of Central Eu-

rope and promote EU policies in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.⁸ However, the question arises about the geographical positioning of the Visegrad countries. For Russia, they have always been countries of Eastern Europe. Apparently, this topic and its ideological implications introduced by the V4 deserve a separate study. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary stated the significance of the Visegrad Group and its main key objectives of strengthening the V4 ties with the United States and implementing the Eastern Partnership programme [22]. This document cannot be considered a private opinion since it was included in the package of official documents of the Visegrad group [22]. In the following document, the Bratislava Declaration dated February 15, 2011, this vision of the V4 policy became the key one, which meant in practice the promotion of the expansion of the EU and NATO, mainly to the East.⁹

The Eastern Partnership programme deserves special attention. The programme is aimed at preventing the post-Soviet countries from becoming the CIS members and pushing them towards accession to the EU. The Bratislava Declaration is imbued with a spirit of self-admiration, to the extent that the V4 members call themselves the new successful political brand and the best example for other countries.¹⁰

In the recent Krakow Declaration of February 17, 2021, adopted on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Visegrad Group, the participating countries call themselves “a reliable partner on a European and global scale and a symbol of successful transformation ...”¹¹ They reiterate the main goals of the EU development, commit themselves to achieve them, and stress their willingness to achieve Euro-Atlantic goals and readiness to strengthen NATO, positioning it as a significant factor of stability.¹²

At about the same time, on August 11, 1991 the Baltic Assembly (BA) was established. It crowned the trilateral cooperation between Latvia, Lithuania and

⁸ Visegrad Declaration 2004 (assembled on 12 May 2004 in Kroměříž), 2004, *The Visegrad Group: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia | Visegrad Declaration 2004*, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412—1> (accessed 28.02.2021).

⁹ The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group Bratislava, 15 February 2011, *The Visegrad Group: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia*, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava> (accessed 03.03.2021).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Visegrad Group Cracow, February 17, 2021, *The Visegrad Group: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia*, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2021/declaration-of-the-prime-ministers> (accessed 17.02.2021).

¹² Ibid.

Estonia in the period 1988–1991, which was aimed at ensuring their secession from the USSR and gaining state independence. To achieve this goal, the Baltic republics organised numerous joint social and political events in a trilateral format and acted as a single bloc in the Soviet state bodies and organisations, in particular, in the Baltic Council. On May 12, 1990 the Declaration on the Unity and Cooperation of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia¹³ was signed by the leaders of the Supreme Councils of the republics.

The apotheosis of the trilateral cooperation of that period was the establishment of an advisory parliamentary body of the three countries — the Baltic Assembly (BA), which is formed from the deputies of the Baltic parliaments in proportion to the party representation. Each of the parliaments of the three States appoints 12–16¹⁴ members. Both the status and the number of representations limit the role of the BA.

Three years later, in addition to the BA (or expanding the scale of interstate Baltic relations), the Baltic Council of Ministers (BCM) was created in 1994. The Council holds tripartite meetings at the level of prime ministers and relevant ministers. They are usually organised once a year within the framework of the autumn session of the BA held in the capital of the country presiding in the BCM.

The Visegrad Four (V4). The conception of the Visegrad Four has become a part of European political life. This association is reasonably perceived as an important factor in the formation of the political and economic situation in Central and Eastern Europe. The Visegrad Four is increasingly acquiring the status of a separate pole of influence both in the European Union and in Eastern and Central Europe. The importance of the association has increased in recent years, particularly, in connection with the Ukrainian crisis and the migration cataclysm in Europe. The Visegrad Four took a special position on both events and demonstrated the will to defend it. Overall, the countries of the Group seem to strive and will pursue a more or less independent line, arising from their national rather than from the common interests of the EU. The tradition of their consolidation has deep historical roots, which were described more than 100 years ago by Lyubavsky [23]. International and not only European recognition of the V4 may be proven by the fact that during the Russian chairmanship in the UN Security Council in September 2015, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, discussing the problems of illegal migration, considered the Visegrad Four as important as the European Union.

