



The Past, Present and Future of Visegrad Cooperation

edited by Dr. Péter Rada

 **V4** Joint
Special Course



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WYDZIAŁ POLITOLOGII I DZIENNIKARSTWA



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The Past, Present and Future of Visegrad Cooperation

Edited by

Péter Rada

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Foreword

This textbook is the product of years of discussion and joint workshops, other publications and research, and more importantly a jointly thought course. The project we have started several years ago intended to bring closer the students of Visegrad and aimed at designing a curriculum for a jointly thought course in the frames of the project V4 Joint Special Course. At the expert level the partners met regularly and in December 2022 they organized the workshop on the future of Visegrad in Budapest hosted by the Metropolitan University Budapest.

The course eventually was introduced in the fall semester of 2022-2023 to the programs of the Budapest Metropolitan University, Budapest, Hungary, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, Metropolitan University Prague, Czech Republic. In the frames of the course the four university taught jointly in hybrid format and during the 12 weeks of the semester the students of the four universities became institutionally classmates. 60 students from the four partners were registered to the course and many others joined individually to one or more classes at BA and MA level. The curriculum was designed to the needs of our students and the requirements were the same.

The Visegrad Cooperation has always meant to be a flexible platform to find and synergize the common interest of the four countries and to synchronize our efforts on the European and global level. Despite this fact we have poor knowledge on this region, its historic importance and the opportunities it could offer to the citizens in many fields (e.g. in economic, business, trade, tourism, cultural, educational, etc. cooperation). There are many resources in our region which we should utilize. Common decision-making based on a more robust cooperation is inevitable and the students need to understand our region better. The cooperation should be based on common values and interests, common roots, culture, identity, history, and a coherent position inside the EU. With globalization proceeding, today the regional development in many areas may be more convenient, but, on the other hand, it is also experiencing serious problems (disappearing diversity, missing inclusion and solidarity, during the economic downturn, environmental devastation and resource depletion, etc.) This raises the need for regional revitalization and development by scientifically studying regions in the comprehensive sense. The goal of the course is to fill this very niche and help the future generation better understand our region.

All students needed to submit an essay about their thoughts and the best essays were selected to be published in this book. The authors of these essays also presented their works at the closing conference of the project in Prague in March 2023 hosted by the Metropolitan University Prague. The present book is a solid basis for teaching about the Visegrad Cooperation and Central Europe, which still fills a niche despite the fact that many have expressed the need of a jointly written comprehensive book about Visegrad. This book did not intend cover all the areas of the cooperation because did not want to limit the imagination and creativity of the students who contributed and the result is a more genuine collection of essays and analyses which better reflect what students in Central Europe think about our region's future.

The project was co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.

The editor

Budapest, 2023. June

Highlights of Visegrad in our Perspective

Ladislav Cabada¹, Ewelina Kancik-Kottun², Péter Rada³, Jaroslav Ušiak⁴

This chapter serves as some kind of introduction to the entire book without the claim that it intends to summarize the chapters which represent a very wide spectrum of approaches, opinions and methodologies. The book is the product of years of discussion and joint workshops, other publications and research, and more importantly a jointly thought course. Therefore this chapter does not intend to be comprehensive and cover all the issues which have come up during our years of work together. This chapter is rather a reflection on our thoughts right at the moment of closing the manuscript in June 2023. That is the title „Highlights of Visegrad” describes probably the best of the intentions of this chapter.

The starting point is the world which is visible from the Visegrad region. Accepting the assertion that there are indeed regional characteristics in foreign policy which are more specific to the Visegrad countries, we also need to note that the V4 is also part of a larger framework of interpretation based on the present logic, i.e. the V4 is part of several larger, overlapping “security-political complexes” such as the EU, or the NATO. The aim here is to interpret our own region (Central Europe and the V4) and share our reflections. The following propositions can be drawn with respect to our region and the world order around us:

1. The other V4 countries’ foreign policy has a sovereign space of maneuver and a national character, which can be decisive first regionally, because it is there where the closer network of values and interests (which are eventually constructed at the national level) directly interact;
2. Central Europe is indisputably and institutionally part of the “liberal world order”: the EU and the NATO;
3. the domestic and/or regional character and space for maneuver is exogenously and institutionally shaped by this “liberal world order” and Transatlantic alliance.

Visegrad in Czech perspective

The Visegrad Group has become a visible but predominantly negatively perceived protagonist over the last decade. Using the concept of culture wars, it presents the basic positions of two clear-cut groups both within the V4 and in the wider European context. It rejects the Manichaeian conception of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ established by these two groups and emphasizes the need for consensus using the basic premise of classical liberalism, i.e. the right to have a different opinion.

February 2021 saw the anniversary of 30 years from the signing of the Visegrad Declaration. There have been a number of crises concerning bilateral discords within the

group, with the individual positions of some prime ministers and governments limiting the cooperation to a minimum. There have also been rather significant value disagreements particularly in the last decade, including an attempt to establish an alternative Central European partnership with a different ideological basis on the platform of the Slavkov Triangle (cf. Cabada 2018). In spite of this fact, the current Visegrad Group (hereafter V4) can be viewed as a relatively vivacious structure with a very ambitious self-presentation. V4 is currently (self-)presented in various media and political contexts and narratives from an exceptionally wide range of perspectives – one time demonised, another time perceived as the *advocatus diaboli* or the protector of ‘normality’.

It is apparent that the images and narratives of Visegrad frequently prevail over other significant aspects of the cooperation, i.e. the success of the group and its members. This success involves particularly the accession to NATO and the EU, which demonstrates sufficient socialization based on western standards (Walsch 2018). This success is an old one, however, and is relativized by the fact that apart from the ‘champions’ of Central Europe, which is how the countries of the Group perceived themselves already in the Declaration, many more candidates acceded in 2004 and over the following years. What may be considered a success is the significant economic progress of the V4 countries. Poland is currently the seventh biggest economy in the EU, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia have also experienced clear economic success. What may also be perceived as success is the fact that for many countries of Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Western Balkans region, V4 has become a symbol of successful Europeanization while at the same time maintaining the status as the greatest promoter of further extension of the EU. This is particularly where one can observe the most positive aspect of the frequently specific European politics of the Orban government. The V4+ format is proving to be functional when pursuing interests at the European level, as illustrated for example with the repeated establishment of the group of “Friends of Cohesion” when discussing the multi-annual financial frameworks of the EU. V4 is also visible within the the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy, not only in relation to efforts aimed at stopping the migration waves at the EU borders, which is frequently presented by V4 politicians in a very unfortunate way, but also e.g. in the form of the V4 EU Battlegroup or the significant contribution to the fight against cybernetic and other hybrid threats (cf. Cabada, Waisová et al. 2018).

The above-mentioned examples of success, as well as many others, are relativized, however, by the problematic behaviour of key actors at the national, Visegrad, and European levels. Paradoxically, even the governments of V4 countries frequently do not present their success in the EU, but instead focus primarily on criticism of EU institutions, using a significantly populist narrative along the lines of “we are the good Central Europeans” versus “the hegemonic EU”. It also needs to be noted, however, that after 2015 many key protagonists on the European level, not only politicians but significantly and frequently also the media, created an image of V4 based on its demonization and presenting the national-conservative populists J. Kaczyński and V. Orbán as the sociotype of the Central European politician. This kind of presentation of “the new Europe” is

misleading and fails to acknowledge numerous cases of success not only of the V4, but also of other countries of the post-communist area in relation to the development of democracy, the contribution to a common European defence, joining the Euro area, etc. (Cabada 2019). As is the case with the national level, one can observe a strong and not always reasoned polarization even at the European level.

All kinds of black-and-white classifications into ‘the bad Visegrad’ and ‘the good ones’ at the European level, or ‘the radical-right-wing populists’ and ‘the pro-European liberals’ at the national level are a cliché. The right wing, in relation to the radicalization, nativization, and anti-liberal positions of a significant (and increasing) part of its members, fails to acknowledge the Europe-wide scale of the problem. The opposition powers standing against national populists overestimate their ‘liberal’ nature⁵ and ignore the negatives, including strong populism resembling the populism for which the majority of current V4 leaders are criticized. My goal is to point out the problematic nature of this black-and-white perspective, which is labelled by many as a ‘culture war’, especially regarding the fact that it is one of the key sources of a strong and deepening polarization and therefore also the weakening of the pro-democratic liberal mainstream.

Some of the new EU member states and their representatives legitimately oppose certain proposals for changes regarding political preferences, the institutional framework, and the division of competences within the EU machinery. The legitimate opposition of a one-way strategy rejecting any compromise applied by the European Commission and a significant part of the political and media environment within EU-15 clearly cannot serve as an excuse for non-compliance with the democratic principles on the part of some of the CEE countries (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021: 3). On the other hand, it is impossible to overlook the fact that particularly this role of a strong opponent has raised the profile of the V4. A major challenge that could ideally result in cooperation among politicians of the V4 member states, regardless of their ideological profile, is to transform the present rather negative coalition potential in the EU and fulfil the ambition of making the V4 the “second engine of integration”. In other words, the V4 needs to overcome the situation wherein it is primarily the veto-player or a destructor and should, in contrast, try to enforce as many of its own proposals as possible in the context of wide coalitions. In order, however, to accomplish such a goal, it needs to seek much more consensus. This is a challenge for the entire EU and ‘the West’ in a more general context. The political mainstream has been disrupted, and within the populist politics, not only right-wing populists but also left-wing progressivists are moving towards radical and in some cases even extreme positions. These ideologically antagonist streams are unified, however, in their opposition to respect for the right to a different opinion. At the same time, they do not view politics as a competition over various conceptions and seeking of consensus, but rather from the Manicheist point of view, i.e. as a fight for hegemony and a game with the zero sum. A return to liberal roots, including the right to a different opinion without ostracism or even penalisation, therefore remains a common challenge for all pro-democratic streams not only within the V4.

Visegrad in Hungarian perspective

2019 was a symbolically important year for Central Europe because in 2019 Hungary, together with other Central European countries, celebrated the 30th anniversary of the change of systems, the 20th anniversary of NATO membership and the 15th anniversary of EU membership, thus joining symbolically and institutionally to the “liberal world order”. These events have been the cornerstone of the foreign policy of the countries of our region over the last three decades. 2019 also marked the anniversary of rejoining the “West”. In Yalta, our country’s fate was decided and we had had no influence on the real directions of development of our country for four decades. However, this changed in 1989; and while the past decades have not been easy, and the democratic transition and institutional, economic and social reforms have not been smooth, today Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic are full and equal members of the Western security architecture and alliance and value community. This membership has given back the opportunity that the V4 countries lost after the Second World War and the membership has given our countries the chance to develop along the values and, more importantly, the interests that were not possible earlier. Consequently, for any sane observer it is clear that there was and is no alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration. Of course, there are and will be disputes and disagreements, but all of these move the alliance forward rather than calling into question its validity.

Central Europe became part of the alliance, however, the “newcomers” did not always feel that they were really welcomed. Feelings of abandonment or neglect have been recurrent and not always unjustified. In the recent decades, the desire to align with the European Union or NATO has meant that the countries of Central Europe have often adopted institutions and rules without criticism, and that we have become less responsive to and less engaged with the often different processes taking place in our region.

The regionally strong socialization effect of Central European cooperation and interaction have direct and unavoidably solid influence on the individual foreign policy of the countries of the subregions of the “liberal world order” (here the V4). However, national interests are constructed internally, i.e. Hungary and the other three Visegrad countries also shape the outcome of the Central European complex compromise of interests and values. This is a valid but overlooked explanation and this is why many immediately talk about the crisis or even the obsolescence of the V4 when this compromise is not born easily.⁶ Consequently, the interests and foreign policy directions are born first independently (of course the governments who are the engines of interest construction through securitization)⁷ even from the neighbors; later through the regional “socialization process” they may get closer and adapt to the compromise. But it is a process and may be longer than in a crisis situation we would expect: shaping the compromise and the “joint” interest in 2015 was quicker than in 2022. In line with this logic the differences in the interests are normal despite many comments that Visegrad is dead.⁸

The Visegrad regional compromise of interests can be different from the rest of the EU or the Transatlantic region, and it is special “socialization process”. Through the process the Visegrad interests shape also the EU, US interests (and issues may appear on the

agenda) and leave a print on the “liberal world order”. The realization of the process implies to a few conclusions: there is a dialogue in the order but changes are slow; the direct agenda setters’ interests will always be more dominant; the smaller states (such as the Visegrad countries) are not always patient and tend to prefer America administrations or EU leadership which are close to their own government ideologically forgetting that the process of socialization is slow.

The idea of the “spirit of Visegrad” cannot be interpreted in the traditional realist-liberal coordinate system. The countries of the Visegrad Group are members of the European Union and NATO, and although their foreign and security policy is guided by some kind of national interest, traditional, classical realist power-political categories are hardly able to interpret their political actions. Although several elements of liberal institutionalism and other liberal theories (interdependence, democratic peace) are relevant to understand the Visegrad Group’s security policy practice, they cannot holistically capture the reality of the Visegrad Group. The security policy of the countries in the region can only be reconstructed as a choice between possible futures imagined in the past, partly interest-based and conscious, partly shaped in a context of debate, partly informed by fundamental value choices and the constructive power of imagination.

Why is this relevant for our region and our countries in Visegrad, and how does it justify the benefits of belonging to the “liberal world order”. NATO cannot, therefore, be conceived of as a mere community of realist interests – otherwise it is doubtful that it could have survived in the post-Cold War world, after the Soviet military threat was gone. Yet it is essential that the Alliance provides its members with a strong collective defense and deterrence capability. Without it, Hungary and the other countries of the V4 would be unable to provide for their own security adequately. Without NATO its member would require prohibitively expensive force development, or else be subordinated to the interests of some external power. If that external power were the United States or NATO (which is likely), the Central European countries would share in the dependence and orientation constraints of the alliance, but would not participate in its decision-making in the absence of membership. That is there is no alternative of memberships on the organizations of the “liberal world order” for the Visegrad countries.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, calling into question many of our assumptions about the international order. Russian aggression is a test of the system and raises questions also about whether the V4 is a regional security complex in the traditional sense. Leaving aside the open questions, we can agree that the invasion of Ukraine will be registered in the history books as a turning point and that many of the often carefully guarded tenets of the way how international relations function will need to be rethought. There is no doubt that the V4 will remain valid and that in today’s world there is a need for political cooperation at the regional level, which can provide flexible and regionally effective responses to (even) global challenges that arise in different regions.⁹ But even before the war in Ukraine, theoretical debates had already pointed out that the theoretical framework of regional security complexes is narrow and not fully applicable to the V4 and that the Visegrad Cooperation is rather a kind of issue(question)-specific regional cooperation, and definitely not a united international organization. That is, the regional

character does emerge, but in terms of commonly understood challenges and responses to them. The issue-specific approach to security has tended to strengthen cooperation on strategic issues over the last 30 years, despite many debates and diverging approaches. The “Visegrad spirit”¹⁰ is the link, the logical and indeed practical institutional “glue” that has enabled the Visegrad countries since 1991 to continue to cooperate flexibly and to enter together on the European or global stage, representing regional interests that would have been less visible without cooperation. Some issues are interdependent and closely interlinked and become issue-specific security supercomplexes (Marton et al., 2015), which are also constantly changing.

The goal of integration into the Euro-Atlantic federal system was unquestionable and its success is beyond question. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the rules of the game in the EU and NATO were shaped without us, and even after full membership was achieved, there remained a justifiable sense of inadequacy in the Visegrad countries: the alliance expected unconditional alignment as a starting point and was not always accommodating of the reservations expressed by our region. There is, of course, no alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration and the Visegrad countries, contrary to any belief have a clear pro-NATO and pro-EU public opinion.

The Visegrad countries have long sought to prove themselves as reliable allies, for example by lining up behind the United States unconditionally in 2003, which led to a number of sharp criticism in Western Europe. The V4 countries also sought to be fully compliant in the often double-standard EU accession process without expressing concerns, which was of course comfortable to the EU. Full membership, as the term implies, brought with it real expectations of “equality”, i.e. the “new” members did not just want to take their share of the responsibilities without being able to shape the future. It was not a question of missed constant praise towards the Visegrad countries, rather a sense of neglect and of being cornered out in serious decisions that generated real fears. These fears are well understood in the V4 countries, but not necessarily in the US. In other words, the importance of cooperation and finding a common voice is particularly important. The Visegrad countries want to be effective, important and reliable partners at the same time, while keeping the typically regionally important issue-specific complexes off the European, transatlantic policy agenda. Effectiveness does not only depend on the Visegrad countries, as the club(s) also need to implement their internal reforms, in which it is important to listen to the views of all members. The use of double or multiple standards in many cases, including against the Visegrad countries, is by no means a way forward.

Visegrad in Polish perspective

It has been over 30 years since the declaration on cooperation between Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in Visegrad was signed. The Visegrad Group, which as a form of regional cooperation was established on February 15, 1991, when the then presidents of Poland - Lech Wałęsa, Czechoslovakia - Václav Havel and Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall concluded an agreement defining the goals and conditions of

cooperation (Kancik-Kořtun 2022:7). At that time, it was an attempt to unite in order to strengthen its position in the arena of European politics, because let us remember that all these countries had freed themselves from the communist regime and began to transform into democratic systems. Thus, the V4 is an informal regional form of cooperation between four countries of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, which share a common history, tradition, culture and are adjacent to each other and have similar geopolitical conditions. Since then, the Visegrad Group has managed to implement a number of projects, two of which were priorities for it, namely the passage of accession procedures and the accession of the Visegrad countries to NATO and the European Union. However, there are constantly new problems and challenges that not only individual V4 countries, but also the entire Group have to deal with. These are social and economic issues, sustainable development and ecology, energy, culture and security. The cooperation of the Visegrad Group is not institutional, it is based solely on consultations as part of cyclical meetings at various political levels, mainly presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers. The only fully institutionalized form of cooperation in the V4 is the International Visegrad Fund based in Bratislava (IVF). The presidency of the Group is held on a rotational basis and lasts a year, and its program is adopted by the prime ministers of the Visegrad countries (from July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023, the presidency of the Group is held by Slovakia. On July 1, 2023, the presidency will be taken over by the Czech Republic) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 changed the policy not only of European countries, but in particular of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including the V4 countries. The armed conflict in Europe undoubtedly threatens the security of the countries of the former socialist bloc, and there is also Russian propaganda and intimidation. The war disturbed the international order and security status in this part of Europe. The Visegrad countries faced a huge challenge overnight after the start of the armed conflict. Undoubtedly, the first problem was the migration of people from war-torn areas to the V4 countries and government and civic assistance to refugees. Unfortunately, this was not the only problem, as the increase in galloping inflation has lowered the standard of living of residents in this part of Europe, and there are also problems related to raw materials and the energy crisis, as well as security problems, including the risk of a potential nuclear conflict. The V4 countries, such as Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, became very involved in helping Ukraine, both military and humanitarian. Poland has made a number of strategic changes to increase its security in the region, including military training for citizens, military training and the purchase of modern military equipment. In connection with its activities, it is placed among the countries involved at the level of a security guarantor in the region. The presence of NATO and American troops in Poland and Slovakia should undoubtedly be mentioned as well. Undoubtedly, Poland was very involved in helping Ukraine in every respect, where the course of Polish foreign policy also changed, in which the Polish government lobbied for help to Ukraine from the first days of the war among foreign countries.

Each of the V4 countries has adopted its own policy in terms of relations with Russia and there is currently no unity among them, as well as among citizens, regarding Russia's war

in Ukraine. Initially, there was talk of a split in the V4 over Hungary's pro-Russian policy, but more than a year after the start of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, it seems that such voices have been hushed up and have not significantly influenced internal politics within the V4. At the same time, it should be remembered that both Poland and Hungary had problems with obtaining European funds and are almost in a battle with the EU for them. The armed conflict close to the border with Poland undoubtedly highlights the importance of Poland's belonging to the structures of the European Union and NATO.

