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## #2: Associated Trio: Eastern Partnership's Visegrád Group?

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On July 19, 2021 the Presidents of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine signed the declaration to strengthen cooperation between the countries in order to reiterate their EU aspirations. The ceremony was [attended](#) by the President of the Council of the European Union, Charles Michel. The three countries [formalized](#) their cooperation earlier in May under the name the Associated Trio (AT). The initiative is a demand-driven response to the flaws of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was not intended to lead to membership, and deliberately avoided performance-based differentiation among its members.

The initiative to establish closer cooperation between the countries that aspire to be members of the European Union is not a brand-new invention. The Visegrád Group (also known as the Visegrád Four, or V4) was established in 1991 by Hungary, Poland, and the former Czechoslovakia, which became the Czech Republic and Slovakia on February 15, 1991. The V4 is a non-institutionalized regional cooperation [format](#), working together in various fields, including defence and internal security, justice, energy, and transportation, as well as culture, science, and education. Initially, the V4 was established with the chief goal of Euro-Atlantic integration after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the fall of the Soviet Union. The members of the Group [pledged](#) to support each other on their way to becoming full-fledged members of the European Union.

The incentive to cooperate was fruitful overall for the V4 – in 2004, 13 years after its establishment, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia finally became EU members. Moreover, the group continues to exist as a non-institutionalized regional format, celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2021. The question is, can the Associated Trio replicate the success story of the Visegrád Group? In this blog post we outline certain commonalities and differences between the AT and the V4; and provide some thoughts on why despite certain differences, the AT still could be an added value both for regional integration and the EU's improved governance in the region.



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## The Visegrád Group and Associated Trio: Similar goals...

The two groups share many similarities in terms of declared goals, structures, and political dynamics among member states. The three countries of the Associated Trio have a common Soviet past, while the V4 countries have all been part of the socialist bloc. The countries of both groups had to undergo the complicated processes of market liberalization and institutional reforms. Another common factor is that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and with that the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc and the Warsaw Pact, [Russia was not a security guarantor](#) for the countries of either the V4 or the AT . Therefore, along with membership in the EU, NATO membership became the utmost goal for both groups, which served as a motivation to formalize their cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

The Visegrád Group made it clear from the very beginning that their initiative was a tool for closer EU integration, not a stand-alone cooperation, although [their path towards EU membership](#) was neither easy nor rapid. Initially, the decision-making process was a controversial bargaining in which the EU tried to discourage the demands for the full membership of the Central and Eastern European countries. From the EU's perspective, the Eastern Partnership framework was not intended to create membership prospects. However, by following the example of the V4 in the form of the newly established AT initiative, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have ensured that their goals and determination [are formulated precisely](#) in the memorandum.

Also, incentive for a closer institutional cooperation with the EU was in both cases driven from within – the heads of the governments of the Visegrád Group countries initiated the Group's inception, as was the case for the Associated Trio. In comparison, the EaP was a top-down project initiated by the EU.

Regarding the internal dynamics, the relations among the participating states in both groups have not always been easy, but the governments of both groups turned to pragmatism, in spite of certain matters of contention. In the case of the Associated Trio, these were differences between Georgia and Ukraine over former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's political career in Kyiv; [different political orientations](#) of Ukraine and Moldova during the presidency of pro-Russian Igor Dodon in Moldova ; border demarcation issues; as well as long lasting [property disputes](#) over resorts inherited from the former Soviet period and a hydroelectric station . As for the V4, their relations have not always been smooth either. Some key examples are [discriminatory Magyarization policy](#) marginalizing the Slovak population during the Austria-Hungarian Empire ; the brief independence of Slovakia as a puppet state of the Nazi Germany during 1939-1945; and [a series of discriminatory laws](#), known as the Benes Decrees named after the Czechoslovak President Edvard Benes, aimed against Hungarian and German minorities living in Czechoslovakia.

Despite those issues the Visegrád Group was [interested](#) in creating some sort of "image" for the Central European region, or a Central European identity. Mostly due to mere geography and the lack of consolidated historical interactions before incorporation into the Soviet Union,



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this sort of identity-creation was not the case for the Associated Trio. Yet, like the V4 group, a large part of political elites and societal groups in the AT countries [have pushed](#) for a similar process of identity formation based on the idea of “belonging to the European family”. Part of this process is the AT countries’ attempt to promote themselves as the three forerunners out of the six EaP countries.

### **...But different contexts**

Despite similarities in terms of declared objectives, the countries of the Associated Trio will find it very hard to replicate the Visegrád Group’s Euro-Atlantic integration success story. There are at least four factors that make the success of the AT platform less likely.

First, the Visegrád Group used to be more homogenous, both geographically and socio-economically, compared to the AT countries. A quick glance at a map would show that the cooperation of the four Visegrád countries largely followed geographic logic. For the geographically more distant AT, the only unifying geographic factor could be the Black Sea. Besides, the AT countries have very different economic, political, and societal structures, which makes a homogenous approach towards the shared objectives a more complicated task.

