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POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH  
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

# BULLETIN

No. 77 (1148), 4 June 2018 © PISM

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## The Varna Quadrilateral: A New Format for Regional Cooperation

Jakub Pieńkowski, Tomasz Żornaczuk

*Initiated at the end of 2017, the Varna Quadrilateral is a forum for cooperation between Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and Romania. It is intended to improve coordination of cross-border infrastructure and energy investments between the largest countries in southeastern Europe. Meetings to date also show that collaboration can have clear political elements. However, a half year after the inauguration of the new initiative, its future is in doubt due to the great differences between its members.*

Most of regional political and economic cooperation formats in southeastern Europe are centred on the Western Balkans. Their goal is to stabilise states in this region politically and economically after the period of armed conflicts, and assistance their integration with the EU. Sometimes, this collaboration is complemented by Croatia and Slovenia. On the other hand, platforms such as the South-East European Cooperation Process and the Regional Cooperation Council include several countries whose size and diversity, as EU members, prospective members and those with no clear prospect of accession, hinders the development of joint arrangements. For this reason, these formulas do not satisfy the ambitions of Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, EU Member States and the largest countries in the region.

**Reasons for Cooperation.** Bulgaria and Greece took an initiative in building the Varna Quadrilateral format. During the meeting in September 2017, their respective prime ministers, Boyko Borisov and Alexis Tsipras, announced the intent to establish the platform together with Romania and Serbia. It was to be based on the Craiova Group, established in the Romanian city of that name in spring 2015. Romania is looking for an exclusive format of regional cooperation, and at the same time would like to increase its own influence within the EU. Such a format would break the informal pairing of Romania and Bulgaria perceived by EU institutions and some Member States since their joint accession in 2007. According to the authorities in Bucharest, this perception also influences Romania's lack of Schengen membership, even though the country has made significant progress in the fight against corruption compared to Bulgaria. The ambition of the Craiova Group was shown by the reference to the Visegrad Group (V4) as a model for regional cooperation for Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia. However, it did not work primarily because Serbia is not in the EU, and most V4 work concerns European policy. The inclusion of Greece, which is the largest country in the Balkans and has the longest experience of EU membership in the region, as well as the emphasis on economic cooperation objectives mainly concerning infrastructure will increase the new platform's chances of success.

By joining the regional cooperation platform, Greece wants to rebuild its own position in the EU and the Balkans, which was undermined by the economic crisis. It also aims to increase its impact on the development of the region's infrastructure, including connections to the port of Thessaloniki. At the same time, Greece is one of the most eager supporters of Bulgaria and Romania's Schengen accession, because the only land connection to the rest of the EU, which does not require crossing the external EU border,

goes via these countries. However, Bulgaria has the ambition of becoming the most active EU country in the Western Balkans, and the new approach of the Union assumes the development of infrastructure connections at the pre-accession stage. Strengthening the EU cooperation with the region is a priority of the Bulgarian Presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2018, during which the Sofia summit of the EU and Western Balkans has been a central point. Serbia willingly participates in initiatives that support its development and efforts to become a member of the EU. The Varna format could be especially valuable for Serbia as the only states aspiring to EU membership among its participants. An additional political impulse is the fact that Greece and Romania do not recognise Kosovo's statehood.

**Ambitions of Economic Cooperation.** The first Varna Quadrilateral summit, held in October 2017, revealed the lack of a concept for regional cooperation. Borisov and Tsipras, along with Romanian Prime Minister Mihai Tudose and Serbian President Alexander Vučić, concentrated on the coordination of joint activities, primarily concerning infrastructure connections. This was motivated by the lack of motorway connections between these countries (although a short section was opened between Bulgaria and Greece in 2015) despite the fact that they are on five of 10 pan-European transport corridors. There are also ambitions to expand railway connections. The memorandum of September 2017 on the construction of a railway between the Greek ports of Thessaloniki and Alexandroupoli and Bulgaria's Burgas and Varna would be extended to include Romania. The lines between Belgrade, Thessaloniki and Sofia also would be modernised. In addition, Greece and Bulgaria both aspire to hold key positions on the regional gas market. This year, they plan to complete the construction of the IGB interconnector connecting the gas terminal in Alexandroupoli with the planned gas hub near Varna.

The domination of infrastructure topics was confirmed by the second meeting, in December 2017 in Belgrade. The memorandum between Bulgaria and Serbia, on the reduction of mobile telecommunication roaming charges, has so far been the only tangible, albeit secondary, result of the Varna Quadrilateral. The political elements of collaboration resounded more clearly than at the first meeting, with Serbia's EU aspirations being supported and Greece using the meeting to criticise Turkey, whose president had earlier questioned the boundaries set out in the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. The third meeting, in April this year in Bucharest, was concentrated on creating ministerial groups to elaborate common infestations.

**Conclusions.** The postponing of the third meeting of Varna Quadrilateral, initially planned for this January, was probably due to the intensity of current political events. During the first months of this year, Bulgaria and Serbia were preparing for the summit in Sofia, Greece intensified talks with Macedonia, and the Romanian government changed. It is expected that meetings will probably resume after the Bulgarian presidency of the EU Council. However, the delaying of meetings could also suggest that the Varna Quadrilateral may not be high among its members' priorities.

The political elements of collaboration pose a risk to the durability of the Varna Quadrilateral due to the great differences between its countries, including positions on the EU, Schengen Eurozone membership, and perceptions of NATO, Russia and Turkey. That is why cooperation, for example on issues related to current events in Europe, could be limited. A political context would also be clear in some joint economic projects. For example, the plan for a rail connection between Greek and Bulgarian ports is geopolitical because it would establish an alternative to the Turkish Black Sea Straits.

Macedonia seems to be a natural partner for this format, because the shortest land connections between Greece and Serbia run via its territory. However, while relations between the Varna Quadrilateral countries are generally cordial, Macedonia is in conflict with Greece about its name, and is involved in minor disputes with Serbia (on the status of the Macedonian Church) and Bulgaria (on national minorities). However, after settling the dispute with Greece, Macedonia could be involved with the Varna Quadrilateral, although probably only for specific projects due to its much smaller economic potential and the early stage of integration with the EU.

From the point of view of Poland as an advocate for equalising opportunities for less developed parts of Europe, the Varna Quadrilateral may be an attractive partner. Its aims are in harmony with the development of regional infrastructural projects promoted by Poland, including within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative. Should such projects be implemented within the framework of multilateral coordination, the Varna Quadrilateral could prove to be helpful in organising joint activities with Greece and Serbia, neither of which are part of the Three Seas project. Cooperation within the framework of the Varna Quadrilateral is at an early stage and has not yet brought concrete results. Because it focuses on infrastructure issues, the durability and effectiveness of this format will depend not only on the determination of the leaders of its member countries, but probably also on the availability of funds (including those from the EU) for the implementation of specific projects. However, cooperation between the Visegrad Group and the Varna Quadrilateral within the proven framework of the V4+ should be considered if the new format in southeast Europe proves to be sustainable and extends beyond infrastructure projects.