As for the future of the Visegrad Group, it seems that in the current situation it has undergone an internal crisis related to the perception of the war in Ukraine by individual states, relations with Russia and assistance to Ukraine and its citizens. Rather, the V4 will continue to function in the previous framework of cooperation, and there are no signs of its changes or a change in policy at the moment. It is also worth noting the new initiatives of regional cooperation, such as the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest Nine, which bring together many more countries from Central and Eastern Europe in their cooperation than the V4.

Visegrad in Slovak perspective

Slovakia assumed the presidency of the Visegrad Group from Hungary in the middle of 2022, taking on the responsibility of steering the group's agenda. The primary focus of Slovakia's presidency was to foster deeper regional cooperation in various key areas such as transportation infrastructure development, nuclear energy advancements, the promotion of low-carbon technologies, the facilitation of green and digital transformation, the pursuit of sustainability goals, enhancing youth mobility, and nurturing interpersonal relationships among member states.

However, given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, we firmly believe that cooperation among the Visegrad countries must now be anchored more than ever on fundamental principles such as the respect for human rights, freedom, democracy, the adherence to the rule of law, the cultivation of good neighbourly relations, and a steadfast commitment to European integration and transatlantic collaboration. The war in Ukraine has underscored the importance of upholding these values and principles in our joint efforts to address regional challenges and promote stability.

Consequently, We are faced with the question of reflecting on the role of Visegrad cooperation in this changing environment, and it will increasingly be necessary to conduct internal reflection on the future and priorities of Visegrad cooperation. The Visegrad Group of nations finds itself divided on several pressing issues. These divisions have emerged as a consequence of the conflict in Ukraine, and although a consensus has yet to be reached, it is crucial that we, as neighbouring countries with a shared history, find ways to collaborate effectively. This sentiment was echoed by Rastislav Káčer, the former head of Slovak diplomacy, following a meeting with ministerial counterparts from the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in Bratislava last year.

However, an increasing number of politicians are placing greater emphasis on the underlying reasons why Orbán relies on the Visegrád Four alliance and why this particular endeavour enjoys such significant popularity, particularly within Hungary. This portrayal of Orbán's political standing resonated to some extent with Slovakia's political parties, like Robert Fico's party. Further developments in Slovakia and the attitude towards the Visegrad Group will also depend on the results of the early elections in Slovakia. These elections have the potential to fundamentally influence the political situation in the country and also the choice and orientation of the new leadership. The outcome of the elections will have an impact not only on internal political decision-making in Slovakia, but also on relations with other Visegrad Group Member States. Nevertheless, a more discerning evaluation is now necessary, forcing a decision between either voting in favour of Orbán and inadvertently working against our own best interests, or casting our votes in a manner that truly serves the welfare of our country. Such considerations give rise to legitimate concerns that Orbán may ultimately abandon his facade as a friendly neighbour, aligning his stance with the fundamental tenets of his political ideology, a characteristic starkly exemplified by his actions concerning Ukraine.

We are dissatisfied with the interpretation of the essence of the Visegrád Group, which is based on complete unity of views and positions on every issue. We believe that the significance of the V4 lies in its association of neighbouring countries, where good neighbourly relations always bring benefits, even if neighbours do not always share the same opinions on everything.

In our opinion, in order to increase the effectiveness and longevity of cooperation within the Visegrád Group, it is crucial to shift the focus towards sectoral policies rather than solely relying on high-level political discussions. While collaboration among the V4 countries has always been present, its impact has gradually diminished in recent years, particularly after the migration crisis in 2015. The group's strength lies in its flexibility and absence of a rigid institutional structure, which should serve as the foundation for its continued existence.

It is worth noting that periods of weakened cooperation in the region are not unprecedented. In the 1990s, during the autocratic rule of Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia, cooperation within the Visegrád Group experienced a decline. However, the future evolution of the group will largely depend on the actions taken by its member countries. One aspect that raises curiosity is whether the Visegrád Group will aspire to respond to France's proposal for a European political community. This idea presents an opportunity for the V4 to actively shape the future of European politics and contribute to the ongoing discussions on European integration process.

Furthermore, the outcome of the upcoming Polish elections could play a significant role in rebuilding Poland's position within the European Union. A potential shift in Poland's stance could bring renewed momentum to the Visegrád Group and strengthen its collective influence within the EU. Since the migration crisis in 2015, the Visegrád Group has faced challenges in finding a strong, unifying agenda. It is important to recognize that the group can only function effectively if all four-member countries are aligned in their

goals and priorities. To maintain its effectiveness as a Central European cooperation mechanism, the Visegrád Group should aim to strike a balance that transcends exclusive ideological affiliations. It cannot be exclusively liberal or illiberal, right-wing or left-wing, but should instead seek a common ground that respects the diversity of perspectives within the region while addressing shared challenges. By emphasizing sectoral policies, embracing flexibility, and fostering inclusivity, the Visegrád Group can reinforce its relevance and contribute significantly to the advancement of Central European cooperation and regional stability.

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⁵ One could mention one illustrative example: the Hungarian formation Jobbik, manifesting strong Fascist and anti-Semitic tendencies, presently creating an alliance with other anti-Orban powers, which is considered by some observers almost a fighter for democracy in Hungary.

⁶ Such as today.

⁷ See Marton et al., 2015

⁸ Luckily, those experts who have dealt scientifically with our region have different opinion. See: Cabada, 2020; Usiak, 2018.

⁹ See more about V4 specific security studies at Marton et al., 2015

¹⁰ See more about the expression “Visegrad Spirit” at Rada, 2021

Symbolic Public Policy and the Visegrad Cooperation's Place in the International Order

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Abstract

The room for maneuver in Central Europe – and in this study to the Visegrad Cooperation – fundamentally determines the limits of Hungary's foreign policy options. Since 1991, the Visegrad Cooperation has been a point of reference in Hungarian foreign policy, both in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration, neighborhood policy and the protection of the Hungarian minorities beyond the borders. The political geometry in which Hungary has had to navigate has a specific regional character, for which the Visegrad Cooperation provides some kind of framework in the form of “symbolic public policy”. The aim of this introductory chapter is to outline this regional character and background, and to examine the place of our region in the world and the way in which regional interests are represented at the level of the international system. Today, the Visegrad countries belong to the core area of the 'liberal world order' and, although they are not direct agenda-setters of the order, they influence it indirectly through regional cooperation, for example in the EU decision-making or through the regional, or bilateral relations with the United States. Thus, Visegrad's symbolic public policy does have a demonstrable impact on the development of the international system, even if it is limited compared to the impact of great powers.

Keywords: symbolic public policy, Visegrad Cooperation, international system

Introduction

The “liberal world order” may be a historical exception (Kagan, 2022: 9) in Kenneth Waltz’s classic realist logic of the international system (Waltz, 2010). Despite the fact that the liberal order did not become truly universal, yet it was able to prevent the outbreak of great power wars after 1945 (at least yet). Theoretic opponents of the order understandably acknowledge its flaws, while its supporters also admit its problems, but liberal thinkers point out that there is no better alternative to it in terms of maintaining international peace and security.⁴ There is a consensus in the theoretical literature that the 'liberal world order' was created by the United States in 1945, taking advantage of a very particular power constellation. Then the order was extended to the former socialist countries, which voluntarily accepted the new rules based order. Ultimately, one of the original aims of the Visegrad Cooperation was to enable the Visegrad countries to become full members of European integration and NATO, thus to operate according to the rules of the liberal order.

This paper makes historical references to the Visegrad Cooperation, but it does not aim to provide a chronological overview. Rather, the aim of this study is to highlight what, in

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the context of the “liberal world order”, can form a logical and conceptual system that is relevant to our country and our region. By identifying the appropriate concepts – such as symbolic public policy – a theoretical research agenda can be formed. Nevertheless, we could not avoid looking at historical events and concepts related to Visegrad, to which approach we provided space only to discuss the basics of Visegrad and policy-polity oriented questions.

The liberal world order and the Visegrad countries

The starting point – which is beyond question looking at the world from Budapest – is that the perceived world is what we see in our region. For us, the region, and therefore Central Europe, means first and foremost the Visegrad Cooperation and the four countries in it.⁵ Accepting the assumption that there are indeed regional characteristics in foreign policy that are more specific to the Visegrad countries, we take into account that the V4 is also part of a framework of interpretation based on the presented logic of larger, even overlapping security complexes. The most prominent of these frameworks are the EU and NATO.

All of these lead to the following statements regarding our region and the "liberal world order", which are also relevant for Hungary: (1) the V4 is indisputably institutional part of the ‘liberal world order’; (2) the domestic and/or regional character is exogenously and institutionally shaped by this 'liberal world order'; (3) despite all this, Hungary's foreign policy (and of the others in Visegrad) has some remaining sovereignty in reality, which are regionally decisive, because Hungarian values and interests constructed at the national level come into direct interaction with others’ interests and values here in Central Europe primarily and at first.

Theorizing about the ‘liberal world order’ is no minor task, therefore it is not the main aim of this chapter. Transatlantic cooperation and within it our region is a specific ‘liberal bubble’ within the wider order because the member countries form the core of the ‘liberal world order’. The United States was able to shape this world as a hegemonic superpower after the fall of the Soviet Union and thanks to its military, economic and political power it was able to set the agenda from its own point of view (Mearsheimer, 2018), leaving less room for the other participants, in some cases even forcing them to comply. The Visegrad countries see the downsides of the ‘liberal world order’ because for instance this American push, but are inside of the bubble. They do not have a direct agenda-setting power, but they can indirectly participate in influencing trends related to an issue already on the agenda. This is only true if the agenda-setters – the EU or the US – can hear the voice of the Visegrad countries. However, if there is no unified and distinctive voice, the individual interests can be lost in the turbulent noise of the outside world, and it is no wonder that our region is playing an adaptive role if it remains silent.

At a theoretical level, but may be in terms of practical policy actions, we can certainly agree that there is a distinctive V4 regional characteristic⁶ that influences the foreign policy of our countries and policies in our region, which is framed by the agenda set and

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pursued by the great powers of our international order (in the liberal world the United States and, not insignificantly for our region, the European Union). We also accept the assumption that the current world order is liberal and is influenced by the issues on the agenda of the liberal West (neoliberal approach, but with some neorealist elements if NATO is included in the calculation), and that the issues reflect the order itself even if the West is not united in every single decision. On the other hand, it has to be acknowledged that the constituent elements of the international system, i.e. states, also have an impact on what issues are on the agenda at the systemic level and consequently how the world order develops. To mention one example of the process: our countries foreign policy is influenced by the international order and international events, but interests and values are determined by a longer and more internally driven process (individualistic approach, which resembles to classical realist or classical liberal thoughts); i.e. what we think about the challenges we all face. In case of Hungary, Hungary's place in the international order (see the goal of being midsize power)⁷ is first reflected in our region and if it gains validation by our partners in the regional complexity⁸, it may also have an influence at the level of the liberal order.

The “liberal world order” from a neoliberal (but also idealist) perspective (Ikenberry, 2020) is a framework the limits of which can be pushed, but not crossed without serious consequences. Sovereignty in the international system cannot be unlimited, because either neoliberal dependencies or neorealist survival mean that even great powers cannot do just anything. The idea of the spirit of Visegrad⁹ cannot be interpreted in the traditional realist-liberal logic. The countries of the Visegrad Group are members of the European Union and NATO, and although their foreign and security policy is guided by some kind of national interest, traditional classical realist power-political categories are hardly able to interpret the political actions. Although several elements of liberal institutionalism and other liberal theories (interdependence (Keohane, 1984), democratic peace (Doyle, 1986)) are relevant to understand the Visegrad Group's security policy, they cannot holistically capture the situation of Visegrad and Hungary in the past decades. The security policy of the countries in the region can only be reconstructed as a choice between possible futures imagined in the past, partly interest-based and conscious, partly shaped in a context of debate, partly informed by fundamental value choices and the constructive power of imagination. From this point of view, it is particularly interesting to look at the Visegrad Cooperation itself as a (symbolic) public policy.

2019 was also symbolically an important year for Central Europe and our country in the “liberal world order”, because in 2019 Hungary, together with other Central European countries, celebrated the 30th anniversary of the regime change, the 20th anniversary of NATO membership and the 15th anniversary of EU membership. These events have been the cornerstone of the foreign policy of the countries of our region over the past three decades. 2019 also marked the rejoining of the Visegrad countries to the West after 75 years of Eastern orientation. In Yalta, our region's fate was made, but without the involvement of our region's representatives and with limited influence on the real fate of our countries for four decades. However, this was changed in 1989; and the Visegrad countries are now full and equal members of the Western security architecture and

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alliance. There was and is no alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration in our region. Of course, there are and will be disputes and disagreements, but all of these will hopefully move the alliance forward rather than call into question its validity.

Most of the disputes within the alliance and the 'liberal world order' stem from the fact that Central Europe has indeed become part of the alliance, but the 'newcomers' have not always felt that they have really been welcomed. Feelings of abandonment or neglect are recurrent and not always unjustified. The desire to align with the European Union or NATO has meant that in recent decades the countries of Central Europe have often adopted institutions and rules without criticism, and have become less responsive to and less engaged with the often different processes taking place in our region. The feeling that Central Europeans have been forgotten or that they are not understood is not conducive to the development of the community. All these experiences, and the serious dilemmas that had to be addressed, can serve as a guide to how to strengthen regional resilience and prepare for the increasingly frequent global political fault lines that are likely to continue to emerge in the future. Regional cooperation does have relevance, and it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that there is no lasting alternative for any of the Visegrad countries within the Euro-Atlantic alliance. A good example of this is that, learning from the lessons of the 2008-2009 crisis, when the whole EU was looking for a solution, the more effective response for our region was a regional approach, and building on this experience in the fight against Covid-19, the member states – despite EU's criticism – sought a solution to the dilemma of how to deal effectively with a staggering pandemic and loss of life without that the effects of the response have unforeseeable consequences for economic performance. Strengthening regional cohesion in the V4, developing physical and human infrastructure and exploiting regional synergies remain high on the agenda.

The past and present of Visegrad Cooperation

In the post-World War II world, Central Europe disappeared even from the vocabulary. In fact, the countries behind the Iron Curtain found themselves in the Soviet empire. In the communist bloc organized by the Warsaw Pact (in the security dimension), Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary were the most advanced countries and actually were not integrated into the Soviet system completely. Their intellectual groups, writers and social scientists preserved and demonstrated the values of national independence and freedom, and their societies sometimes showed a strong desire for democracy, which they did not give up even after their uprisings were crushed. The Hungarian 1956, the Czechoslovak 1968 and the Polish 1956-1980 regularly expressed the desire to return to Europe. The ideal of Europeanness expressed the demand for freedom and better living conditions.

The political processes that started in the second half of the 1980s, above all the political turnaround in the Soviet Union, notably the democratization steps taken under Gorbachev – perestroika (reconstruction), glasnost (openness) – opened the possibility of regime change for countries wishing to escape dictatorship and Soviet rule. Poland and Hungary were the first countries to take steps towards the transition, with the institutionalization of political pluralism (multi-party system) and the organization of free parliamentary

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elections, followed relatively quickly by Czechoslovakia. During this period, the political forces of the three countries paid close attention to each other's processes, achievements in the transition and concrete political strategies, aware of their historical similarities and common interests. The political groups in the three countries, which were organizing against communist rule, were in constant contact with each other, even illegally, during the Soviet period and during the regime change, supporting each other, learning from each other and taking their solidarity for granted.

The governments that were formed in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary after the first free elections were determined to preserve the solidarity of the past and to act for common goals. In November 1990, at the signing ceremony of the Paris Charter, which laid down the principles of the new post-Cold War Europe, Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall expressed his belief in the three countries' cooperation and proposed to the Polish and Czechoslovak heads of government and their partners that the political leaders of the three countries should meet the following year in Visegrad to reflect on the memory of shared history.

Before looking at the historical, geopolitical reasons for the Visegrad alliance, it is worth reviewing the broader geographical context of the four countries, and defining the troubled Central European region. With shifting borders and changing geopolitical fault lines, the Visegrad countries, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, share many of the same historical roots. The three later four countries have been moving side by side in the process of state-building and connecting to Western Christian civilisation since the 10th century, when many of the current European countries did not even exist in their present form.

There were serious historical roots for the strengthening of cohesion between the countries of the region following the change of regimes. There are a number of common links, values and interests that have long united the Visegrad countries. And behind these specific political, social and economic reasons, there is also a close geographic affinity. The Visegrad Group is situated in a special 'in-between' region, sandwiched between East and West. In terms of its social functioning, it has belonged to the Western half of Europe for thousands of years, while drifting away from the West in waves over the centuries, it has drifted towards Eastern Europe.

There are specific reasons for this dichotomy, this 'in-between region', since even after a thousand years, a strong geographical dividing line can still be discerned. It starts south of the source of the rivers Elbe and Saale and stretches from the western border of the Lajta and the former Roman province of Pannonia to the Adriatic Sea. In the areas to the West, the late antique Christian and the barbarian, Germanic social and political systems merged after the fall of the Roman Empire and have formed the basis of European culture ever since (Szűcs, 1983).

In the East, on the other hand, the center was Byzantium, which sought to preserve the Eastern heritage of the Roman Empire rather than integrate the so-called barbarian world. European regions, too, can only be spoken of from around the turn of the millennium. Meanwhile, the Western center of Christianity because of the state religion remained

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Rome. With the great schism of 1054, the region as a whole followed the rite of the Western Church, while another, equally strong boundary line, much further east of the first, was clearly drawn. This separated the western and eastern Slavic territories from the Alduna region northwards through the Eastern Carpathians, and by the 13th century it had been drawn as far north as the Baltic. The so-called 'West' was less pronounced, but still applied to the Kingdoms of Bohemia, Poland and Hungary, and to the Germanic Order in the north, yet within this West the foundations of Central Europe began to emerge a millennium ago. Interestingly, from the 16th century onwards, a sharp economic and social fault line along the Elbe-Lajta border divided Europe again. In this way, the Visegrad region and the territories to the east of it were uniformly transformed into the territory of the so-called second or hereditary serfdom (Szűcs, 1983).

In addition to the cultural and social impact, the countries of the region drifted more towards the East in economic terms. This dichotomy created the specific intermediate area known as East-Central Europe. From a historical perspective, the geopolitical lines of power over the Visegrad countries have changed a lot in recent centuries. The complete loss of sovereignty of the Czech Republic following the Battle of White Mountain (1620), the partition of Poland three times (1772-1795) and the incorporation of the Kingdom of Hungary into the Habsburg Empire have prevented them from jointly shaping the future of the region.

Later fault lines were reinforced by the territorial division of the Great Powers at Yalta in 1944, when the Iron Curtain was drawn almost along the same line that had already divided the region several times before to the west. After long centuries of temporary common destiny, followed by repressive decades of socialism, the independent sovereign Visegrad states found each other instinctively. And two decades ago, North Atlantic and European integration reached the region.

The above mentioned invitation of József Antall and the the Visegrad meeting in 1991 was inspired by a medieval agreement. In November 1335, at the initiative of King Charles Robert of Hungary, a council was held in the royal palace of Visegrád on the Danube, attended by King Casimir III of Poland and King John of Luxembourg of Bohemia. The three rulers met to settle their differences of power and to agree on economic and political cooperation to counter the Austrian and German ambitions for domination of the Central European region. They identified new trade routes to circumvent the Vienna customs. The main stops on the Buda-Brno route were Esztergom, Nagyszombat and Holics. Buda and Brno were granted full trade rights. Kassa became the center of Polish-Russian trade in Hungary.