The status of the Baltic Assembly. In the international information space, both in its domestic part and in other segments, it is customary to consider the Baltic countries as an integral conglomerate. This approach gives rise to the

¹³ Formation of the Baltic States' regional organisations, 1988–1991, *Baltic Assembly – Pre-History*, available at: <https://www.baltasam.org/en/history/pre-history> (accessed 15.02.2021).

¹⁴ Baltic Assembly Statutes, 2021, *Baltic Assembly*, available at: <https://baltasam.org/en/structure/statutes> (accessed 15.03.2021).

feeling that Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia are allegedly united by numerous coordination mechanisms that allow them to react to any event quickly and smoothly and have a unified front on any matter. In this regard, those who are far from the Baltic issues are naturally perplexed when they learn that in the foreign policy, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia are connected only by an advisory parliamentary body — the Baltic Assembly (BA) and the Baltic Council of Ministers (BCM), meeting in accordance with their regulations once a year. It could be assumed that by their overactive integration activities the BA and the BCM attempt to compensate for the underdevelopment of the organisational structure. However, BA and BCM, in contrast to the Visegrad group, are known mainly to experts in the Baltic States and do not attract much attention by their activities. As the Baltic authorities admit, both organisations, especially the BCM, after Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia joined NATO and after joining the European Union, were brought in line with the new requirements. In this regard, it is of interest to study why one of two geographically neighbouring regional associations progresses and becomes a noticeable factor of influence, while the other is hardly noticeable and does not show prospects for self-development.

The reasons for the differences between V4 and BA. In addition to the influence of internal political nuances and the peculiarities of relations between countries on the status of both associations, objective indicators of the Visegrad group and BA/BCM countries should also be taken into account, in particular, such as the population size, the volume of national GDP (table 1).

Table 1

**Population of the Visegrad countries and the countries
of the Baltic Assembly in millions of people as of 01.01.2020¹⁵**

Countries	Population, million people	Percentage in the total population of the European Union
EU -282	512.3	100
Visegrad group - V4	63.6	12.4
Hungary	9.7	1.8
Poland	37.9	7.3
Slovakia	5.4	1.05
Czech Republic	10.6	2.06
Countries - BA / BCM	6.0	1.17
Latvia	1.9	0.37
Lithuania	2.8	0.54
Estonia	1.3	0.25

Source: the table has been prepared by the authors based on the Eurostat data

¹⁵ Population change — Demographic balance and crude rates at national level, 2021, *Eurostat*, available at: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=demo_gind&lang=en (accessed 12.01.2021).

The data presented in the Table 1 show that the population of the Visegrad countries is ten times as high as the population of the Baltic Assembly countries. The population size is important because it is a primary source of labour resources, on which, among other things, the economic potential of countries and their investment attractiveness depends. The size of the population is an important indicator for calculating the volume of the consumer market. In this sense, the percentage of the population of the V4—12% of the EU — allows us to consider the V4 as a factor in the EU internal market since we are talking about 1/10 of the entire EU market. Compared with that, the percentage of the population of the BA of just 1% of the EU is too low to be taken into account. It would be an exaggeration to say that the Visegrad countries are much more attractive than the Baltic Assembly countries. However, in combination with other socio-economic factors, the Visegrad countries have an advantage; they are more economically attractive than the BA/BCM countries. The Fig.s of national GDP presented in table 2 are no less obvious.