Second, the AT countries face [enlargement fatigue](#) within the EU to an extent not seen before. It is true that the accession process of the V4 countries in the EU was neither rapid nor easy. Not all EU members were similarly enthusiastic about the enlargement, yet the discussions about the accession already occurred in 1991, with the [negotiation](#) of the Association Agreements between the European Community on one side, and the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, on the other side. The EaP, however, was not initially designed to offer membership, but rather incentives for closer cooperation. Many EU countries see the EaP explicitly as an alternative format to enlargement, not as its precursor. The multiple crises and disappointment over the democratic backsliding in new member states, including in the V4 countries, has further discouraged the older EU member states to seek further enlargement, and has made the AT countries’ membership quest increasingly difficult.

Third, the AT countries face a different geopolitical context. The V4 countries managed to accomplish their EU accession process in a time when Russia was too weak to oppose the process and the EU was [“the only game in town.”](#) Moreover, back then, the majority of the older EU member states saw enlargement as a chance to benefit politically and economically. In the EU’s immediate neighbourhood there was a war-torn Yugoslavia on the one hand, and the Europe-oriented Visegrád Group on the other. The AT countries face a very different geopolitical environment marked by the decreased interest of the US. Russia’s continued military presence and support to Moldova’s break-away region Transnistria, the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and Russia’s recognition of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the aftermath, as well as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 have made it clear that Russia is keen to maintain its influence in the neighbourhood. The EU itself seems to have a balancing



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approach between maintaining stable relations with Russia, also its main energy supplier, and its engagement with the EaP countries.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the domestic contexts of the countries in the two groups differ significantly. It is true that the image of the V4 has been somewhat tarnished recently due to illiberal dynamics in Poland and Hungary. However, the political elites in V4 countries accomplished a small miracle in the 1990s by transforming their political and socio-economic structures in a short period of time, setting an example for a successful transition from authoritarianism and planned economy to market-based liberal democracy. The AT countries, on the other hand, have never brought forward visionary and reform-minded elites.<sup>2</sup> Instead, political systems in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have been shaped by a never-ending cycle of patronal politics, informal clientelist networks, and semi-authoritarian governance modes. Under these circumstances, even if the geopolitical issues with Russia and the EU's enlargement fatigue are resolved at some point in the future, domestic deficiencies in the three countries still would impair their quest for further European integration.

## Why the EU should embrace the new format

Despite the somewhat bleak prospect, the idea of the AT format should not be dismissed easily. As a new format it has some potential to address some of the major weaknesses of the EaP and make the EU's neighbourhood governance in the region more effective and impactful.

Among others, the AT introduces a much-discussed differentiated approach to the EaP area. The EU could finally push for the regatta principle towards the AT countries, especially if the format remains open to new members as suggested in the Resolution on the future of the Trio Plus Strategy 2030 [adopted](#) by the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly in 2019. The Resolution suggests the "Trio + 1" term in order to include Armenia based on the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between Armenia and the EU. Therefore, the AT can be seen as a chance to motivate the other EaP countries without antagonizing behaviour.

Next to boosting their European ambitions, the AT could also encourage much needed regional cooperation among the EaP countries, leading to tighter regional integration schemes in energy, infrastructure, and economy – something that is still lacking in the region.

Finally, the demand-driven AT-like formats could be used by the EU to better leverage reform processes in the AT countries. To paraphrase a famous adage, with great ambition comes great responsibility. Since AT sets more ambitious goals for its members in contrast to the Neighbourhood Policy platforms, the EU may find it easier to impose more formalized and less vague political conditionality, and to break the resistance of reform-sceptical political elites in the AT-member EU neighbourhood countries.



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### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> With exception of Moldova which follows the policy of neutrality. The majority of Moldovan population is also against the NATO membership, see: RI. 2019. "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova; December 5, 2018 – January 16, 2019." Accessed 03.03.2021. [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_moldova\\_poll\\_december\\_2018-january\\_2019.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_moldova_poll_december_2018-january_2019.pdf). P.57.

<sup>2</sup> Even if institutional reforms by Mikhail Saakashvili's government are considered as a success story, he was more of an authoritarian modernizer rather than pro-democratic reformer.

### How to contribute to the *Across the Caucasus* Blog

The blog is open to anyone who is interested and informed in writing about contemporary developments in the Caucasus and the wider Black Sea and Caspian Sea region including but not limited to scholars, researchers, freelance writers, activists, artists, civil society members, and politicians. Young female researchers and researchers from the Caucasus countries are particularly encouraged to submit their articles. You will find a detailed list of possible topics and the blog guidelines on the website. Before you send your work to us, please make sure to familiarize yourself with our guidelines. If you are not sure whether your topic fits our thematic scope or have another question related to the blog, feel free to contact us at [jenacauc@uni-jena.de](mailto:jenacauc@uni-jena.de) and indicate "Across the Caucasus Blog" in the subject line.