This cooperation was so successful that the economies of the three kingdoms flourished at this time, with the three historic kingdoms of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary becoming the core of Central Europe. For their existence and independence, they had to constantly fight wars with neighbouring powers. The fact that they could represent their interests more effectively together was demonstrated by the meeting of the three kings at Visegrad in 1335, perhaps the first summit in Eastern Europe. The history of Central Europe has shown that aggression, conquering or threatening ambitions from outside

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must be met with common action, defending the values and traditions of the people of this region.

This was the main motivation behind the later policy of personal unions, the policy of the Polish, Czech and Hungarian rulers in the region of uniting the 'Visegrad' territories into an alliance. The historical memory of all three countries vividly recalls events in which unity and mutual support brought joint successes, and failure to do so weakened those left behind. The Polish support for the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848, the Hungarian-Polish parallelism of 1956, the Hungarian-Czechoslovakian processes of 1968 and the influence of the Polish Solidarity movement in Eastern Europe are also emotionally significant for today's generations.

The name of the Visegrad Group was chosen at a meeting by Václav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, Hungarian Prime Minister Antall József and Polish President Lech Wałęsa in Visegrad, Hungary, on 15 February 1991. At the meeting, the politicians signed a declaration that the three (since 1993 four) countries would work closely together on the road to European integration. After the collapse of the communist regime, their cooperation facilitated the transition from totalitarian regimes to a free, pluralist and democratic society, and they shared the common goal of joining a modern, democratic world.

In the Declaration, adopted at the summit on 15 February 1991, the representatives of the three countries summarized their countries' common political and economic aspirations and their intention to harmonize their policies for the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact (the troops, i.e. Soviet soldiers, were still on our territory). The document set out the long-held principles and political and economic aspirations of the new leadership of the three countries to "eliminate the social, economic and intellectual manifestations of totalitarianism", to build parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, to establish a modern market economy and to participate as soon and as fully as possible in European integration. Significantly, it was stressed that "national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities should enjoy all rights, including in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres, as well as in education, in accordance with traditional European values and in line with international human rights instruments." We are committed to a society "tolerant of local, regional and national communities, free from hatred, nationalism, xenophobia and hostility towards neighbors". Practical steps included consultations on security, market-based economic cooperation and the development of North-South transport infrastructure. The Solemn Declaration signed by the Heads of State and Government was pleased to note that "the consciousness and aspirations of our nations for historical unity can now be expressed unhindered and in accordance with the real interests of our peoples at the highest level of political will."¹⁰

In 1993, the Visegrad Cooperation became a four-member bloc with the separation of Czechoslovakia. The group was originally called the Visegrád Three, but after the split of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic in 1993, we speak of the Visegrád Four. All four member states joined the European Union on 1 May 2004.

The emergence of symbolic public policy in regional cooperation

Symbolic public policy (Lester et al, 2000: 9) does not directly offer (welfare) benefits to particular social groups in the public policy space, solving specific social problems, changing the regulation of procedures, but focuses government policy on the representation of social values that strengthen social cohesion, develop community motivation to assert these values and support and follow government action that embodies these values. Symbolic public policy is typically of political significance, as governments or other political actors use it to emphasize their own political views, values and priorities, or to counterbalance the positions of the opposition. However, the impact of symbolic public policies can be limited as they do not always lead to concrete action or changes in practice.

The V4 countries aim to strengthen cooperation in the economic, political and cultural fields and to represent common interests in the European Union and in international politics. The articulation of the community of 'V4' countries as a symbolic public policy is a reinforcement of common values and common goals, but cooperation itself brings not only symbolic values but also economic and political benefits. Cooperation strengthens the Central European region and the member countries within it. Cooperation is also reflected in the cultural field, for example in the areas of shared historical memory, education and research.

Together, the “frontrunners” of the former communist bloc achieved the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Community on 16 December 1991 and in 1992 they established their own free trade area, CEFTA. For years, they argued together for NATO membership to guarantee their security, which was achieved on 12 March 1999 (Slovakia was able to join later because of former Prime Minister Meciar's policies).

V4 cooperation as a symbolic public policy can have an impact not only in/on the region but also in the European Union and in international politics. The collective action of the V4 countries obviously carries more weight on the international stage than the individual action of each country. As a symbolic public policy, the V4 exhibits values that tend to emphasize common historical, cultural and economic traditions. For example, the V4 tend to stand together against migration and to emphasize the importance and sovereignty of nation states. In addition, there are also symbolic actions in the V4 countries that aim to reinforce national identity or values, such as the celebration of national holidays and commemorations.

The former Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary started negotiations in early 1990. Their main goal was free cooperation without dependence on Russia. The relationship was voluntary and based on historical traditions. At the invitation of Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall, he invited the leaders of the other two countries to Visegrád Castle. Visegrád became a symbolic place, since more than six and a half centuries earlier the then Czech, Polish and Hungarian kings had met there along similar economic interests and geopolitical fault lines. Again at the site of the first Visegrad Congress, the leaders of these countries, Czechoslovak President Václav Havel, Polish President Lech Wałęsa and Prime Minister Antall József, officially founded the Visegrad Group on 15

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February 1991. The first few years of V3 cooperation, which at that time brought together three countries, were a very active and successful period. They fulfilled one of their most important goals, the dismantling of the system of political, military and economic cooperation that was controlled by the former Soviet communist empire. The Hungarian Prime Minister played a major role in this. In the end, the geopolitical process that began with the fall of the Iron Curtain was symbolically completed with the Visegrád Process, which would later serve as a regional model for the entire post-socialist camp.

The Visegrad countries have been at the forefront of European integration processes in the region. They were years ahead of the others in European and North Atlantic integration. The V3 also signed the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) as early as 1992. The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary's first major joint political success after the regime change was their accession to NATO in 1999. All along, these three countries were also the most likely to join the EU, and it was only through the European Union that a much larger group of countries was finally integrated.

The first few successful years of cooperation were interrupted by the separation of Czechoslovakia. On 1 January 1993, the Visegrad 3 became 4 with the creation of independent Czech Republic and Slovakia. This transformation weakened cooperation between the countries with the turnaround of the new independent Slovak policy under the Mečiar government. The country's foreign policy typically opened towards the East rather than towards an exclusive North Atlantic engagement. Only the 1998 trilateral summit in Budapest brought a change in this matter. This became a turning point in the history of the Visegrad Group, as half a decade later one of the group's main objectives was achieved and they were finally able to join the EU together with six other countries.

Yet the most successful period of Visegrad Group cooperation can be considered the long decade after 2010, when the countries of the region deepened their cooperation in an increasing number of areas. Not only did the classic cultural and economic ties strengthen, but the migration crisis that unfolded in the mid-2010s also led to the formulation of alternative political positions vis-à-vis the Western EU member states. The unity of action also persisted for years, regardless of changes of government, leading to the strengthening of a new bloc in the EU.

For a long time, the region has not had the opportunity to move towards integration and become an autonomous decision-making center of its own accord. However, the Visegrad Group has also succeeded in this area by joining the EU, as common traditions, political and economic operating principles have created a similar community of interests and values. This particular set of ideas is simply called the Visegrad idea. Although the relationship between the countries in the region has grown spectacularly, there has been increasing tension between them in recent years. Slovakia, as the only euro area member state, naturally has closer relations with the euro area member states and a more reserved position, even on migration, compared to the Hungarian-Polish axis. The dispute between the Czech Republic and Poland over the coal mine in Turów was also a noisy conflict. In the past, both countries had been in favor of coal mining development, even in the EU, but the Polish mine caused tensions between the two sides for quite some time (Szakálné

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Szabó, 2021). Despite all these internal disputes, the region moved together for a long time, and this unity lasted until the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022. At that time, it became clear that there was no longer full alignment between the four states in terms of geopolitical orientation and that the Hungarian government was on an independent path vis-à-vis the other Visegrad countries.

The situation today is twofold. The 2010s were the most successful decade of cooperation in the region for several reasons. On the one hand, for a long time, these countries were led by governments with good ideological-political relations. On the other hand, common challenges such as international migration or the epidemic and its management have brought the Visegrad countries even closer together. As a result, the 4 have been working in an increasingly close framework and in more regular meetings, similar to other EU and Central European regional cooperations. However, diverging foreign policy positions indicate deeper fault lines than before between Hungary and the other Visegrad countries.

The European core value of “unity in diversity” is indeed true for the Visegrad Group. Fundamentally, the region has always remained pro-European and committed to North Atlantic relations, albeit in a more critical form. At the same time, the members of the group pursue a particular policy of individual interests, where differences of opinion remain, which does not hinder their cohesion, but where flexibility is the strength of their cooperation. The regular small summits of the V4 have often helped formulate common positions. It is precisely the absence of organizational constraints that has ensured that internal disputes do not hamper the essence of cooperation (Szakálné Szabó, 2021). This symbolic politicization has strengthened the Visegrad Group in recent times.

It can be seen that many difficulties still characterize the functioning of the Visegrad countries, but they have increasingly been able to act as equal partners in disputes with the leading countries of the EU over the last decade. While the members of the group compete with each other and conflicts between them do not disappear through cooperation alone, this is what gives their relationship a special character of success. In addition to internal challenges, external pressures also make it difficult for the region to remain united. Macron's presidency has been characterized by France's continued efforts to separate Slovakia and even the Czech Republic from the other two members of the group. Despite these challenges, the region is growing stronger economically. The centers of power are slowly but steadily shifting eastwards, increasing the potential for joint success for the Visegrad Group (Szakálné Szabó, 2021).

The challenge for the future may be to maintain cohesion between the members of the group or even to transform cooperation geographically. The war conflict in the region's neighbourhood has clearly stirred the waters in relations between the countries of the Eastern European Union, which in the longer term may be accompanied by a shift in geopolitical interests.

In addition to the Visegrad Group, there are also a number of different types of cooperations within the European Union. Similar transnational cooperation exists, for example, in the Nordic Council, the Assembly of the Baltic States or the Nordic-Baltic Group of Eight (Szakálné Szabó, 2021). This type of cooperation has become the “V4+7”,

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which also includes Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria. It is also worth mentioning the “V4 and Eastern Partnership” relationship, where they cooperate with non-EU members of the Eastern Partnership, or the “V4 plus Nordic and Baltic countries” cooperation. These processes have also led to the creation of the Three Seas Initiative, a regional grouping of 12 EU countries between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas, including Austria, which could become an increasingly important regional grouping with the Visegrad countries at its center. Although the future of cooperation may depend on the international political situation, changes in the global economy and the domestic political situation of individual members of the Visegrad Group, they are expected to become an increasingly important force in Europe from a historical perspective (Orbán, 2021).

In the three decades since the change of regime, the Visegrad countries have become a key factor of Central European identity. Having achieved the strategic goals originally set, the Visegrad countries are increasingly coming together in a variety of areas and forms. Despite the difficulties, it is clear that there is considerable potential for voluntary, informal cooperation in the region. Many factors have shaped the Visegrad Cooperation to become a force for decisive change, even within the EU (Szakálné Szabó, 2021).

Once a quasi “single issue” organization, the Visegrad Group quickly achieved its main objective of dismantling the Soviet-style command system and integration to the West. However, cooperation did not die out, but spread to ever wider areas. It was through their flexibility rather than rigid structures that they were able to achieve success. And they have not been alone in the region, but there is also a noticeable increase in the need for deeper cooperation with other countries and groups of countries. This can be seen in the growing relations with the Baltic and the Western Balkan states, as well as in the issue of the Western Balkans enlargement, which is strongly favored by the Visegrad Group.

Conclusions

The goal of integration into the Euro-Atlantic alliance system was unquestionable and its success is beyond dispute. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the rules of the game in the EU and NATO were shaped without us, and even after full membership was achieved, there remained a justifiable sense of inadequacy in the Visegrad countries: the alliance expected unconditional alignment as a starting point and was not always accommodating of the reservations expressed in our region. There is, of course, no alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration and the Visegrad countries, contrary to any belief to the contrary, have a clear pro-NATO and pro-EU policy.¹¹

The existing theories of international relations are useful tools to analyze the international system, the “liberal world order” from a realist, or a liberal point of view emphasizing systemic elements of international relations. However, these theories – probably the constructivist regional security complex theory better – cannot holistically capture the situation of Visegrad and Hungary in the past decades. The security policy of the countries in the region can only be reconstructed as a choice between possible futures imagined in

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the past, partly interest-based and conscious, partly shaped in a context of debate, partly informed by fundamental value choices and the constructive power of imagination. From this point of view, it is particularly interesting to look at the Visegrad Cooperation itself as a (symbolic) public policy.

Today, the Visegrad countries belong to the core area of the 'liberal world order' and, although they are not direct agenda-setters of the order, they influence it indirectly through regional cooperation, for example in the EU decision-making or through the regional, or bilateral relations with the United States. Thus, Visegrad's symbolic public policy does have a demonstrable impact on the development of the international system, even if it is limited compared to the impact of great powers.

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³ Head of Institute at the Budapest Metropolitan University, associate professor

⁴ Robert Kagan sees the roots of the problem in the fact that order itself may regulate many dimension of life but cannot change the inherited human nature. Because of which we can feel today that the “liberal world” is under siege of historical powers or trends. Believing in the negative nature of humans as leading factor in international relations is primarily realist approach but talking about the limiting power of institutions is rather liberal. (Kagan, 2022)

⁵ It is rather difficult task to define exactly what Central Europe really is because the geographical, political and even the societal or economic borders mean different frames. Another problem is how to be more specific or narrow. To avoid even more methodologic challenges this chapter uses Central Europe's narrow definition and maybe a bit superficially uses the expressions Central Europe and Visegrad Cooperation interchangeably. The usefulness of the narrow methodology is discussed in more details in the Marton-Rada's approach of security policy (Marton et al., 2015)

⁶ See the statements of the Regional Security Complex Theory, eg. in: Marton et al., 2015

⁷ For an example for “mid-size power” see the Hungarian prime minister's strategic outlook. Eg.: <https://www.vg.hu/vilaggazdasag-magyar-gazdasag/2023/01/regionalis-kozep hatalomkent-latja-magyarorszag-jovojet-orban-viktor>

⁸ See for more details: Marton et al., 2015

⁹ See for more details: Rada, 2021

¹⁰ Translated from Hungarian. See the original source:

<https://antalljozsef.igytortent.hu/szolgalatban/kormanyfokent/kul-es-nemzetpolitika/egyeb-kulpolitikai-irasok/162-antall-jozsef-a-visegradi-egyuttmukodes-letrehozaja>

¹¹ Many will probably raise concerns or start automatically criticize this statement without checking some facts mainly because they think about the Hungarian government's publicly repeated comments related to the NATO or the EU. However, politically motivated statements and public opinion not necessarily is the same in all cases. See for example the opinion polls and analyses of the Nézőpont Institute (Nézőpont Institute 2019a, 2019b)

Thirty Years of Visegrad: from “Back to Europe” to the Fight for a Different Europe

Ladislav Cabada

Abstract

The Visegrad Group has become a visible but predominantly negatively perceived protagonist over the last decade. This paper observes the transformation of V4 into the form of a populist regional group including the embeddedness of the group in the network of European national-populist and nativist forces. Using the concept of culture wars, it presents the basic positions of two clear-cut groups both within the V4 and in the wider European context. It rejects the Manichaeian conception of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ established by these two groups and emphasizes the need for consensus using the basic premise of classical liberalism, i.e. the right to have a different opinion.

Key words: Visegrad Group, European Union; Conflict of values; populism

Introduction

February 2021 saw the anniversary of 30 years from the signing of the Visegrad Declaration. There have been a number of crises concerning bilateral discords within the group, with the individual positions of some prime ministers and governments limiting the cooperation to a minimum. There have also been rather significant value disagreements particularly in the last decade, including an attempt to establish an alternative Central European partnership with a different ideological basis on the platform of the Slavkov Triangle (cf. Cabada 2018). In spite of this fact, the current Visegrad Group (hereafter V4) can be viewed as a relatively vivacious structure with a very ambitious self-presentation. V4 is currently (self-)presented in various media and political contexts and narratives from an exceptionally wide range of perspectives – one time demonised, another time perceived as the *advocatus diaboli* or the protector of ‘normality’.

It is apparent that the images and narratives of Visegrad frequently prevail over other significant aspects of the cooperation, i.e. the success of the group and its members. This success involves particularly the accession to NATO and the EU, which demonstrates sufficient socialization based on western standards (Walsch 2018). This success is an old one, however, and is relativized by the fact that apart from the ‘champions’ of Central Europe, which is how the countries of the Group perceived themselves already in the Declaration, many more candidates acceded in 2004 and over the following years. What may be considered a success is the significant economic progress of the V4 countries. Poland is currently the seventh biggest economy in the EU, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia have also experienced clear economic success. What may also be perceived as success is the fact that for many countries of Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) and the

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Western Balkans region, V4 has become a symbol of successful Europeanization while at the same time maintaining the status as the greatest promoter of further extension of the EU. This is particularly where one can observe the most positive aspect of the frequently specific European politics of the Orban government. The V4+ format is proving to be functional when pursuing interests at the European level, as illustrated for example with the repeated establishment of the group of “Friends of Cohesion” when discussing the multi-annual financial frameworks of the EU. V4 is also visible within the the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy, not only in relation to efforts aimed at stopping the migration waves at the EU borders, which is frequently presented by V4 politicians in a very unfortunate way, but also e.g. in the form of the V4 EU Battlegroup or the significant contribution to the fight against cybernetic and other hybrid threats (cf. Cabada, Waisová et al. 2018).

The above-mentioned examples of success, as well as many others, are relativized, however, by the problematic behaviour of key actors at the national, Visegrad, and European levels. Paradoxically, even the governments of V4 countries frequently do not present their success in the EU, but instead focus primarily on criticism of EU institutions, using a significantly populist narrative along the lines of “we are the good Central Europeans” versus “the hegemonic EU”. It also needs to be noted, however, that after 2015 many key protagonists on the European level, not only politicians but significantly and frequently also the media, created an image of V4 based on its demonization and presenting the national-conservative populists J. Kaczyński and V. Orbán as the sociotype of the Central European politician. This kind of presentation of “the new Europe” is misleading and fails to acknowledge numerous cases of success not only of the V4, but also of other countries of the post-communist area in relation to the development of democracy, the contribution to a common European defence, joining the Euro area, etc. (Cabada 2019). As is the case with the national level, one can observe a strong and not always reasoned polarization even at the European level.

The aim of this paper is to specifically point out that all kinds of black-and-white classifications into ‘the bad Visegrad’ and ‘the good ones’ at the European level, or ‘the radical-right-wing populists’ and ‘the pro-European liberals’ at the national level are a cliché. The right wing, in relation to the radicalization, nativization, and anti-liberal positions of a significant (and increasing) part of its members, fails to acknowledge the Europe-wide scale of the problem. The opposition powers standing against national populists overestimate their ‘liberal’ nature¹ and ignore the negatives, including strong populism resembling the populism for which the majority of current V4 leaders are criticized. My goal is to point out the problematic nature of this black-and-white perspective, which is labelled by many as a ‘culture war’, especially regarding the fact that it is one of the key sources of a strong and deepening polarization and therefore also the weakening of the pro-democratic liberal mainstream.