Table 2

The volume of GDP of the Visegrad and the BA/BCM countries in million euros and percentage in 2019¹⁶ (the results of 2020 have not yet been presented by Eurostat)

Country	GDP volume, million euros, current prices	Share of national GDP in total GDP of the European Union, percentage
EU 28	16,486.2	100
Visegrad Group countries	996.0	6.0
Hungary	146.0	0.9
Poland	532.3	3,2
Slovakia	93.8	0.5
Czech Republic	223.9	1.4
Countries of the Baltic Assembly	107.2	0.65
Latvia	30.4	0.18
Lithuania	48.7	0.30
Estonia	28.0	0.17

Source: the table has been compiled based the Eurostat data, which in the December 2020 update are compared with the data for 2019. The data for 2020 have not been released yet. When calculating, reference was given to the absolute rather than relative data. The share of countries is calculated based on the volume of EU GDP before the UK left the EU on January 30, 2020.

¹⁶ GDP and main components (output, expenditure and income), 2021, *Eurostat*, available at: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=nama_10_gdp&lang=en (accessed 14.01.2021).

The data in the table show that the ratio of the GDP indicators of the Visegrad countries and the Baltic Assembly is similar to the ratio of the population of these associations. In both cases, the Visegrad indicators are almost ten times as high as those of the Baltic Assembly.

The GDP Fig.s — the total value of goods and services produced over a given period of time — can also serve as indicators of the current economic state of the two associations. The tenfold difference in the economic potential manifests itself in the share of these associations in the European Union and affects the formation of their authority. The GDP of the Visegrad Group is 6% of the total GDP of the European Union. This fact cannot be ignored when assessing the economic opportunities of the EU, both in the current and long-term economic perspectives. At the same time, the GDP of the Baltic Assembly is only 0.65% of the total GDP of the EU, which is a very small share that can be neglected if necessary. In a consolidated form, the share of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic Assembly/ BCM in the EU population and GDP is given below (table 3).

Table 3

**The share of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic Assembly
in the EU GDP and Population ¹⁷**

Association	Population as a percentage of the total EU population	GDP as a percentage of total EU GDP
European Union 28	100	100
Visegrad group	12.4	6.0
Baltic Assembly/BCM	1.17	0.65

Source: the table was compiled by the authors.

It is obvious that the Visegrad group is a significant part of the European Union both in terms of GDP and the capacity of the consumer market, which is linearly correlated with the population size. The BA/BCM constitute only one per cent of both indicators and, consequently, are of minimal economic interest. The activities of the BA/BCM are mostly of a protocol nature in the sense that they are organised in a measured manner; an annual session is usually held back-to-back with a BCM meeting. To date, 38 BA sessions and 35 BCM sessions have been held. The bigger number of the BA sessions can be explained by the fact that in 1994—2002 they were held twice a year.¹⁸ During that time, the Baltic countries were preparing for their accession to the European Union. Later, the BA adhered and still adheres to the schedule of having one session per

¹⁷ Data calculated by the authors based on Eurostat data. References are indicated in tables No. 1, 2.

¹⁸ The Baltic countries applied for EU membership in 1992—93, and in 1994 they were accepted for consideration. The EU decision on the possibility of expanding to the East was made in 2000 at the EU summit in Nice (France). The Baltic States became EU members on 01.05.2004.

year.¹⁹ The intensity in BA/BCM activity at that time reflected nervousness in the Baltic countries caused by a multi-stage, albeit standard, assessment of their application by the EU. The BA agenda of the events organized was not diverse and was dominated by such topics as the regional security strategy, the common regional gas and electricity market, the implementation of the Rail Baltica project (a project for a railway connection of the Baltic countries with Northern Europe and Germany).

Let us now go back to 2019 and have a closer look at the BA/BCM action plan for 2019, which was implemented and its performance can be assessed. The plan was prepared by Latvia, which chaired the association in 2019. The action plan was quite detailed and included 14 events, that is, more than two events per month.²⁰ However, there are no materials on the results of the implementation of this plan.²¹ It can be assumed that the events were merely a formality and their results were not significant enough to be reflected in the form of separate documents.