The Developing Image of V4: From a Star Pupil to an Unwanted Child

In the first fifteen years following the fall of Communism, the group of Central European countries (apart from the V4, literary sources commonly classify Slovenia in this group as well) were labelled as ‘star pupils’. This image was strengthened thanks to their relatively stable economies, the absence of greater internal or bilateral conflicts, institutional adaptation, and the overall formal democratization including relatively strong rule of law. The disruption to this ‘harmony’ by Meciarism in Slovakia was minimized after 1998, and in 1997, the Central European countries were accompanied in the so-called Luxembourg group by Estonia, the most successful transition country of the Baltic Region. As pointed out by Lovec, Kočí and Šabič (2021: 2), this image changed as the result of an (alleged) failure to adapt to western standards, and the V4 received a new label as ‘the problematic children of Europe’. The fundamental reasons for such a rejection are considered to be specifically their rejection of relocation mechanisms and the fact that Poland and Hungary have been facing an EU investigation for alleged infringements of the rule of law (Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty).

The V4 is perceived by external critics as an internally consolidated and integrated organization whose member countries have uniform attitudes, i.e. they may be perceived as homogenous units (like-units). Such a perception is, however, very far from the reality. As already demonstrated in numerous studies, the V4 is a highly inconstant and fluid regional group based on the interaction of sovereign states and purely inter-governmental cooperation. Put in a different way, from the hundreds of particular political topics tackled by them, the governments of the V4 countries sometimes find ones where their positions correspond significantly with one other. Traditionally, there is strong agreement in support of further extension of the EU. The V4 countries have also had similar attitudes in terms of energy security and after 2015 in relation to the issues of migration into the EU and the so-called relocation quotas. There are nevertheless many topics where their attitudes differ and in some areas, there is even a rivalry between them, for instance when competing for foreign investments. Slovakia is a member of the Euro area, while the other V4 members are not. The political parties of J. Kaczyński, V. Orbán, A. Babiš, and R. Fico, governing the respective countries at the same time, belong to four different fractions in the European Parliament. Presenting the V4 as a fully coherent group would therefore be misleading and in fact populist, even more due to the fact that the critics of ‘the evil V4’ often also point out the positive deviations from negative regional trends, such as the Slovak presidents Kiska and Čaputová or the mayors of the capital cities (see below).

One-sided criticism of the V4 therefore obscures the other side of the picture – the long-term institutional crisis within the EU (Ágh 2019). In the context of the deep sense of insecurity impacting the entire EU and actually all its member states, the ‘core’ of the EU decided to strengthen integration and a common identity. More substantial opposition of such a measure was used and often also misused by western mainstream media and politicians in order to criticize new member states for their alleged failure to adapt to the European environment and values – in other words as a failure to achieve (full) socialization. Compliance with the strengthening of political and identity-related

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integration was therefore perceived as a new condition for the club membership which supplemented the previous conditions labelled as the Copenhagen criteria. A number of new member states rejected partly or fully this policy of “post-accession conditionality”, and particularly the one-sided criticism of their own opposing attitude and the overall stigmatization of the ‘newcomers from the East’ (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021).

It was naturally possible to notice gradually stronger critical voices even in a number of countries of EU-15, although there is a difference in the strength of the criticising protagonists at the national level. Even some of the countries of ‘Old Europe’ have seen such protagonists becoming members of governments, although they frequently represent minority partners (Italy, Austria), or have faced a *cordon sanitaire* (re)established against them in the political and especially the media environment. In contrast, in the V4 and the wider CEE, critics of the strengthening of transnationalism in the EU have gained control over cabinets and other institutions and have built their own ones emphasizing the primacy of national politics and national interest in order to face the EU narratives. They criticize the EU, primarily the European Commission (EC), as exceedingly activist and call for its ‘re-bureaucratization’ and its subordination to the Council of the EU using the classic populist repertory, presenting themselves as defenders of the nation and the Visegrad/Central European people from the hegemony and oppression from the Brussels elites. Central European populists led by V. Orbán present the ‘people of the V4’ as a protagonist that is traditionally and permanently oppressed, but within the symbolic politics present themselves as the greatest fighters for protection of alleged Christian values against the (ultra)liberal developments taking place in ‘the Old Europe’ and against migration (Cabada 2021).

The response to the criticism of one-sided and non-alternative politics, linked to the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty on part of the European mainstream, was often rather insensitive. The entirely legitimate demand for preservation of the intergovernmental paradigm including the veto right for each member state was perceived in the case of new member states as old-fashioned and illustrating a low political culture. This is perhaps why one can observe in some V4 countries a greater sympathy for the motives of British politicians and the public behind Brexit. The stigmatization of CEE was affected, among other things, by a long-term geo-political and geo-cultural perception based on the stereotype of ‘the Europe in-between’, understood as ‘the outer circle’ of Western Europe / the EU, a (semi-)periphery and a source of (potential) instability. Europeanization and socialization paradigms were therefore perceived as a tool for prevention of a return or a movement towards violence (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021: 4).

The migration crisis was a turning point in the perception of Central Europe and the development of its hetero-stereotype on the part of the EU-15. The rejection of relocation mechanisms and other steps of (some) Central-European governments was perceived as a clear failure of Europeanization mechanisms. As pointed out by Lovec, Kočí and Šabič (2021: 11), the following years saw intensive publication of scientific literature dealing with institutional failure and the increase in nationalism in Central Europe. The media and political stigmatization were thus complemented with the scientific framework and

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Central Europe, primarily the V4, became ‘the big bad wolf’ and has been presented as a coherent group of Eastern countries permanently blocking EU policies (Walsch 2018). Numerous ‘counter-union’ statements of Central European politicians, some having a clear populist basis but many of them being rather well reasoned (the issue of double standards, the absence of discussion, and generally the absence of alternatives in the area of public policies), may even be seen from the perspective of “the counter-stigmatisation strategy” (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021: 12).

From the vantage point of certain critical or constructivist theories, the development of V4 and (some of) its member states towards de-democratization, the disruption of the principle of the rule of law, and anti-liberalism are a manifestation of a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a result of the systematically established image of the V4 as a problematic subject, it has actually become a problematic subject. This means, among other things, that within the V4, positions deviating from the ‘common’ voice are marginalised (typically numerous statements or reservations of Slovak dissidents are ignored or presented as irrelevant). In contrast, from the outside their strength and importance are often overestimated. As demonstrated by Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi (2021), the V4 has been transformed under the ideological leadership of the anti-liberal ‘counter-revolutionaries’ V. Orbán and J. Kaczyński and the opportunists A. Babiš, M. Zeman or R. Fico (cf. Hesová 2021: 130–131) into a populism-driven format. The above-mentioned protagonists prefer intergovernmental concepts emphasizing the autonomy of member states and the high interaction rate (Söderbaum – Spandler – Pacciardi 2021: 14).

The populism-framed regionalism is based on three key institutional preferences: the principle of personalised governance (*leader-driven format*), political symbolism, and *à la carte* cooperation. Apart from that, its typical feature is an effort at distancing from the international liberal order and the protagonists who are presented as its representatives (Söderbaum – Spandler – Pacciardi 2021: 3). Within the *à la carte* cooperation, populists focus on selected international topics with the aim of domestic mobilization and symbolic protection of the nation’s integrity (a typical recent example is the issue of migration) (ibid.: 16).

In relation to this, one may observe that (not only) Visegrad populist leaders undertake targeted attacks on liberalism as such, on institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and within the EU particularly on the EC, as well as on certain leaders who (allegedly) represent ILO including their own dominance in this unfair regime (for instance Germany, represented by Chancellor A. Merkel). It is in particular V. Orbán who is presented by his proponents as a strong leader having to face allegations of populism and anti-democratic practices from western hypocrites, since he is a true challenger of the EU’s neo-colonial influence (Furedi 2017).

The outlined development of V4 as a populist regional organization with V. Orbán as the obvious leader, benefiting from the ideological accord with the one-generation-older J. Kaczyński and from pragmatic counter-union cooperation with certain Czech and Slovak politicians who act as somewhat passive supporters of these two ideologists. This has naturally resulted in a situation where the entire V4 has become the populist ‘challenger’

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of the EU’s institutions, primarily the EC. The leaders of Fidesz and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość view themselves as the leaders of the European ‘counter-revolution’, which they clearly demonstrated already in 2016 at the meeting in Krynica (Cabada 2021: 297). They have become the most prominent Central European politicians using the new stream of anti-globalism and nativism which is globally connected to D. Trump, J. Bolsonaro and F. Duterte. This stream is characterised by strong anti-liberalism and an emphasis on moral and symbolic politics going as far as a culture war.

The culture war is fought primarily over social norms, national values and historical symbols (Hesová 2021: 131). According to Hesová, culture wars in Central Europe have been taking place on three main planes: as a war over the past or collective memory, a war over identity, and a war over morality. As concerns the conflict over the past, revisionism in relation to both the Communist period of history (the Czech Republic) and to older periods, primarily the inter-war period, or in the case of Slovakia and Hungary (as well as Slovenia, Croatia, or the Baltics) the period of World War II can be observed. Identity conflicts are focused around the definition of a nation and Europeanism through so-called Christian values. In the case of national populists and nativists, the lack of the necessary liberalism regarding respect towards every individual’s freedoms and rights can be observed. Moral politics is focused around the topics of gender, the so-called traditional family, abortions, etc. All such disputes deepen the gap between the two ideological groups and become primarily a tool in the struggle over cultural hegemony (Hesová 2021) and eventually also political hegemony.

It is also apparent that the above-described culture wars and their topics extend beyond the V4 and CCE and create a framework for a Europe-wide or even global conflict between two conceptions moving further away from each other. Clear evidence of the overlap and penetration of national-conservative populism from the V4 and CEE into the European level is the cooperation of V. Orbán and M. Salvini and other western right-wing populists before the 2019 elections into the European Parliament and also after these elections in the Parliament. The newest and apparently very ambitious project of the uniting nativist and anti-liberal (formally) Christian streams in Europe is the *Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe* presented at the beginning of July 2021. The first place on the list of 16 signatories belongs to J. Kaczyński, while V. Orbán is listed fourth. Their parties are accompanied on this list by for example, the Italian far-right formations League and Brothers of Italy, the National Rally led by M. Le Pen, the Dutch Flemish Interest, and the Austrian Freedom Party. The Declaration is the essence of the so-called culture counter-revolution and the struggle for “Christian” Europe. The liberal ideological framework of integration and all the efforts for a ‘European’ approach are perceived here as a violation of the principle of coexistence of free states. Among other things, according to the signatories the EU “is increasingly becoming a tool of radical forces that intend to bring about a cultural and religious shift in Europe focused on the establishment of a European super-state, the destruction or abandonment of European traditions, and the transformation of basic social institutions and moral principles”. The main authorship of the declaration is attributed to J. Kaczyński, who is supposed to be the

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host of the ‘follow-up’ program conference in September 2021. The reasoning and narrative show a substantial influence of V. Orbán (*mal* 2021).

As suggested in the previous analysis (Cabada 2018), one of the alternatives to the national-populist form of the V4 might be Central-European cooperation within a different format, for instance the Slavkov Triangle, which would be less ideology-driven and more focused on particular public policies. Another alternative might be a withdrawal from the V4, either in the form of full withdrawal or the empty chair policy. In the last five years, Slovakia has been closest to such a solution and has actually been using it in certain cases. The most substantial option for the change in the V4 development would be the weakening of the ideological and populist profile of the V4, i.e. a change in the governments of some of the countries.

In this respect, it is important to mention the alternative format which is most visible from the marketing perspective – the cooperation between the mayors of the V4 capital cities. The alliance of the mayors G. Karácsony, R. Trzaskowski, M. Vallo, and Z. Hřib is presented as a pragmatic alliance defending the interests of the cities in the context of national and European policies. At the same time, however, it also emphasizes the fight against non-liberal governments (Matišák 2021; Zichová 2020), or “nationalist and populist regimes choking the local democracy” as stated by G. Karácsony in December 2019 upon the establishment of the Pact of Free Cities. It should be noted that all mayors of the V4 capitals may be perceived as progressivists: particularly R. Trzaskowski and G. Karácsony represented or have represented key challengers of the present governments in their respective countries. At the same time, it is important to remind ourselves that the programmes and narratives of these protagonists frequently include rather radical attitudes, as well as populism and strong elements of post-modern political marketing (Matišák 2021).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to briefly point out that some of the new EU member states and their representatives legitimately oppose certain proposals for changes regarding political preferences, the institutional framework, and the division of competences within the EU machinery. The legitimate opposition of a one-way strategy rejecting any compromise applied by the European Commission and a significant part of the political and media environment within EU-15 clearly cannot serve as an excuse for non-compliance with the democratic principles on the part of some of the CEE countries (Lovec – Kočí – Šabič 2021: 3). On the other hand, it is impossible to overlook the fact that particularly this role of a strong opponent has raised the profile of the V4. A major challenge that could ideally result in cooperation among politicians of the V4 member states, regardless of their ideological profile, is to transform the present rather negative coalition potential in the EU and fulfil the ambition of making the V4 the “second engine of integration”. In other words, the V4 needs to overcome the situation wherein it is primarily the veto-player or a destructor and should, in contrast, try to enforce as many of its own proposals as possible in the context of wide coalitions. In order, however, to accomplish such a goal, it needs

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to seek much more consensus. This is a challenge for the entire EU and ‘the West’ in a more general context. The political mainstream has been disrupted, and within the populist politics, not only right-wing populists but also left-wing progressivists are moving towards radical and in some cases even extreme positions. These ideologically antagonist streams are unified, however, in their opposition to respect for the right to a different opinion. At the same time, they do not view politics as a competition over various conceptions and seeking of consensus, but rather from the Manicheist point of view, i.e. as a fight for hegemony and a game with the zero sum. A return to liberal roots, including the right to a different opinion without ostracism or even penalisation, therefore remains a common challenge for all pro-democratic streams not only within the V4.

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¹ One could mention one illustrative example: the Hungarian formation Jobbik, manifesting strong Fascist and anti-Semitic tendencies, presently creating an alliance with other anti-Orban powers, which is considered by some observers almost a fighter for democracy in Hungary.

Common Challenges and Cooperation with the Visegrad Four: Sectoral Analysis of the Visegrad Security

Laura Nyilas¹

Introduction

The focus of the analysis is to explore in more depth the security challenges facing East-Central Europe and to forecast the military, economic, political, social and environmental challenges facing the region in the short term.

The geographical focus of this research is East-Central Europe, which is relevant today in several important aspects. The precise delimitation of the Central European and Central and Eastern European regions is less clear, and is a matter of some controversy. Its borders are not geographically defined, but have been shaped by geopolitical contexts that have been subject to change throughout history.² Although the conceptual delimitations of Central and Eastern Europe may vary, the present research will focus on Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, thus the Visegrad countries. In this case, it can be said that these countries have become a group for political reasons, and that they now form a region, the Central and Eastern European region. The latter could be interpreted in a broader geographical sense, but the narrowing is justified by political, economic, social and historical reasons, in particular the Visegrad Cooperation, which will celebrate its 30th anniversary in 2021.

The importance of the theme and the region is reinforced by the increased cooperation and political visibility of the Visegrad countries over the last decade. In the Central and Eastern European region, the Visegrad Cooperation is the oldest and one of the most effective regional groupings, established (the first three) by the member countries in 1991, based on the political realities of post-Cold War and post-Soviet disengagement.³

The following analysis will discuss the clarification and definition of the geographical delimitation of Central and Eastern Europe. The theoretical framework of security policy will then be examined in order to provide a preliminary clarification of the concepts used in the analysis. The paper analyses in detail the importance of the five main security sectors in the region and the extent to which the region and its countries are exposed to each of the security threats. Thus, after a theoretical overview of the security sectors, the sectors concerned are examined in a practical light.

The application of security sector theory, even within a regional political-geographical framework, is a topic that has gained attention in international relations literature thanks to the work of Barry Buzan et al.⁴ The regional approach, and the theory of a regional security complex based on the common interests of regional political actors, also justifies the delimitation of the research to the Visegrad countries.⁵

And the topicality of the subject in the case of the Visegrad countries, probably does not really need to be justified separately. Consider that world political events in recent

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decades have repeatedly called into question the relevance of cooperation, which has nevertheless survived. It is not the task of this paper, even in terms of time, to analyse the debates that are emerging in the V4 over the weeks, and it can be stated that the V4 as a regional complex will not lose its relevance despite the disagreements between its members. In the three decades of Visegrad Cooperation since 1991, the world order has also undergone several transformations, which have naturally had an impact on the countries. We could already assess 2019 as a kind of Central European year, referring to the 30-20-15 numerology: the countries of the region celebrated 30 years of regime changes, 20 years of NATO accession (except Slovakia) and 15 years of EU accession (Slovakia joined NATO at the same time).⁶ For all these reasons, 2022 is the year to review the complexity and multidimensional/sectoral characteristics of security in the region.

Methodology

The applied methodology is based on qualitative research. The results are difficult to quantify and this was not the aim of the paper, the main method being the application of a theoretical framework. The emphasis in this paper is not on general insights, but rather on individual perspectives based on the theoretical framework. Based on a deductive methodological logic, the analysis examines a delimited theoretical issue specific to the Visegrad countries.⁷

In his 1998 book, *Security: a new framework for analysis*, the creator of the concept of security, Barry Buzan distinguishes five security sectors. The paper will use these five sectors to focus on Eastern and Central Europe, so the four Member States of the Visegrad Cooperation, as argued above. On this basis, methodologically, the region will thus be examined through five different „theoretical lenses”. The clear demarcation of the different sectors is debatable, but this debate is beyond the scope of this paper. Ultimately, it is not the aim of the paper to draw a sharp distinction between sectors, so that possible overlaps may arise in the course of the analysis.

Theoretical framework and conceptualization

East-Central Europe

There is much debate surrounding the precise definition of the Central and Eastern European region. This is one of the reasons why there is a certain constant uncertainty about the region, especially about its borders.⁸ Several approaches have attempted to define the region through different dimensions and within an appropriate conceptual framework. These debates focus mainly on the existence of the region as a distinct geopolitical entity, its racial interpretation, its civilisational, cultural and economic aspects, and the range of its Member States, which vary greatly from one historical period to another.⁹

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The Polish historian Oskar Halecki was the first to coin the term 'East-Central Europe'. His aim was to affirm the specificity and western orientation of the peoples of the Danube Basin and the southern Baltic, who were generally understood as one with the Russians (as in 'Eastern Europe') or the Germans (as in *Mitteleuropa*). The countries to be included in the Visegrad Cooperation were undoubtedly different from the Russians and Germans, and they also seemed to share certain common characteristics. Since then, more and more scholars have been attracted by one aspect or another of the problem. So how should the region concerned be defined geographically? Sometimes the term is restricted to the Balkans and Ukraine, sometimes to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, and sometimes the link with the Balkan Peninsula can be a source of controversy. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have adopted a Western form of Christianity, their peoples have embraced 'Western' rather than Eastern culture, preferring Western democracy to both German authoritarianism and Russian absolutism.¹⁰

Security policy

The exact scientific classification and delimitation of security policy is difficult to describe, as the term is used differently in a number of literatures. However, the field of security has always been considered a multidisciplinary discipline, encompassing approaches from political science, history, psychology, economics, sociology and physical sciences, among others. The terms security policy, security studies or strategic studies can be used synonymously on several occasions.¹¹ In Hungary, the concept of security policy emerged from the 1980s onwards, specifically in the context of international studies and military science. The continuous development of the international world and system, the ever-widening range of subjects to be included in the scope of security challenges made it necessary to broaden the scope of security policy beyond military science.¹²

The fundamental question is what makes an area a security or international security issue. In the traditional sense, security is related to survival, i.e. a state of affairs in which the state acts in an unconventional way. Security can therefore be said to exist when a state seizes any means necessary to eliminate a threat and in effect declares the threat to the state as a whole to be a risk. In the case of insecurity, the threat is negligible, so to speak, once the state politicizes any issue and then resecuritizes it, thus placing it at the top of the list of priorities for state action.¹³

The 1998 book by Barry Buzan and his co-authors outlined a new and comprehensive analytical framework for security studies. It examines the nature and dynamics of the five main sectors affecting security. It rejects the traditional schools of thought that security needs to be reduced to a single sector. They argue that security is a specific type of policy that can be applied to a wide range of areas. The five areas that the research itself is based on:

- the military sector, which, as described by Buzan and his co-authors, is about violent coercive violence;

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- the political sector, which is about power relations, governmental status and recognition;
- the economic sector, which is about trade, production and financial relations, among other things;
- the social sector, which covers relations of collective identity; and
- the environmental sector, which is about the links between human activity and the planet's biosphere.¹⁴

However, the five security sectors can only be separated in theory, in practice they overlap and overlap at several points, so realistic conclusions can only be drawn after examining the five sectors.