Funding. The activities of the Visegrad Group are funded by its member countries in the form of annual contributions. In addition, the group has a separate fund, the Visegrad Fund, created in 2000 and used for the implementation of projects initiated by the association. The projects are mainly aimed at working with youth, preserving the history of the region and Europe and identifying new promising areas of cooperation.²² In addition to the member countries, there are other donors of the fund: from the EU — Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands; from external donor countries — South Korea, Canada and the United States. The fund provides grants to both individuals and organisations.²³

The importance of the Visegrad fund is highlighted in the Krakow Declaration of February 17, 2021, noting that more than 600 projects for the development of civil society have been financed within the framework of the Eastern Partnership in the Western Balkans and Central Europe. In the Declaration, the fund is already referred to as the International Visegrad Fund.

The activities of the BA/BCM are funded by allocations from the budgets of the parliaments of the Baltic republics. Consequently, the amount of funding depends on the state budgets and may change accordingly whereas the annual contribution to the Visegrad Group is a fixed sum.

The V4 and BA/BCM foreign policy. Although they were established at the same time and pursued similar goals — membership and complete integration into the EU — the V4 and BA/BCM associations are now noticeably and sig-

¹⁹ Sessions of the Baltic Assembly, 201, *Baltic Assembly — Sessions and Documents*, available at: <https://www.baltasam.org/en/sessions-and-documents> (accessed 14.01.2021).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Working Plan of the Baltic Assembly under Latvian Presidency in 2019, 2019, *Baltic Assembly*. available at: <https://www.baltasam.org/images/2019/Working-Plan—2019.pdf> (accessed 24.01.2021).

²² *Visegrad Fund*, 2021, available at: <https://www.visegradfund.org/> (accessed 23.02.2021).

²³ About us, 2021, *Visegrad Fund*, available at: <https://www.visegradfund.org/about-us/the-fund/> (accessed 25.02.2021).

nificantly different from each other, and not only in terms of their economic and demographic indicators. The main difference is that the BA/BCM is a publicly inactive organisation, whose activities are reduced to a narrow range of tasks that are of interest, in most cases, only to the members of the association and do not fall under the definition of a multi-vector policy. The activities of the BA/BCM are mainly dominated by the regional dimension agenda, aimed at Northern Europe and reflect the interests of their northern neighbours.

The Visegrad group and the BA/BCM often compete with each other, which is particularly obvious in the Eastern Partnership programme. As Shishelina [24] notes, the Visegrad countries consider the programme partly their creation and would like to monopolize its implementation.²⁴ At the same time, the BA/BCM countries consider the post-Soviet space an indispensable part of their foreign policy priorities, which is reflected in the Eastern Partnership program. In general, it can be stated that the V4 and the BA tend to distance from each other. In April 2016, Latvia hosted a meeting of the Foreign Ministries of the Baltic States, Northern Europe and the Visegrad Group to discuss security, energy, the Eastern Partnership and the problems of European integration. However, this meeting required the participation of the Nordic countries, acting as an informal moderator.

The focus of attention of the two associations is the Eastern Partnership programme, aimed at the reorientation of post-Soviet states from membership in the CIS and making them join the EU.²⁵ The rest of the V4 and BA/BCM activities are different. The geographic vector of the V4 activity is directed to the Balkans, Central Europe, and the post-Soviet space. There is also interest in the Northern European sub-unions. At the same time, only one V4 member country (Poland) demonstrates its close ties with Lithuania [25]. Objectively, only Hungary and Poland possess resources and willingness to play a more independent role in the European Union, but not Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. As practice shows, they can defend their point of view and would like to have a certain degree of independence, if not for complete withdrawal from the EU. They strive for broader autonomy, although the current EU regulatory documents do not envisage it. This conclusion is confirmed by the joint moratorium of Hungary and Poland under the terms of the EU budget for 2021 – 2027 put forward on November 16, 2020.

The results of the study showed that the associations analysed differ in the degree of their activity; in most cases, they simply respond to current events and have no clearly formulated strategic goals of their foreign and domestic policy. The V4 – Russia dialogue is mainly based on individual initiatives of the countries. The BA/BCM made the coordination of tactical and strategic anti-Russian actions a cross-cutting theme of their regular meetings. Therefore, Russia cannot have one general pattern of behaviour for developing its relations with these associations.