Military sector

A relatively broad spectrum of threats of a military nature should be understood, since it includes practically any military activity, not only the military forces of a country, but also the presence of terrorist groups. The security threat, in any region, is most visible in the military sector.¹⁵ In practice, the military security agenda largely refers to the ability of governments to provide adequate defenses against internal and external military threats, but can also include the use of military force to defend states against non-military threats to their existence, such as migrants or rival ideologies.¹⁶ Last but not least, a state's military can also serve the purpose of peacekeeping or humanitarian intervention.¹⁷

Security has always been an important issue in the Central and Eastern European countries, alongside the great powers. Since the formation of the V4, the establishment of defense cooperation has been an agenda item. However, when the V4 joined NATO and the European Union as a final guarantee, the intensity of V4 defense cooperation decreased. In the last decade, the issue has become increasingly important, given the Russian-Ukrainian conflict of 2014-2016 and the current conflict as well.

Ukraine's neighbors have shown varying degrees of support, motivated mainly by their geographical and historical past. However, there is no doubt that the number of countries sympathetic to Ukraine has grown over time in the region. Ukraine has traditionally enjoyed strong support from Poland, and today the Czech Republic has joined this group, while Hungary remains more pro-Russian and Slovakia is divided on the issue.¹⁸

A further military threat in the future could be the prolongation of the war, its further escalation, in particular the nuclear threat, the nuclear arsenal that Russia possesses. In addition, a further escalation of tensions around Ukraine could trigger a larger and more sustained wave of mass migration than is currently the case. The creation of a migration and asylum system at European level capable of coping with these challenges, including the migratory pressure on the external borders of the European Union, is key.¹⁹

Environmental sector

The concept of environmental security is typically associated with the end of the Cold War. The idea of linking the environment and insecurity was one of the first major attempts to secure a non-military security issue. The sense of society's subordination to the forces of nature was first seriously questioned in the 1960s and 1970s. The emergence of international environmental movements popularized the sense of an imminent environmental crisis linked to rampant population growth, increasing resource scarcity and the weakness of existing social and political institutions.²⁰

In securitizing the environmental sector, it is necessary to consider whose survival or the survival of what is at stake. In the case of environmental security, it may be the subject of protection:

1. the nation state itself, since environmental threats can challenge national security as a whole;
2. people, also known as human security;
3. and the ecosystem as a whole.²¹

Although direct and frequent natural disasters do not necessarily threaten East-Central Europe, it is important to take a global view of the future and to align countries' strategic objectives with global goals, in order to ensure that the region is not affected by environmental threats and that such risks are reduced in other countries and regions of the world.

Climate change, adaptation and mitigation are increasingly dominating EU legislation and the Future of Europe conference. The V4's contribution to the EU's climate ambitions was already rather indifferent before the pandemic.²² Another report that objectively sheds light on the Visegrad Cooperation's position on the global sustainability goals is the Sustainable Development Report, published in June 2021, which assesses the progress of all 193 UN member states towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report ranked Finland, Sweden and Denmark at the top of the ranking. The Visegrad countries were all in the top 25.

The V4 region's climate lag is also reflected in the 2021 Climate Change Performance Index, which assesses 57 countries and the European Union that together are responsible for 90% of greenhouse gas emissions. While the European Union ranked 16th, a high performance, the Slovak Republic ranked 31st, a medium performance, the Czech Republic 47th, Poland 48th and Hungary 50th.²³

Economic sector

If military security is the longest established substantive area of security studies, economic security is the most widely accepted "new" substantive area. What constitutes an economic security threat is not easy to define. As Buzan et al. have shown, defining economic security is a complex issue, given that the central feature of a market economy

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is 'uncertainty'.²⁴ A market economy works best when there is extensive competition and a constant risk of failure. The search for economic security therefore seems antithetical to the promotion of a global economy based on market mechanisms such as free trade and competition.

How strong or united economically is the Visegrad Cooperation? If counted as a single nation state, the Visegrad Cooperation would be the fifth largest economy in Europe and the 12th largest globally. With a population of 64 million, it would rank 22nd in the world and 4th in Europe.

Poland is catching up with Western Europe with high average annual growth of 4.2%. Already the seventh largest economy in the EU, Poland was the biggest beneficiary of EU funds from 2014 to 2020. It is important to note here that there is the possibility of a smaller inflow from the EU budget, just as in the case of Hungary, if the EU decides to tie certain funds to respect for democratic values.

According to Oxford Economics, Central and Eastern Europe is one of the regions most exposed to the economic impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and has cut its GDP forecast for Central and Eastern Europe by an average of 1 percentage point this year and 0.5 percentage point in 2023. The forecaster said risks were "tilted sharply to the downside". Oxford Economics said in a note on 14 March that the impact on the four economies of Central and Eastern Europe will be felt primarily through a rise in commodity prices, particularly energy prices, which will boost inflation and hit real incomes. and consumption. Russian imports of oil, gas, coal and nuclear materials make the countries of Central and Eastern Europe very vulnerable.²⁵

Despite the problems, the Visegrad nations continue to play a key role, at least for German exporters. According to the Center for European Reform, the Visegrad Cooperation collectively managed to become Germany's most important trading partner in 2017, overtaking China and the United States for their integration into EU-level supply chains.²⁶

Social sector

In the relation between Barry Buzan and the Copenhagen School, social security is the ability of a society to maintain its essential character and preserve its essential features in the face of changing conditions.²⁷

Social security is a key concept in the field of security, but paradoxically the emphasis has been on the political, institutional unit, the state, and, accordingly, the political or military sector. Social security is closely linked to political security, but is nevertheless distinct from it, which is about the institutional stability of states, systems of governance and the ideologies that legitimise governments and states.

In East-Central Europe, the military and social sectors of security threats are highly interconnected. Russia's drift away from international norms not only poses a political threat, but also increases the sense of threat in society, with potentially serious consequences for society as a whole. The escalation of the conflict in Ukraine has caused

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civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, forcing people to flee their homes in search of safety, protection and assistance. In the first five weeks, more than four million Ukrainian refugees crossed borders into neighbouring countries, and even more were forced to move within the country.²⁸

Further tensions in the region, at the national and regional level of the Visegrad Cooperation, may be caused by the divided position on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Hungary has been widely criticised for its refusal to supply arms or to allow arms shipments through the country to help Ukraine, and has also been criticised in light of its failure to comply with EU sanctions on Russian gas. Czech Defence Minister Jana Cernochova expressed her concern for Hungary on Twitter. In her Twitter post, she expressed her deep regret that Hungary is more interested in cheap Russian gas than in the blood of Ukrainians.²⁹

Political sector

The political dimension consists of threats of a political nature that constitute threats to state sovereignty. It is important to note that although the different sectors overlap and overlap at some point, in this case political threats should be understood as non-military risks. Political threats concern, among other things, the institutional stability of the state. The objective pursued by political threats can range, in general, from pressuring the government to adopt a particular policy, to overthrowing the government, to disrupting the political structure of the state.³⁰

Closely linked to the threats to the political dimension is the sovereignty of a state, the threat to it. The sovereignty of a nation can be threatened in several ways. Dissident, extremist political communities and rebellions pose a serious threat, as they do not accept the regime of the day, or more precisely the ideology on which the regime is based. It also includes any challenge to the legitimacy and international recognition of a government. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, several previously unknown features of sovereignty have emerged, which have made it much more difficult to interpret political security.³¹

Several sources argue that the V4 is actually V2+2, due to the greater political differences between the Polish-Hungarian and Czech-Slovak pairs. Hungary and Poland are now in serious dispute with the other members of the European Union, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia are not "playing from the same sheet music."

A number of factors divide the countries concerned, ranging from the aforementioned policies on Russia and China to the linking of the disbursement of EU funds to the rule of law. In addition, despite Budapest and Warsaw's close alliance against the EU's efforts to punish them for backsliding on democracy, their policies towards Russia are very different. Poland's nationalist government sees Russia as a threat, while Hungary's prime minister maintains close ties with the Kremlin.³²

Although each country is going through different developments, there are patterns that show unity, even if this is a challenge for the European Union, as all Visegrad countries

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challenge Brussels at some level and question their role in Europe. For example, regional integration projects such as the Benelux countries are relatively far from the Visegrad Cooperation, and even further away from the old aspirations for a Central and Eastern European federation or confederation to fill the geopolitical void left by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, this was never clearly identified as a possible long-term goal. Although there were hints of such ambitions.

However, despite the political tensions, it seems clear that the Visegrad process has contributed to improving relations between the four countries concerned, because this regular multilateral dialogue has never ceased, despite the sometimes strong tensions. Beyond the easing of tensions, the cooperation of the Visegrad Cooperation countries has also brought tangible benefits, an emblematic example being the group's support to Slovakia in its successful process of catching up with NATO and the EU integration process.³³

Summary: results of the research and interpretation of the sectors together

Although there are differences between the Visegrad Cooperation countries on some issues, overall the security challenges require a common regional solution. Some of the sectors that have been theoretically decoupled also show regional characteristics. In some sectors, contrasts and differences of opinion are visible; but as sectoral theory states, sectors can only be separated in theory and must ultimately be understood together. Therefore, the contrasts identified in each sector cannot be generalized to relations and security policy as a whole.

The first dimension to be examined was the military sector, where the threats to the region and the differences between the four countries under study were immediately apparent. While Hungary distances itself from arms transfers to Ukraine, the stationing of NATO troops in the country and EU sanctions against Russia, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are openly anti-Russian. However, all four countries have been united in their support for refugees fleeing Ukraine and have united in their condemnation of Russia's belligerent actions and in their declaration of Russia as an aggressor.

Based on preliminary assumptions, the military sector, i.e. the military challenges facing the region, have multiplied, proving that this segment of the issue has become more pronounced and has had more serious repercussions in several areas. At the same time, the political threats to the region, both at EU level and specifically in view of the common political cooperation between the Visegrad countries, cannot be neglected. Several sources in the literature have pointed out that there has been much criticism of the V4 cooperation, referring to the political divergence between the four countries, with the Czech-Slovak and Hungarian-Polish 'axes' seeming to diverge. The paper pointed out that, despite the different perceptions of participation in the European Union, the rule of law and atrocities against the judiciary, the Visegrad Cooperation cannot be considered as a break-up, as the Visegrad process has contributed to improving relations between the four countries concerned, as the regular multilateral dialogue has never ceased.

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The differences between the Visegrad Cooperation countries are also evident in the economic sector. One of the four countries, Slovakia, is the only one to have joined the euro zone, which has made it more integrated into the European integration process. Currently, the greatest economic threat to the region is the economic impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Apart from Russia and Ukraine, Central and Eastern Europe could be the biggest victim of the war, given the region's high dependence on Russian gas and the fact that the separation from it would place a heavy burden on the economies of individual states, increasing the household costs of citizens, which could easily escalate into civil discontent, thus jeopardising the social security of the country.

After examining environmental security, it was concluded that the region is not currently under serious direct threat, but that global factors such as pervasive climate change could pose a threat to the region. To this end, countries need to take greater responsibility to meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), failure to which could pose a fatal threat to the future.



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The Role of Central Europe in the Arctic

Simon Szilvási¹

Abstract

The geopolitical transformation that occurs in the last 20 years mainly involves the Arctic countries, as well as external actors such as the People's Republic of China or India. However, in addition to these countries, a number of other countries further afield are also interested in the changing Arctic. Among these, though in a different context of Central Europe, Poland and the Czech Republic worth to mention. Warsaw has operated a weather station in the region since 1957 and has observer status in the Arctic Council. These countries share a common intersection of maritime access and ocean-front location, which allows them to participate to a large extent in maritime trade. Hungary is an exception in this respect, as it has not had a sea exit since 1920 and is a so-called landlocked country. Extreme weather events, uneven precipitation and the gradual warming of our climate are also being felt in our country as a result of climate change. The political and military consequences of the Arctic changes may also affect Hungary in the context of our defence cooperation, and the impact of economic changes on world trade may be felt more directly in the Carpathian Basin.

Keywords: Arctic, Climate change, Central Europe, Hungary, Defence

Introduction

The Arctic, which is being transformed by global climate change-induced warming, is an increasingly important international policy issue. The earlier appreciation of the area dates from the beginning of the Cold War, in particular from the development of the nuclear capabilities of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and later with the advent of intercontinental ballistic missile technology. Initially it served as a buffer zone between the two superpowers of the time, the United States of America and the Soviet Union, but to this day the Arctic Ocean's ice shelf remains the prime site of the two countries with the greatest nuclear strike capability. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Arctic security environment underwent a major transformation, as the successor Russian state was unable to maintain its military facilities and naval capabilities in its Arctic territories in the form they had previously existed. At the same time, the Arctic NATO member states have significantly reduced their defence capabilities (Vigh, V. 2020).

Over the past 15 years, this area has been brought back into the international relations and security policy spotlight compared to the post-Cold War decade. The extent of ice melt and the increased accessibility of sea and land areas have attracted the interest of many countries outside the region. The rate of melting of the Arctic ice sheet has accelerated significantly over the past 30 years, reaching its lowest extent in 2012 and its second

lowest in 2020, at the end of the summer shipping season (Szilvási S. 2018). The potential to exploit these economic opportunities and the future use of maritime shipping routes could not only increase the region's role in international politics, but also permanently transform regional specificities. Global climate change is not only affecting the Arctic but is transforming the climate of the entire planet. The melting of frozen ground and permafrost is releasing large amounts of carbon dioxide and other harmful substances, accelerating the warming process. The melting of sea ice and glaciers in the Arctic will eventually raise sea levels in all parts of the globe (Padányi, 2022).

The geopolitical transformation mainly involves the Arctic countries, as well as external actors such as the People's Republic of China and India (Zoltai, A. 2018. Polar Silk Road. PAGEO). However, in addition to these countries, several other countries further afield are also interested in the changing Arctic ((Lagutina M. Leksyutina Y. 2019). Among these, in the context of East-Central Europe, Poland is worth mentioning. Warsaw operates a weather station in the region since 1957 and has an observer status in the Arctic Council. These countries share a common intersection of maritime access and ocean-front location, which allows them to participate to a large extent in maritime trade. Hungary is an exception in this respect, as it has not had a sea exit since 1920 and is a so-called landlocked country. Extreme weather events, uneven precipitation and the gradual warming of our climate are also being felt in our country as a result of climate change. The political and military consequences of the Arctic changes may also affect Hungary in the context of our defence cooperation, and the impact of economic changes on world trade may be felt more directly in the Carpathian Basin.

My research interests are in the military aspects of climate and geopolitical changes in the Arctic as a security region. In this study, I define Arctic engagement as activities in the areas north of the geographic Arctic Circle and in the eight countries bordering the Arctic Ocean. In the course of my research, the author confronted with the fact that the involvement and role of our country, Hungary, seems to be, on first examination, marginal in this region. However, as a member of international organizations such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), as well as the United Nations (UN), Arctic changes affect every country, if not directly, then indirectly (Farkas, D. 2021).

Hungarian academic research on the Arctic

In order to study the history of research on the Arctic in terms of scientific needs, we need to look back to the period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Within the framework of Hungarian geography, Arctic exploration provided the core of the early academic literature on the Arctic. It can be said that since the 1870s, the domestic literature on geography and climate has explored the Arctic with varying degrees of intensity. In the field of geography, the Arctic is still the subject of a large number of papers. In addition to these works, it can be generally stated that in the years after the turn of the millennium, in line with the changes in the international literature, more and more Hungarian language works on international relations and political changes in the Arctic have been published.

In the academic sphere, a number of studies and publications on Arctic geopolitical and security policy changes have been published in the last 15 years by Hungarian authors, including at the Corvinus University of Budapest, the University of Pécs, Hungary. Several faculty members and staff members of the Faculty of Military Science of the National University of Public Service have written on this phenomenon, exploring different aspects of the discipline. For example, there have been papers on the changing role of armed forces due to climate change, on the territorial claims of Arctic countries from the perspective of international law and the law of the sea, and last but not least on the military developments in the Russian Federation. Within the framework of the Doctoral School of Military Sciences, two doctoral students are also conducting research and preparing their dissertations on these topics. Between 2008 and 2021, the web portal honvedelem.hu - despite the relatively marginal nature of the topic - has registered more than 33 articles, mostly on the Arctic and the Antarctic (Szilvási S. 2022).

About one third of these articles were about Hungarian military engagement and cooperation. In the present paper, I will present the non-military involvement in a shorter, descriptive manner, while the two military exercises and training with Hungarian participation will be discussed in more detail. In the first part, as a historical overview, I will look at the earliest Hungarian contact, the expedition with Hungarian participation to explore the Northeast Passage in 1882. Then, touching on related developments in the 20th century, I conclude with a discussion of military involvement in the 21st century.

The Austro-Hungarian Arctic expeditions

It is a little-known fact that not only one Arctic expedition was launched under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but three, the second of which became more widely known when the archipelago named Franz Josef Land after the monarch of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was discovered. The exploration of the Arctic and scientific research was one of the areas of peaceful rivalry between the great powers of the time: the British Empire, the United States of America, the German Empire and France all launched numerous expeditions to the Arctic. At that time, there were still many blank spots in the northernmost reaches of the Earth, areas that were still waiting to be explored and mapped. It was therefore possible for a Central European state to make discoveries that were previously unknown. There are, of course, stories that the archipelago may have been known to the ancient Greeks and some Scandinavian peoples, but no written evidence of this has survived. The scientific theories of the time distinguished between three main concepts of what the areas surrounding the North Pole were actually like. The first theory was that the Arctic Circle was covered by a continuous ice sheet, the second was that it could be covered by land, similar to the Arctic. And the third, which is the one that most influenced the monarchy's researchers, according to the experts who worked in the area, is that the Arctic is an open expanse of water, fringed by an ice sheet. These theories were of major importance in the research of the time because they determined the technical equipment used by expeditions. Explorers who believed in the open water

theory, for example, used boats, but those who believed in the continuous ice sheet theory preferred to use dog sledges to reach unexplored areas (Nagy Miklós M. 2004).

The monarchy's first expeditions were mainly the result of German exploration and discovery. Julius Payer, who later became known as the scientific leader of the Austro-Hungarian expeditions of 1871 and 1872, was also part of the German expedition. The explorers from the German Empire investigated areas close to Greenland, trying to get as far north as possible. Following these explorations, the monarchy's scientists decided to set their destination from the Spitsbergen to Novaya Zemlya in the Russian Empire (Szeghő, P. 2015.) In 1871, the first voyage of discovery took place, led by the same Karl Weyprecht who had led the expedition to discover Franz Joseph Land. On the basis of the results of the first expedition, the monarchy carried out a detailed analysis of the possible routes for further expeditions. At that time, very little weather data was available to the explorers, and maps describing the areas did not yet exist in their present form. The favorable weather conditions experienced during the first expedition took an unfortunate turn during the second expedition a year later - they were unable to sail beyond the 78th parallel (Németh, V. 2019).

The second voyage of discovery is wrongly presented in the Hungarian media as a Hungarian or Austro-Hungarian colonialism. However, there were no colonial claims or demands from the Monarchy in this region, it was merely a scientific expedition to find a sea route across the Arctic from Europe to Asia. In the newly discovered Franz Joseph Island there was named location Zichy Land after one of the major financial backers of the publicly funded exploration led by Karl Weyprecht and Julius Payer, and the explorers also named the route Deák Ferenc Island, Hungária Bay, the Vámbéry Island Group and Cape Budapest. Count Jenő Zichy himself donated 45,000 forints for the expedition, but several famous noble families of the time, including the Esterházy, Batthyány, Festetics and Széchenyi families, also participated in the public donation. It is interesting to note that the only Hungarian member of the 24-strong research team was a ship's doctor, Dr. Gyula Kepes (Magyar Tengerészek Egyesülete, 2023). The crew was commanded by Austrian officers and the sailors were experienced Dalmatians and Italians. Gyula Kepes played a major role in ensuring that the expedition survived, with only one person dying during the voyage, an outstanding achievement in the history of Arctic exploration. The Hungarian ship's doctor not only provided a high level of medical care for the crew but was also responsible for the food supply and carried out plant and zoological observations (Nagy, Miklós M. 2001).

The 'first international polar year', which was announced between 1882 and 1883, made possible the last, third expedition, in which the monarchy also played an active part. The Austro-Hungarian observatory was located on Jan Mayen Island and commanded by Lieutenant Commander Emil von Wohlgemuth. It was a success, especially from today's perspective, that the monarchy was able to establish an international scientific initiative for Arctic exploration, starting from the organisation of an independent Arctic expedition. This third research expedition and hosting of the Polar International Year can be considered the last major effort in Arctic research organized under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Later, individual expeditions were launched, for example,

the Hungarian geographer Jenő Cholnoky's research in the Spitsbergen was carried out at the invitation of the Germans. The geographer's research involved the freezing of Lake Balaton, and his international publication of his findings enabled him to work with renowned international researchers of the time in the Arctic Circle. In 1909, the Hungarian Geographical Society considered it important that the organisation should provide support for expeditions to map the North or South Pole, but unfortunately this objective was not achieved (Kiss M. 2020).

The Hungarian Defence Forces and the Arctic exercises

Due to its geographical location, Hungary is an outsider in the Arctic in terms of security and defence policy. However, as a member of international organisations such as NATO, the European Union and the United Nations, it is involved, albeit indirectly, in events in the region. The experience of the Hungarian Defence Forces in the Arctic is less well known. Our soldiers have only performed their international duties in Lithuania, the northernmost mission area under the auspices of NATO. In recent years, there have been two major engagements of Hungarian soldiers in international military cooperation in Arctic countries.

Trident Juncture, 2018

The first one was the Trident Juncture exercise in Norway in 2018, in which several of our contingents participated as NATO members. Organised by NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT), the event showcased the military activities of 29 member countries and 6 countries from the Partnership for Peace programme and presented the response of the Alliance's armed forces in a possible Article 5 collective defence situation. In addition, the exercise, which involved more than 40,000 personnel and thousands of combat vehicles, also promoted interoperability between the armed forces of the member countries. It was one of the largest NATO-organised exercises in the region since the Cold War. The USS Harry S. Truman, an aircraft carrier in the US Second Fleet, also crossed the Arctic Circle for the first time since the end of the Cold War in this exercise, signaling the importance of the region (Edvardsen, A. 2022).

They were responsible for setting up and operating a fuel supply base as part of the exercise, providing technical assistance in providing communications to air squadrons and raising awareness of the steps to be taken by the Norwegian population during the exercise. In Kallax, Sweden, a team of fifteen Hungarian and Lithuanian technicians provided the communication link between the squadrons in different parts of the country and other participants in the exercise. According to Major Sándor Németh, the team leader, their tasks included the installation, commissioning, operation and maintenance of computer workstations, as well as the establishment and maintenance of internet connections for telephones, printers and video linking devices for NATO and national sub-units. The importance of communications for operations almost goes without saying. The unit of ten Hungarian and five Lithuanian soldiers carried out these tasks between 8

and 19 October 2018, which were a real challenge for the soldiers. Also participating in the Norwegian exercise was Brigadier General János Somogyi, who as Commander of Landcom, Land Component Command - North (LCC-N), has been involved in the coordination of several international brigades.

The MH Civil-Military Cooperation and Psychological Operations Centre (CIMIC for short) personnel exercised in Norway between 17 October and 10 November 2018, commanded by Major Sándor Nyíri. The Hungarian CIMIC unit was subordinated to the Italian 132nd Ariete Brigade and was tasked with supporting the civilian environment and building and maintaining relations with local authorities. The Hungarian troops are strengthening the acceptance of the international troops among the local population through their presence and appropriate communication strategies. During the exercise, international troop movements place a significant strain on civilian infrastructure. The Hungarian team's main task was to identify and contact the administrative leaders of the municipalities critical to the operations. In addition, the team visited primary and secondary schools in the area to inform young people about the objectives and importance of the operation.

As an additional Hungarian participant, 15 soldiers from the MH Material Supply Base (MH ARB) contributed to the support of the exercise in the framework of German-Hungarian logistic cooperation. The team led by Lieutenant Melinda Hovány-Pap was responsible for the installation and operation of the fuel depot. The German and Hungarian units performed their tasks in mixed squads and started the installation of the 150 cubic metre storage module and the 600 cubic metre gas oil tank farm the day after their arrival (Nagy, A. 2018). Our soldiers were able to learn about the construction and operation of the fuel depot, as well as the tasks related to fuel supply, such as filling and unloading the fuel trucks, quality assurance and the operation of the laboratory. During the exercise, five Hungarian NCOs attended a pump operator training course in order to successfully complete future assignments. During the exercise, Trident Juncture 2018, approximately 3.5 million litres of the two types of propellants available during the exercise were stored in the system, followed by quality assurance tests and finally the fuels were provided to the participating units. Their task was made even more difficult by the fact that they had to meet particularly stringent environmental standards (Háda, I. 2018.)

Hungarian Defense Forces in Alaska

In the framework of the second joint exercise at the end of 2021, the 2nd Special Purpose Brigade of the 2nd MH Arpad Vitéz Bertalan (2nd MH KRDD) prepared for the challenges of Swift Response 2022 with the help of the 4-25 Infantry Brigade Combat Team / Airborne (4-24 IBTC), which is based in the US state of Alaska. During the theoretical and practical training, the Hungarian soldiers gained experience in cold-weather small unit combat. The training also covered a number of other areas: marching drills, nutrition and survival practices, field training, health and operations planning, and even proper dress. The latter requires special techniques in the cold temperatures of up to

minus 40 degrees Celsius that are typical in this area. While the Hungarian military dress is made up of five different layers, the Arctic conditions require seven layers of clothing. The cold also has a negative impact on technical equipment, with a significant reduction in battery and battery life. This is a huge challenge from a design point of view. A march on foot was also carried out, shelters were built and the night was spent in these shelters. Hungarian soldiers also participated in parachute training and a successful jump, which was a real challenge in the snowy and extremely cold conditions. In addition to the preparation, details of the 2022 exercise were discussed with the 4-25 IBCT Commander, Colonel Michael Shouse and the Brigade's Commanding Ensign, Alex Kupratty (Miért éppen Alaszka 2021 Honvédelem). The successful training provided the Hungarian Special Forces Brigade with a unique experience and opened a new chapter in the series of military training operations with Arctic countries. It is expected that more and more similar activities will be carried out in the Arctic countries, in which our country can play its part, either as a member of NATO or in the framework of other cooperation. A third event in the framework of NATO this year, in 2022, is the so-called Cold Response 2022 exercise, in which our country was represented among the 23 participating nations. No official statement from the Hungarian Defence Forces is yet available on the exact locations and specific tasks of the Norwegian-led exercise.

Conclusion

Hungary is a so-called landlocked country; it is surrounded by land from the world's oceans. Since 1920, with the Trianon Peace Treaty modified borders, the country has lost its direct link to the Adriatic Sea and thus its direct waterway connection to the Mediterranean Sea. The national strategies were investigated such as the Foreign Policy Strategy of Hungary and the Security Policy Strategy. The second mentioned strategy indirectly includes the new emerging regions as security risks because of climate change (Molnár, D., Szalkai P. 2022. Hadtudomány). The study mainly looked at the best-known historical antecedents, and provided contemporary examples of Hungarian involvement, mainly from the Hungarian Defence Forces. During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hungary made a significant contribution to the science of international polar exploration through its researchers and generous public donations. After the Treaty of Trianon, interest in the distant ice world in the North remained in the scientific community. From then on, individual stories and academic research dominated, with Hungarian geographers and polar explorers joining other international ventures to continue studying the Arctic. It can be noted that in Hungary, except for a few university research associates (scientific research); there is no organized, state-led Arctic research not in the academic nor in the scientific area (Molnár, D., Szalkai, P. 2022). In 2017 Péter Szijjártó, Minister for Foreign Policy and Trade have highlighted Hungary's main relations and possible areas of cooperation in his speech at the Norwegian Arctic Frontier conference titled White Space – Blue Future (Szijjártó P. 2017.)

In order to achieve the research goal - a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary study of Hungary and the Arctic - the author initiated the publication of new material by the

official defence agencies to obtain the latest data. Whether we look at the historical aspects or at modern examples, it is clear that there is very little Hungarian information available to the researcher. The authors who worked during the monarchy are well documented, and their work has been elaborated by later Hungarian authors.

In addition to scientific research, there is also evidence of Hungarian involvement in its documentation. For example, Hungarian photographer Eszter Horváth accompanied the MOSAiC (Multidisciplinary Drifting Observatory for the Study of Arctic Climate), the largest scientific research project in the Arctic ever conducted in 2019 with the participation of 20 countries, and she also participated in the excavation of the remains of the research vessel *Endurance*, which were encased in ice, and documented the work (Horváth, E. 2022 National Geographic). However, as the scope of this study and the early stages of the research did not allow it, there is no mention of the Hungarian explorers of the Arctic and Antarctic, especially from the years following the 20th century. Further results on this topic are expected as the research continues, as the author seeks to provide a comprehensive study of little-known Hungarian individuals and organisations in the Arctic (Topál et al. 2022 Nature Communications).

Poland is very active in the Arctic. Since 1957, the Poland had a year-round station devoted to scientific and research activities in the Hornsund area in Svalbard having four other university stations in Svalbard. scientific interests include the social sciences, economy, and even the institutional scheme of Arctic cooperation. (Musanovic, A. 2022.) It is important to note that Poland is high engaged not only in Arctic research although in the Antarctica as well. Another main achievement of Poland participating in the Arctic the Warsaw Format Meeting formula that was established in 2010. The original idea was to create a platform to exchange views and opinions between the Arctic Council Observer States and the European Union as well as to allow open discussion with the Arctic Council Chairmanship (Arctic Council 2020). The meetings also provided the occasion to meet experts from relevant areas of expertise. The main points of the agenda were to exchange views between the Observer States and the EU with the Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials Group of the Arctic Council in relation to Chairmanship plans as well as with the Chair of the EPPR Working Group and the head of Indigenous Peoples Secretariat (Łuszczuk, M. et al. 2015).

Czech scientists are involved in several longer-term research projects that contribute to the activities of the three Arctic Council working groups. The focus areas are environment, climate change and socio-economic impacts. Scientific activities During the period 2007-2022, the staff of the Centre for Polar Ecology (CPE) were involved in a total of 11 international and 24 national scientific and educational projects. In recent years, more than 150 visitors from the Czech Republic and other countries have participated annually in the winter and summer Arctic activities of the Josef Svoboda Station in the Czech Republic. Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP): For more than fifteen years, Czech researchers have been measuring important climate parameters, including UV radiation, in Svalbard Islands and the data collected are fed into international databases (Masaryk University, University of Southern Bohemia) that monitor global warming. The Czech Republic intends to support the work of the Arctic

Council through partnership and cooperation with members, permanent participants and observers. In 2017, the Czech Republic hosted the Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW). The conference focused on three main areas of further Arctic research, all of which involve Czech scientists (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2022).

Austria, the Czech Republic, and Poland are primarily investigating the Arctic from a scientific point of view. For Austria is a very special year for polar research in Austria - it is the 150th anniversary of the Austro-Hungarian expedition to Franz Josef Land. It is expected that the anniversary strengthens the scientific and academic relations to the Central European countries and establishes new connections among the participants.



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**Historical Lessons of Anti-Communist Protests in Visegrad Four Countries during
the 1950s-60s**

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Abstract

For V4 countries, the Cold War was a period of the fight between European identity and Soviet colonization. The events of 1956 and 1968 in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia provide great insights on the structure of the Soviet empire and obtain some knowledge about the states of the Visegrad Group. Therefore, this essay examines the historical lessons of the struggles of those nations which tried to obtain their liberty from the Soviet empire and made an attempt to implement the experience of V4 countries on the realities of Russian war in Ukraine.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, revolution, Soviet Union, colonialism

Introduction

The end of World War II changed the course of world history in many aspects. Europe has never been so devastated and vulnerable to the influences of outside forces. Former superpowers like France, the UK and Germany were damaged the most, hence exposed to the outer influences. In this power vacuum, two actors introduced antagonistic visions of post-war reconstruction – the USA and the USSR. As a consequence of escalated tensions between them, by the beginning of the 1950s, Europe was divided by the Iron Curtain on the Western block, united by the US under the political-military defensive block NATO and economic organization EACS, and the Eastern camp institutionalized in the form of the Alliance duplication the Warsaw Pack and the EACS's counterpart COMECON. States of the former group developed capitalism and liberal democratic institutions. The latter ones became Moscow's puppets and were denied the opportunity to choose their vector of development. As the cases presented in this essay show, those who disobeyed the Kremlin's will or threatened its supremacy were forced to comply.

Before the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union on the edge of the 1990s, there were several attempts to tackle the communist regime inside the Eastern Bloc in general, particularly in the modern Visegrad Group countries. Those protests were mostly oppressed, sometimes very violently, but they showed the people's aspiration to resist the Soviet colonization and re-establish their countries as a part of liberal Europe. By assessing the cases of the Polish October of 1956, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and the Prague Spring of 1968, the essay unpacks the historic lessons of those revolutions and argues that the states of Visegrad Group indeed belong to European states and are willing to fight for their independence from the Russian (then Soviet) dominion.

The Polish October (10.–11.1956)

Shortly after the end of World War II, a copycat Soviet-Stalinist model of socialism began to establish in Poland under the leadership Bolesław Bierut, commonly known as the “Stalin of Poland”, and the local Communist party – the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). (Makowski, 2001) The death of the Polish leader in 1956 put the Central Committee of the PZPR in a difficult situation: either to proceed in the Stalinist model of government or adopt more liberal policies, inspired Khrushchev’s doctrine. Due to the repressive nature of the former Stalinist regime, in the period from 1953 to 1956 the anti-communist sentiments intensified in the country. The reformist forces within the PZPR were grouped around the former first secretary, removed from power and imprisoned for "right-wing nationalist deviation", Władysław Gomułka with his program of the "Polish path to socialism". (Kovács, 2021) Incapability of tackling the existent social problems, using the Stalinist model, death of the former leader, around whom the cult of personality was built and the rising liberal and more progressivist sentiments within the Party and population created the perfect storm that underpinned the public resilience to the regime and climaxed with the series of the protests, the biggest of which is known as the Poznań June.

The reasons for the outbreak of the revolution were simple: workers at the Poznań’s largest factories complained about tax increases for the most productive workers, while local directors failed the micromanagement of the factory. (Kemp-Welch, 2008) In the morning of June 28, 1956, the workers' all around Poznań started a riot. Rebels sieged the important buildings in the city, released the imprisoned workers and armed themselves from the weapon storages of the police and penitentiary. Polish politburo decided to use military units to mitigate the uprising. The Deputy Minister of National Defense appointed a particular operational group to oversee the city's pacification. The exchange of fire lasted in various parts of Poznań until noon on June 29, and shots were fired sporadically until June 30, when the uprising was suppressed. (Kovács, 2021) The Politburo claimed that the dissatisfaction of the Poznań working class was the distortion in economic policy, the bureaucratic behaviour of enterprise administrations and heads of ministry departments in solving labour problems. The Politburo found guilty the regional party-administrative apparatus, the local security service, and press workers. (Kemp-Welch, 2007)

The repression of the uprising, which was supported by the population, provoked a national and international outcry and forced the party to undertake significant policy changes. Gomułka became the candidate acceptable to both opposing wings of the party – Puławian (more liberal) and Natoliń (more conservative). (Machciewicz, 2009) The Plenum on the election of a new First Secretary was planned on October 19. During internal talks, Gomułka managed to lobby an important condition: the Soviet Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky, who had mobilized troops against the Poznań workers, was to be removed from the Polish Politburo and Defence Ministry. The decision on excluding Rokossovsky provoked a negative reaction in Moscow. On the night of October 18-19

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launched a march on Warsaw, using the troops of the Northern Group of the Soviet Army and the motorized infantry and tank columns of the Polish People's Army. During this intervention, minor violent clashes occurred on the western borders of Poland with the soldiers of East Germany. (Kemp-Welch, 2008)

On the day of the scheduled elections, the Soviet delegation led by Khrushchev arrived uninvited, where they negotiated with the Polish Politburo and Gomułka. Khrushchev gave the Poles an ultimatum: leave the old Politburo unchanged, prevent Gomułka from coming to power, keep Rokossovsky in the Politburo, and stop democratization. However, the Polish delegation informed Khrushchev that he was in no position to demand anything, due to the fact that the workers of biggest Polish city's factories were armoured in advance and stayed overnight at the working premises ready to retaliate on command. (Pearson, 2002)

Seeing that the situation could not have been solved by military means, the Soviet delegation fled to Moscow with most of the higher military officers, including Rokossovsky. On October 21, the Plenum elected Gomułka as the First Secretary of the Central Committee of PZPR. As the First Secretary, he led the Polish delegation during the Polish-Soviet negotiations. By mid-November, Gomułka had made significant progress, obtaining the cancellation of Poland's external debts, more preferable trading conditions, the withdrawal of the unpopular collectivization of Polish agricultural sector, and authorization to liberalize policy toward the Roman Catholic Church. On top of that an agreement was reached to repatriate 30,000 Poles from the USSR, and the status of Soviet troops in Poland was revised. (Pearson, 2002)

The Hungarian Revolution (23.10.–10.11.1956)

Like in the case of Poland, Stalinist terror characterized the political and economic systems of Hungary in the period between 1948 and 1953: the personality cult of Mátyás Rákosi and Stalin, the forced collective farming, the prioritisation of heavy and military industry over meeting the demand of the domestic population in basic goods, and the growing poverty. A police state was covering and controlling everything in the country. On top of that, Hungary was considered the loser in the World War II, therefore, the burden of reparation was imposed upon Hungary that exacerbated the economic situation even more.

In 1953, after Stalin's death, Rákosi resigned at the behest of the new Soviet leadership. The new First Secretary was appointed – Imre Nagy, an agricultural specialist who had been excluded from the party leadership in 1949 due to his liberal worldview and particularly opposition to cooperatives. He implemented a large number of reforms that resulted in the rise of standards of living in Hungary. In 1954, as part of his new reforms, he made public life more democratic, among other things. (Borhi, 2014) Due to the generally reformist nature of the Nagy leadership, the party, under the heavy influence of the former First Secretary, decided to change their leader, and one of Rákosi's followers, András Hegedüs, became the new prime minister. However, due to public sphere being

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accustomed to an atmosphere of relaxation and the internal opposition within the party, restoring Stalinism in the country was no longer possible, hence jeopardizing the stability of the regime.