²⁴ The Eastern Partnership programme was co-authored by Sweden and Poland.

²⁵ The Eastern Partnership programme was adopted on 09.05.2009 in Prague (Czech Republic). Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine are invited to participate in the programme.

The Russian government notes the accumulation of various contradictions in the EU. Russia admits that some Eastern European countries may follow the example of Great Britain and raise the question of terminating their EU membership. According to some assessments, this may happen by 2028.²⁶

The single-vector foreign policy of the Baltic countries, their reliance on the confrontation with Russia and ensuring the dominance of Northern European interests, narrow the political and economic attractiveness of the Baltic. The Visegrad Group seeks to act in unison with EU priorities when they are in line with the V4 regional interests. On the other hand, the V4 is steadily pursuing a course aimed at protecting their national interests and ensuring that they are not devalued by the requirements of the EU.

A comparison of the agendas of the chairmanship in the V4 and the BA/BCM associations does not speak in favour of the Baltic countries. The chairmanship of a particular country in the BA/BCM association, in contrast to the chairmanship in the Visegrad Group, is not often characterized by originality and reflect not so much national interests but rather the priorities of Euro-Atlanticism, mainly its American interpretation.

In general, we can confidently state that the Visegrad Group is a more effective regional organisation compared with the BA/BCM both in terms of defending the national interests of the member states and in terms of its status in the EU.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that “the rise of the subnational level and the recognition of the importance of political networks combined, leading to the emergence of the concept of multilevel governance in the study of the European Union” [26]. This theory appeared following the EU foreign policy and economic decision-making practices. At the turn of the century, it was understood that “... leaders entering a supranational association will fear the expansion of the centre they are creating. Accordingly, not wishing to be his hostages, they will only go to the creation of an alliance with weak supranational institutions, leaving the key decisions for themselves” [27].

At the same time, it makes sense to keep both sub-alliances in the focus of attention, periodically comparing Russian foreign policy requests with the dynamics of their development.

Given the current content, tasks and practical activities of the BA/BCM associations, there are no prerequisites for Russia’s initiatives to establish business ties with the BA/BCM, including those aiming at the normalisation of Russian-Baltic relations. At the same time, one should not ignore the dynamics of the BA/BCM activity. Further study of the feasibility of establishing relations with these associations may be required provided there are positive changes in the agenda of the association.

²⁶ President of Russia V. Putin. Speech at the plenary session “Bridges over the Waves of De-globalization” at the XI VTB Capital Investment Forum “Russia Calls!”, Held on November 20, 2019, Investment Forum “Russia is Calling!” *President of Russia*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62073> (accessed 21.01.2020).

The prospects for possible ties between Russia and the Visegrad group look comparatively more attractive. Two aspects could be of practical interest. Given the annual rotating presidency of the member countries in the V4, the presiding country could include the normalization of relations with Russia in its agenda. For example, Hungary could put forward this idea. The reaction of other member countries and the discussion between them could highlight the advisability of Russia's turning to the V4. The second aspect is the possible participation of Russia in certain events of the Visegrad Group providing there is an invitation from the V4.

Based on our analysis of the economic and political dynamics, our research shows that currently the BA/BCM association is not of particular interest for Russia either in terms of the development of bilateral relations with the Baltic countries or deepening ties with the EU. For Russia, the Visegrad group has a certain potential for the development of bilateral relations. However, this requires the fulfillment of a number of conditions on the part of the V4, including those indicated above.

To sum up, the current relations between Russia and the Visegrad group and BA/BCM as associations do not guarantee tangible positive developments in Russia's bilateral relations with each of the participating countries. It is preferable to continue developing bilateral relations with each country separately. At the same time, it is necessary to follow the activities of both associations — the Visegrad group and BA/BCM.

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