The Hungarian Revolution broke out on October 23, 1956, with a protest march by students and intellectuals in Budapest. They were provoked by the support of Gomułka's reforms and his struggles against the Russians at the time. Those protests turned into a clash and then into an armed confrontation between the demonstrators and the Hungarian state security service, the ÁVH. Many districts of Hungary and several government organizations came under the control of the rebels, which allowed them to introduce changes in the laws in the territories under their control. (Schmidt, 2020) There was no unanimity in the protesters' methods of armed and political struggle. For example, when they unveiled secret service agents, the moderate wing of the rebels was determined to prosecute them, while ultra-nationalist groups executed them on the spot.

Under pressure from the insurgents' demands, the Hungarian Workers' Party replaced the popular disgraced reformer Imre Nagy as prime minister. After the agreement with the Soviet side on the ceasefire, Nagy announced his intention to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact.

Such a situation didn't let the USSR stay aside. Therefore, formally on the invitation from the Hungarian Communist party, the Soviet troops intervened in Hungary, twice. (Schmidt, 2020) For the first time, Soviet troops entered the streets of Budapest on October 24. Fighting occurred between the Hungarian insurgents and the Soviet occupiers, supported by the ÁVH secret police. The Soviet invasion was temporarily successful. However, the resistance continued and led to a ceasefire agreement between the two sides until November 1, 1956. (Gyáni, 2007)

For the second time, on November 4, the Soviet army, in coordination with the new government of János Kádár, attacked Budapest. The insurgents' fighting continued in Budapest and other cities for about a week. Imre Nagy was expelled from the office, fled but was soon captured. Subsequently, Kádár formed a new proletarian-peasants government. The Soviet army, together with ÁVH, reorganized by the Kádár government, continued mitigating the riot. The uprising was entirely suppressed by January 1957. After the so-called "trial", Imre Nagy was executed on June 16, 1958. (Schmidt, 2020)

During the uprising, thousands of Hungarian rebels and hundreds of Soviet soldiers died, and many more were injured. Almost 200,000 residents left the Hungarian People's Republic as refugees. This event had grave consequences for the communists of Western countries. Many who had previously sympathized with the Soviet Union began criticizing its actions. (Gati, 2006)

The Prague Spring (05.01– 21.08.1968)

The communist government was established in Czechoslovakia as a result of the coup in February 1948. Those events were the culmination of a process that had already begun in 1945 and consisted of a whole chain of mutually conditioned and interconnected events. Their main aim was the establishment of the Communist Party in the Czechoslovak Republic (ČSSR). After the coup, a communist dictatorship under the leadership of the Stalinist Klement Gottwald was established.

In 1968, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of ČSSR, Antonín Novotný, was defeated by the reformist wing within the party. Alexander Dubček, Slovak by nationality, was elected in January 1968 – that was the time when the Prague Spring has begun. In April, the Central Committee approved the Liberal Action Program that introduced policies that were directed toward liberalization, both political and economic. One of the most significant reform initiatives of the Prague Spring was the liberalisation of censorship in February 1968 and its complete abolition on March 4. Despite conservative members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party demanding to cease the changes, Dubček proceeded in reorganizing the role of the social party. (Navrátil, 2006)

At first, the activities of the residency of the State Security Committee of the USSR were intensified on the territory of the ČSSR. The representation of the KGB was expanded, and contacts with the heads of the Czech special services became closer than before, most of whom maintained a pro-Soviet position. There were no particular problems here. Soviet Chekists felt they had the rights of an "elder brother", had access to a wide array of information and indicated what and how to do. They followed every step of the Czechoslovak leaders, eavesdropped on their conversations, and recruited agents in their entourage. (Graham, 2019)

The KGB did a diversion. They laid weapons caches, which were demonstrated as evidence of the opposition forces' preparation for an armed rebellion. The information that came through the KGB channels was aimed at pushing them to take more decisive action. Thus, subordinates of KGB Chairman Andropov reported on discovered warehouses with weapons allegedly secretly delivered from Germany. (Graham, 2019)

The Soviet Union made itself available for bilateral talks in Čierna nad Tisou in the summer of 1968. During the meeting, Dubček defended the program of the reformist wing of the Communist Party of the ČSSR and pledged loyalty to the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON. Since these talks did not turn out satisfactorily from the point of view of the Soviet leaders, they considered a military alternative. Representatives of the Soviet Union, GDR, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia met on August 3rd and signed the Bratislava Treaty, which confirms adamant loyalty to Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism - i.e. Soviet dominance. The Soviet Union expressed its intention to intervene in the Warsaw Pact country if the bourgeois system of some political parties began to be represented by various factions of the capitalist class. The official invitation to "mitigate the counter revolution" was delivered to Brezhnev during the Bratislava summit. The decision about the "military variant of the solution" was made

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after a long telephone conversation between Dubček and Brezhnev on August 13, 1968. (Šiška, 1998) On the night of August 20, 1968, approximately half a million army troops of the Warsaw Pact - including troops from Bulgaria, GDR, Hungary, Poland, but mostly the Soviet Union – crossed the border and fled into Czechoslovakia.

Alexander Dubček gradually dismissed the representatives of the reform current in the Communist Party from their leadership positions. In April 1969, Gustáv Husák became the First Secretary of the Party and thus began the period of so-called normalization. Dubček was expelled from the Party and got a job as a forester after holding the post of Czechoslovak ambassador to Turkey for some time. (Dubček, 1993) Husák cancelled the vast majority of reforms of the 1960s, "cleansed" the party of its liberal members and dismissed professionals. He worked to restore the influence of police authorities and strong ties with other "socialist" states. He also wholly centralized the management of the economy again. The Prague Spring was definitively strangled by mid-1969.

Lessons of the revolutions

In November 1956, the director of the Hungarian News Agency, shortly before his office was razed to the ground by artillery fire, sent a message to the world warning that the Russian attack against Budapest had begun. The dispatch ended with these words: "*We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe.*" (Kundera, 2016, 1)

This paragraph from the seminal Milan Kundera's essay "Tragedy of Central Europe" is highly pressing in modern reality. Who are those brave people ready to die for their country and Europe? Why do they want to die for Europe? With the launch of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, these and many other questions are being more often and more acutely asked. They are abstract because the answer depends on the particular state and time. Thus, the Visegrad Group countries often declared their affiliation to the family of free European nations, particularly during the anti-communist revolutions of the 1950-60s. Like Ukraine now, they proved themselves worthy of thoroughly enjoying their liberty and proved to be politically mature and independent nations. If juxtaposing those events, we can draw parallels between the past, present and future of Central Europe.

All these events generally follow the same pattern. The communist system is incapable of meeting both the economic and political demands of society. In Poland, the workers faced harsh working conditions, low wages, high food prices and unrealistic production quotas imposed by the Stalinist central planning system. The workers also felt exploited and alienated by the bureaucracy of the party and its privileged nomenklatura. Hungary suffered from severe economic problems after World War II, connected to inflation, low wages, food shortages, and heavy taxation. The Soviet Union also exploited Hungary's resources and industry and demanded reparations for the war. Czechoslovakia faced problems such as low productivity, high costs, inefficient planning, worker absenteeism and low living standards due to the inconsistent economic policies of Novotný. Overall,

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the economic situation is staggering, and desperate people are starting to demand changes.

Altogether with the oppression of freedoms, dissatisfaction with the single-party system and the oppression of liberal thinking, these factors provoke social unrest, resulting in protests, rebellions, and revolution. Then, Russian intervention brutally scuppered the revolution and restored the previous status quo with even tougher measures, called the period of "normalization".

The first two revolutions were the result of the collapse of the Stalinist cult of personality and tried to exploit the liberalization period in the USSR to reform their Stalinist-like systems as well. However, the juxtaposition of Poland and Hungary shows the different outcomes from the generally the same input conditions. It is reasonable to ask whether those two revolutions ended up so differently. One of the reasons may be the scale of the revolutions and their leaders. The political vector of Gomułka's government was more moderate: he didn't reject communism in Poland but rather aspired to gain more independence for his state and apply the "Polish path to socialism" doctrine. On contrary, the Hungarian leader I. Nagy was more radical. He declared his intention to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, meaning the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from the country, too, and conduct the free elections – unacceptable luxury for the Soviet satellite. From the USSR perspective, the preservation of ally, even with some liberties, was a better outcome than the potential downfall of whole empire. Therefore, the constrained Polish revolution triumphed, while the more radical Hungarian revolution failed. Some scholars suggest that after the revolution, Poland experienced the transition from being a puppet state to a client state (Berend, 1996), others assert that it changed from being a Soviet colony to a dominion. (Pearson, 2002)

The cases of Hungary and Czechoslovakia merit exceptional scrutiny. Hungarians were "*the first time that a country along with its legitimate government and legitimate prime minister, defied the Soviet might*", (Antall, 2008, 152) while Czechoslovakia had the same situation, when the legitimate government led by the legitimate prime minister enjoyed the public support and tried to fight the occupation. They share the common reasons for the revolution – economic and political degradation. In the early 1950s, the Rákosi economic policies increased the per capita income, however, the standard of living declined due to the compulsory financial contributions towards the industrialization of Hungary. The poor bureaucratic management of resources exacerbated the economic situation, causing shortages of necessary goods. (Pető, Szakács, 1985) In the early 1960s, ČSSR experienced an economic downturn. In the early 1960s, industrial production altogether with the agricultural sector stagnated. The 3rd five-year plan (1961-65) plan was cancelled after the 1962 recession. The plan's aims were proved to be too high and unreachable. National income declined in 1963. In 1965 it was only 1.9% higher than it was in 1960, compared with 6.9% growth in 1956-60. (Czechoslovakia Economic..., 2004) However, Alexander Dubček was a convinced communist, and in his policies he was closer to Gomułka, rather than to Nagy, but still the Prague Spring ended up with the Soviet tanks in Prague and the following "normalization" period. The reason for this

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outcome is the Brezhnev doctrine and his aspiration to preserve the unity of the Eastern Bloc.

In all of those three cases, Russia/Soviet Union played an important role, and their intervention defined the outcome of the conflict. So, let's break down what was the Soviet Union and Russia from the perspective of V4 countries.

All those revolutions illustrate the nature of the Russian Empire: the core is neither culturally superior nor more civilized than its colonies, usually vice versa. Just consider the fact that the first Czechoslovak Republic was at the time the most democratic country in Europe, unlike Russia, which economically and socially was stuck in the mid-XIX century at the very same time. Only heavy industrialization after the communist coup of 1917 at the enormous and unjustified social costs made them competitive with other European developed countries, and still, their products were worse in quality than the same in Hungary or Poland. From the cultural perspective, in the words of Ondřej Slačálek: „*Even the great Russian novels, while certainly great and representing cultural values, are above all very intensely foreign.*“ (Slačálek, 2016. 37) Half of the culture was oriented on the West and covered the issues they highlighted, and another half was appropriated from the colonies, like Ukraine or Poland.

Another key feature that belongs to the Russian culture was highlighted in Kundera's essay "Introduction into variations" – sentimentalism. He argues that feelings are used to justify the most notorious actions and that this leads to a lack of understanding and intolerance. In the case of Czechs, he illustrates that the lack of values, ideas and institutions can lead to the justification of gore, aggression, and atrocities. (Kundera, 1985) Developing this argument, Russians build their empires on emotions and feelings – hate, proud, patriotism that appealing to the feeling of belonging to the greater dominant group – but hardly those myths are found on the basis of truth. Lie is the biggest tool in the hands of Kremlin – lie of the regime enemies, lie of counter revolution, lie of Slavic or Eastern European unity, lie of prosperous communism, etc. Combining brutal conspiracies with appeals to primitive emotions creates the basis for the Russian ideology.

Any attempts to establish this emotive ideology on the states with the strong institutional bonds and values, ended up in a military confrontation, because there is no other way the subaltern empire can impose its power over more developed culturally and socially states. Therefore, it can only preserve the military-established order by constant lies and brutal force. The occupied states are developing their own domestic social and cultural capital that, as we see now, cannot be contained by brutal force – it will permanently destroy the chains and set oneself free. The fierce fashion of halting the inevitable changes proves that point. However, as Havel prophetically affirmed: "*the Soviet Union cannot expect to remain forever free of the world-wide struggle for national liberation*", (Havel, 2018, 129) and, as history illustrated, neither military power, nor ideological lies can stop the dawn of national consciousness.

These examples clearly show two historical and current facts. First, Russia, in every incarnation, is not in favour of letting the states that it considers their satellites behave independently. A question, formulated by Jerzy Giedroyc's close comrade Juliusz

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Mieroszewski in his seminal essay on the Russian complex of Poland “*Why do Russians prefer to have satellite states instead of friendly, relatively neutral neighbours?*” (Mieroszewski, 1974), has been answered. Following his logic of analysing history, we can conclude that Russia does not want to have competitors, neither politically, nor ideologically. From the last two cases, it is obvious that if either Czechoslovakia or Hungary took the lead in the socialist block, Russia would immediately lose the monopoly on ideology and therefore became the periphery. Dubček in his autobiography mentioned Lenin’s quote: if the socialist revolution won in any developed country, unlike Russia, then this state would lead the international socialist movement, and Russia would follow it. He made a note near this quote: “Czechoslovakia? East Germany?”. (Dubček, 1993, 78)

Second, states of modern Visegrad Four were always European states and always belonged closer to Europe than to Russia, and the people of those states were willing to fight for their freedom. The spirit of freedom is uniting these states with their geographical location. If implementing the lessons of these events in modern times, neither authoritarianism in general nor Russia, in particular, are the favourable vector of orientation and development. Therefore, we should not allow the proliferation of authoritarianism and pro-Russian foreign policy orientation among V4 countries as long as we all will end up in an obscure period of "normalization", which in the case of modern propagandist newspeak means the period of "even bigger oppression and obedience than ever".

As history suggests, Russia was always the enemy, the state that neglected the dignity of the Central European nations by labelling them in a reductionist and outdated fashion "sphere of influence", a state that did not bring anything but torture, fear and lies. The future of the V4 region belongs to people who can adequately comprehend history lessons. V4 should be united to face the common menace and achieve common goals because, as history shows us, we share too much in common and, therefore, should embrace our similarities and move on. Thus, if there is one lesson to be taken from the case studies of the essay, that would be this: Central Europe belongs to the European family of nations, share both the common values of liberty and freedom, and share a common enemy – Russia – the state that was always mimicking the European ideas, values and institution models and subverting them to contest the world order. (Morozov, 2013) Therefore, the reasons that most states of Central Europe are helping Ukraine with arms and providing her with humanitarian aid are obvious. The most important here is that both Ukraine and Central European states experienced the traumatic experience of being conquered by Russia, and this experience should be sublimated into one decisive front against the state that wants once more to return times that shall never to be returned.

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V4's Cooperation with Ukraine or V4+Ukraine Format

Veronika Bilovol

Abstract

The present study closely takes into account the topics of the V4+Ukraine format. Among the key questions for the author were: what had the greatest impact on the development of this partnership and why it is important and relevant. At the same time, having reviewed the main events in each of the selected periods, the author summarizes how this affected further cooperation and the provision of various types of assistance to Ukraine by V4 countries as a group during Russia's full-scale invasion since February 2022.

Keywords: V4+Ukraine format, cooperation, security, periods, war in Ukraine.

The Visegrad Group was established in 1991 by three Central European post-socialist countries: Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. But after the collapse of Czechoslovakia, the Visegrad Group transformed from V3 to V4, which remains recently and is likely to remain in this composition for a long time to come, precisely because of the unique historical connection between the members of the group, a certain similarity of their values and traditions, common interests and goals on which the group was formed. Although, despite some similarities, it is also hard not to notice many differences between the members's opinions, especially when it comes to some global issues. In any case, what about the primary goals of this group? It was certainly about full-scale democratization, the revival of society after communist rule, and the transition to a new path in general. When the most important strategic goal for all 4 members was achieved - accession to the NATO, and then to the EU - it gave not only great opportunities and inspiration for further development for each of these countries on their own, but also an understanding that this cooperation is essential and needs to be maintained at the proper level. Since the accession into these important structures, the V4 has strengthened as a regional bloc within the European Union and set many new goals for the future.

During the first official visit of Vaclav Havel to Warsaw in 1990, he made an appeal and said: "We face the chance to change Central Europe, which has so far remained mainly as a spiritual phenomenon, into a political phenomenon". (Legucka 2015:30) These changes obviously need to affect not only the members of the group but also their neighbors in order to create something truly valuable out of the region.

Gradually bringing closer to the topic chosen by the author, it is important to understand that V4 strives not only for communication and preservation of stability within the group and Central Europe, but also externally with other countries, which is an integral part of the concept. That is why the V4 countries, often together with other like-minded partners, coordinate their positions on EU policies, launched joint projects and created the V4 brand through dialogue with third partners in the V4+ format. (The Visegrad Group 2014)

The Visegrad Four uses the V4+ format as a strategic area of activity and development of effective communication and cooperation beyond membership. The V4+ format covers countries, regions and organizations from all over the world, including even Japan, Korea, the African Union, Egypt, Israel and the United States. Therefore, in this essay, the author would like to take a closer look at the relationship between the Visegrad Four and Ukraine - one of a large number of countries with which V4 is in touch, but not the least important. So, what has influenced the development of this partnership, and why is it important and relevant?

Probably the most important factor in Ukraine's relations (at least their origin) with the V4 was Russia. It is clear that, in the first years of its independence, Ukraine, which had been under Russian communist rule for a long time, could not get rid of its dependence on Russia and immediately sever all economic, cultural, and political ties – it was a complicated process that took a long time to be successful. Needless to say, Ukraine is the most important country in the post-Soviet area for the global and regional position of the Russia Federation. Almost 80% of Russia's gas transit goes through Ukraine to Central and Western Europe, which is the main source of income to the Russian federal budget. (Legucka 2015: 34) „Russia obviously does not like this type of cooperation in this part of Europe when it is not part of it. For our part, we know that only cooperation in Central Europe gives us a guarantee of development and peace.“. (Szymanowski 2017)

In this way, the development of relations between the Visegrad Group and Ukraine can be divided into several specific stages. First, this is the period from Ukraine's gaining independence to the Visegrad countries' accession to the EU, which are the years of 1991-2004. But why this particular period of time? In the author's opinion, on the one hand, this is the period that begins with the declaration of Ukraine's independence - an event from which it is possible to talk about a separate, free country that is able to make its own decisions and has the opportunity to cooperate with other countries or groups, such as the V4 - however, in this particular period, we can hardly talk about any regular or, in general, any effective cooperation, because Ukraine was still highly dependent on Russia and actually had no specific goals and aspirations, while on the other hand, as for the V4 directly, until 2004, the main objective of the Visegrad Four was the EU membership, for which they were diligently striving and could not pay much attention to other aspects. So, there were certain steps towards cooperation, but rather ad-hoc initiatives.

When the members of the Visegrad Four joined the NATO, it was important to involve Ukraine in this process so that they could see their neighbor as a security partner. Nevertheless, the first reaction of the Ukrainian opposition to the proposal to expand NATO even to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic was that this would be a threat to Ukraine's security. This reaction was mainly due to pressure from Moscow, which has always been against such organizations and the then indecisive political elite in Ukraine. Yet by 1999, interest was already beginning to show on both sides. Ukraine feels more confident and is slowly but surely reviving. The V4 countries were beginning to perceive Ukraine as a possible security partner and even as an active supporter in NATO peacekeeping operations. In 1999 started the Ukrainian-Polish mission as part of NATO forces in Kosovo.

Secondly, the period from 2004 to 2013 slowly brings us closer to some of the most important events. These include, firstly, the accession of the V4 members to the EU – a significant event that radically changed the perception of the Central European region and laid a solid foundation for the further work of the V4 group, and secondly, 2004 also marked a milestone event in Ukraine - the Orange Revolution.

As for the first, long-awaited accession of the V4 to the EU, this event has obviously changed a lot, but what about the area of collaboration with others? The post-2004 collaboration was built upon the text of the Kroměříž Declaration (2004), which has announced the new goals for the V4 future. Via Kroměříž Declaration, the participants reaffirmed their commitment to the enlargement of the European Union. They expressed to be ready to support countries aspiring for EU membership by sharing and transmitting their knowledge and experience. This Declaration was seconded by the set of guidelines on the future areas of Visegrad cooperation, in which the member countries have pointed out four categories of the common interest: cooperation within the V4 area, cooperation within the EU, cooperation with other partners and cooperation with NATO and other international organizations. (Mogildea 2018: 6) Thus, the period since 2004 can be considered the beginning of the V4+Ukraine format, when the interaction became relatively static and began to bring positive results, thanks to the Declaration 2004 mentioned above.

As for the second major event associated with this period, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, it came as a great surprise for whole Europe. During the first thirteen years of independence, the political, cultural, social, and economic borders between Ukraine and Russia remained blurred, and most people on both sides of the border continued to consider the fates of the two conventionally separate countries inextricably intertwined. But 2004 has changed everything. Thousands of citizens concerned about the free future of Ukraine rallied under orange banners to support the election of Viktor Yushchenko as future president, who then set a course for Western ideas and a desire to move away from ties with Russia. During the „orange revolution“ in December of 2004 the Visegrad Group ministers of foreign affairs made a statement on the situation in Ukraine in which they had underlined that „Ukraine is not only a key neighbor and strategic partner of the European Union, but also a major player in regional and global security. We believe that a positive resolution of the crisis, followed by a genuine democratization could create a basis for a new quality in the EU–Ukraine relations. A democratic Ukraine, fulfilling its commitments and pursuing fundamental reforms, should be offered a long-term European perspective“ (Legucka 2015: 40).

Subsequently, in 2005, the first V4+Ukraine meeting was held in Poland, where Ukraine's European integration and some energy cooperation issues were discussed, and the prime ministers of Ukraine and Poland also had a separate conversation. "The Visegrad Group has set itself a very practical task: to unite efforts to pave the way for their countries to join the European Union. And we hope that the experience of this group of countries will help Ukraine pave the way to the European Union," as the former Prime Minister of Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko emphasized. The main outcome of her visit to Poland was the two declarations signed by the Visegrad Group states supporting Ukraine's accession

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to the EU. (Lvivska Gazeta 2005) And already in early January of 2006, Defense Minister A. Gritsenko took part in a meeting of V4 defense ministries heads, where he spoke about Ukrainian need for expert support on the way to the Euro-Atlantic integration. Since 2007, meetings in the V4+Ukraine format have even become traditional and somewhat permanent. In addition, there were periodic joint military exercises between the Visegrad countries and Ukraine. (Maksak 2018)

The Orange Revolution, however, did not result in Ukraine's admission to the European Union. But despite this, cooperation between the V4 and Ukraine has grown considerably for a time. The Visegrad countries sought at this time their new mission and some of them spotted it in the possibility of spreading democracy, the rule of law and protection of human rights in the eastern neighborhood. Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had made a statement that the Eastern Partnership (EaP) should be a way of rapprochement with the EU and the stage in the further „opening of the doors“ for Eastern countries. It must be emphasized here that Hungary was more interested in the integration of the south. (Legucka 2015: 42) As for this Eastern Partnership, it can be said that it was finally approved under terrible circumstances - in 2008, when Russia attacked Georgia. It is difficult to say about the common views of V4 members on these circumstances, because everyone had their own opinion.

Ukraine has indirectly become one of the main prerequisites for the Visegrad Group's security policy and this was shown in the gas conflict in 2009. Those members of the Visegrad Four, who were dependent on the import of Russian gas, , suffered significantly, as gas pipelines run through the territory of Ukraine. In the following year, the V4 countries adopted the Energy Declaration, which outlined the directions of cooperation in this matter in the V4+ format. After that, many different types of cooperation in military and security forms were also approved.

Relationship between Ukraine and the V4 became more complicated with the election of a new president in Ukraine in 2010 who had a somewhat pro-Russian position. Accordingly, the Visegrad Four was concerned about the situation in Ukraine, especially the level of democracy and respect of human rights. Despite the difficulties, some important security and defense initiatives between Ukraine and the V4 have been launched. In 2013, the need for further support and commitment from the EU was reflected in the joint declaration of the V4 and the Eastern Partnership countries. The V4 ministers confirmed their openness to share the experience of reforms and systemic transformation of the Eastern European partners. In this context, they emphasized the importance of the V4 Eastern Partnership (V4EaP) program, developed by the International Visegrad Fund to promote political transformation and democratization in the Eastern Partnership countries. (Joint Statement on the Eastern Partnership 2013)

In fact, war in the eastern part of Ukraine has become the most important factor in the V4–Ukraine relations. Since the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2014, the region of Central and Eastern Europe has perhaps felt the importance of regional cooperation and revision of security methods more than ever before. After this event, an essential transformation took place in relations between the V4 and Ukraine -

the Visegrad Four became an extremely vital platform for supporting national security in Ukraine's foreign policy and for the V4, it was crucial to maintain external stability in such times. Security of the member states had to be improved, and the future of European security depended on it. All of this led to the signing in March 2014 of the Visegrad Four's Long-Term Vision for Deepening Defense Cooperation. „As a consequence of changes of extraordinary dynamics and magnitude in the global security environment, Europe has to increase its contribution to enhancing its own security. This challenge should be undertaken in a period when the gap between the defense capabilities and defense budgets of the United States and of European nations is growing, while the security environment in Europe's neighborhood has become more fragile, and new types of security challenges are emerging”. „All four Visegrad countries should benefit from the deepening of the cooperation, thus increasing the cohesion of the V4 group. The Visegrad Group remains open to cooperation with third states or groups of states. Common projects are envisioned mostly with the involvement of countries from our wider region”. (Long-Term Vision 2014) Therefore, these decisions firstly concerned the military sphere - the establishment of multinational armed forces and joint training centers, and a framework document was prepared to deepen cooperation in defense planning.

Then, in May 2014, the Visegrad Four implemented a pilot project, an educational program called the Civil Servants Mobility Program (CSMP), which was aimed at training civil servants from Eastern Partnership countries and also Western Balkans by organizing special study visits to V4 member states, which should be run simultaneously. The planned format was to host 6 fellows for 1 week in each V4 country, which means that in total there were 4, one-week fellowships covering the whole V4 region. The chosen topics reflected the needs of Ukrainian civil servants and were consulted with V4 embassies in Kyiv. While in Poland and Slovakia the fellows focused mostly on regional governance-administrative reform, in Hungary their focus was on good governance and human resource development in civil service, while in the Czech Republic it was energy. In overall, the program and the meetings were very much welcomed by the group of 23 Ukrainian experts and the group expressed their desire to continue in cooperation and dialogue with partners in all V4 countries. The fellows found the format of the Civil Servants Mobility Program very practical and useful and expressed a wish to continue it. (CSMP-Ukraine 2014) The program continued to work in 2015 and 2016 as well. Thus, cooperation began to develop in different directions and was not focused only on security partnership, but also on educational fields.

The Budapest Declaration of June 2014 made the next step in strengthening the V4 defense capabilities, including the NATO eastern flank strengthening. The Declaration also indicates that it is Russia's aggression against Ukraine that makes it necessary to review the current Group members' defense policy. (Maksak 2018) „In accordance with the Long Term Vision and other documents approved during the Hungarian V4 Presidency, we are committed to make further progress in our defense cooperation. In this process we support the involvement of V4 national defense industries as much as possible. At the same time, we are open to cooperation with other partners outside the V4 where and when useful”. (Budapest Declaration 2014) The V4 declared its desire to

continue joint efforts to make the group a prominent element of the global security environment, a real „part of Europe”, while also creating its own effective defense solutions.

In December 2014, the V4 member states issued a joint statement during a meeting in Kyiv, where they discussed the current situation and course of the conflict, as well as the support and assistance provided by the V4 countries to the government and people of Ukraine. The V4 countries reaffirmed their commitment to the policy of non-recognition of Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, emphasized the need to restore peace and stability in Ukraine and also the importance of unity and cooperation to achieve this. „The V4 countries will continue to assist via their official development programs, projects and grants focusing inter alia on areas such as democratization, good governance, regional development, the security sector reform and border control, as well as with humanitarian aid for the Ukrainian people in need, especially those displaced from Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine“. The V4 countries and Ukraine also decided to further enhance political and working contacts at the bilateral level, as well as cooperation in international multilateral forums. (Joint Statement 2014)

Even though there were many disagreements within the group during this period, as each member had its own position on the conflict, particularly on sanctions against Russia, they were able to find a consensus and provided support to Ukraine, especially in the period 2014-2016. The difference is that Poland saw Ukraine in the strategic/security perspective, but other V4 members liked to think of Ukraine more from an economic and social point of view. (Legucka 2015: 32) Still, it was the CEE countries that were among the first to show respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and the aspirations of the Ukrainian people for further European integration and also, using the existing V4+ format, were able to engage to the discussion of the situation in Ukraine and to encourage countries such as Austria, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the Western Balkans, Germany, France to join pro-Ukrainian statements. It is important to note that during Slovakia's presidency of the Visegrad Four from July 2014 to June 2015, the issue of strengthening the V4 format with Ukraine, on the one hand, and security + defense issues, on the other, were indeed in the focus of the group's attention. Bratislava paid special attention to maintaining a high-level political dialogue with Ukraine to stimulate democratic and structural reforms, and energy and security issues in general were also discussed at the level. Due to the support of the Group states, in 2014-2015 Kyiv was able to withstand Russia's pressure in the energy sector. In November, 2015, Ukraine succeeded in abandoning the purchase of natural gas from Russia. (Maksak 2018)

If we talk about 2014-2015 as the years of the rise of the V4+Ukraine format, in 2016-2017 the level of cooperation began somewhat to decline in 2016-2017 due to numerous problems, among which the most decisive were disagreements both between V4 members within the group and with Ukraine itself, which needed more initiative and interest to resume intensive cooperation. This is not to say that cooperation during this period was completely ineffective, as there were positive moments, for example, in the summer of 2016, the participation of the Ukrainian armed forces in the Visegrad Battlegroup was formalized, which meant that another agreement was reached between this countries –

„This project has brought positive results not only for our armed forces, namely increased interoperability and close military interaction, but also in the area of multinational cooperation and where partners like Ukraine in 2016 or Croatia this year contribute to our effort“ (Joint Communiqué 2019), and in June 2017, the first meeting in the V4+Baltic States+Ukraine format took place, during which the participants focused on the prospects for strengthening practical military cooperation, but compared to previous years, cooperation has deteriorated to a certain level not only in the years mentioned here, but has remained so in the years since.

From one perspective, this can be explained by the Visegrad Group's focus on internal EU issues and the search for compromise solutions to Russia. Alternatively, the situation can also be explained by a decline in the level of political dialogue between Ukraine and individual members of the group. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Budapest, who was not satisfied with the situation of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine, has announced that it is blocking Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations at all international platforms, including the EU and NATO. In addition, it is clear that a certain cooling in relations with the V4 countries was clearly a bilateral problem and could be the result of Kyiv's incomplete understanding of the mechanisms of cooperation, interests and capabilities of its partners in the group. (Maksak 2018) During the last few years, cooperation between Ukraine and the Visegrad Four at all levels really has been in a certain stagnation, the main probable reasons for which have already been discussed before. The last agreement with Hungary was signed in 2006 (on military-technical cooperation), with Slovakia in 2011 (on the creation of the coordination center for logistics), with Czech Republic in 2013 (on quality control of the defense products during military-technical cooperation), and with Poland in 2017 (joint with Lithuania on changes to the agreement on a joint battalion). (Hanna Shelest 2019)

It was important to review the highlights of the V4-Ukraine relationship in all the previous paragraphs in order to understand its course and changes over the decades, as well as to get an idea of what kind of relationship might be observed now. And so how can we characterize the current situation in V4 cooperation with Ukraine? Cooperation has become more effective now, but again, this was initiated by the conflict and again by Russia, with its attack on Ukraine in February 2022, a full-scale war which is still ongoing. In fact, a few days before the outbreak of a full-scale war on the territory of Ukraine, several discussions took place in Houston/US with the participation of the heads of the Visegrad missions in Washington, in which special attention was paid to the deterioration of relations between Ukraine and Russia, and the importance of transatlantic unity was so emphasized like never before.

Already in early March, 2022, an important summit concerning this matter between the V4 and the United Kingdom took place. Their joint statement declared: „We, the leaders of the Visegrad Group Countries and the UK, stand united in condemning Russia's aggression on Ukraine – a brutal, unprovoked and premeditated attack against a sovereign, peaceful democratic state. The actions of Russia, and those who enable them, represent an egregious violation of international law and the UN Charter that undermines European security and stability“. In general, the V4 and UK, with this statement, engaged

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in supporting Ukraine, continuing the response against Russia's actions in the form of sanctions and other adopted measures. They also offered support to refugees, providing temporary shelter in their countries and discussed reducing dependence on Russian fuel to improve collective energy security. „...We have today resolved to further deepen and strengthen these bonds, as a significant contribution to European peace and security and to work together to protect NATO Allies”. (V4+UK Joint Statement 2022)

The V4 countries have mobilized significant financial and human resources to help Ukraine as a whole, as well as to assist refugees from Ukraine, which has been a vital contribution from their side. „Complementing their bilateral efforts with a joint act of tangible solidarity, the V4 countries agreed on a support package of 1 million euros to help Ukraine via the International Visegrad Fund, with a focus on improving the situation of refugees from Ukraine in the V4 countries, especially vulnerable groups such as youth and children”. (Joint Communiqué on Providing Joint V4 Assistance to Refugees 2022)

The horrific war is still ongoing, yet cooperation has not stopped either, which shows a real desire and understanding that security in Europe can only be preserved by helping Ukraine, despite numerous disputes within the Group. For example, most recently, in December last year, they signed the Declaration of the Defense and Security Committees of the Visegrad Group parliaments in Bratislava. At the meeting, the Visegrad Group discussed current security and defense issues. The meeting reaffirmed the member states' support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and its internationally recognized borders; noted that the European Peace Fund (EPF) has proven to be incredibly effective in supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine and stressed the need to maintain a high level of support from the EPF in the near future. The heads of delegations agreed on the continuation of the development of defense and security cooperation within the framework of V4, joint purchases in defense industries.

„Today Russia is using the ongoing war in Ukraine to increase polarization and amplify tensions in the global arena. Its hybrid tool includes undermining world food security - a significant disruption of food supply is caused by Russia's aggression on Ukraine - threatening a nuclear incident and blackmailing energy consumers”. (Declaration of the Defense and Security Committees of Parliaments of the Visegrad Group 2022)

The new year, 2023, began with a solidarity visit to Kyiv by the mayors of the Visegrad capitals (Bratislava's mayor Matúš Vallo, Budapest's Gergely Karácsony, Prague's Zdeněk Hřib, and Warsaw's Rafał Trzaskowski), who came at the invitation of their Ukrainian counterpart, Vitaliy Klitschko, the mayor of Kyiv. At the meeting, they jointly discussed issues related to deepening cooperation in various areas: refugee support, humanitarian assistance, post-war reconstruction and overall security. Mayors of the V4 cities expressed their support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. In addition, the mayor of Bratislava presented an initiative to unite Ukrainian cities that were harmed by Russian aggression and Central European cities that are able and ready to help. „Ukrainian cities will enter their needs and requests into the system in order of priority. Donor cities will be able to continuously check if they are able to meet some of the requests or record in the system how they can help in other ways. We hope that the new platform will

encourage other cities to join this initiative. (...) I am glad that our V4 capitals – Prague, Warsaw, Budapest, and Bratislava – are setting an example for others “. An agreement was also signed on the transfer of ten old Warsaw subway trains between the mayor of Warsaw and the mayor of Ukraine, which could be useful at least in the form of spare parts. (Visegrád Post 2023)

Summary

In this essay, the author has tried to look at the development of V4+Ukraine partnership, the main positive aspects, as well as some problematic ones, and what influenced the course of relations in general, and then smoothly moved on to the present and the state of these relations here and now. To summarize, we can conclude that the topic of cooperation between the V4 and Ukraine was important to analyze not only when it was just emerging, but also now. Despite the years when cooperation was almost minimal and there were many problems, it still "held on" and is therefore of great importance now, during a full-scale war in Ukraine. Of course, looking back, it is impossible to say that this cooperation was ever perfect, but it is there, and thanks to decades of building and developing the relationship between the V4 and Ukraine, the Visegrád Four are now trying to do their best to help Ukraine and to be an example for others. Cooperation in particular between V4 members is not easy, but it is now vital in the context of the war in Ukraine and maintaining security in the CEE region as well.

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Václav Havel and his Influence on the Visegrad Group's Establishment and its Functioning during the 90's

Václav Havel and his Influence on the Visegrad Group's Establishment and its Functioning during the 90's

Adéla Zemanová

Introduction

The Visegrad Group, one of the major formations in Central Europe, became a very important issue in political science. The Visegrad Group had to face (and still faces) many challenges with mixed success.

The Visegrad Group was formed under specific conditions. The cooperation benefited from good relationship among the Czech, Slovak, Polish and Hungarian intellectuals. These intellectuals were mostly opponents of communist regimes in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. After the fall of the communist regimes in Central Europe in the late '80s, the above-mentioned countries occurred to be in some kind of a vacuum. After democratic elections, some of the former regime opponents became new leaders in these countries, e.g. Václav Havel, Árpád Göncz, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Ján Čarnogurský. These people represented a driving force on the way to the Visegrad's cooperation.¹

The following text is dedicated to Václav Havel, crucial person of Czech (Czechoslovak) politics, and his role in the process of Visegrad Group's forming. I would also like to discuss Havel's impact on Visegrad's functioning during the 1990s. I would like to concentrate on these three following issues:

- 1. How did Václav Havel contribute to develop the relationship among Central European countries?*
- 2. Was Havel's part of this process crucial?*
- 3. How did Havel reflect the situation around „Visegrad“ during the 1990s?*

Václav Havel: From Dissident to President

Václav Havel was born in 1939 in Prague². He came from a major Prague business family. From the perspective of then communists, he came from a so-called „bourgeois“ family³. Havel's origin was quite determining for his future. The communists later misused his origin as a tool to damage his reputation especially when Charter 77 was issued. Since Havel was a co-author and a spokesperson for Charter 77, the propaganda described Havel as an immoral property-revanchist who is not interested in human rights at all.⁴

As a businessman's son, Havel was not allowed to study at the university, however he attended evening classes at the grammar school. He worked as a stage technician. He became more active in politics during the Prague spring period. During '60s he became a playwright; his play *Zahradní slavnost (The Garden Party)* was presented in the Divadlo na Zábřadlí Theatre. Havel was an author of other plays, for example *Audience*

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(Audience). Havel was also an essayist, he has written a famous essay called *Moc bezmocných* (*The Power of the Powerless*). Some of his texts were published after 1989, for example *Dopisy Olze* (*Letters for Olga*) etc.⁵

After the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968, the regime expelled Václav Havel out of public life. That fact didn't mean, however, that Havel gave up on his visions. He sought to draw attention to the need for respect human rights, as well as to release political prisoners in Czechoslovakia. He wrote a critical letter to the former president of Czechoslovakia, Gustáv Husák, in 1975. He also co-founded samizdat library – *Expedice*. Thanks to *Expedice*, underground literature or philosophical pieces of work were published.⁶

As I already mentioned, Václav Havel became a spokesperson of Charter 77.⁷ Charter 77 was a „brief document, invoking the two international covenants on human rights, which had been signed by Czechoslovakia in 1968 and ratified in late 1975, and describing the many violations of these rights.“⁸ As an opponent of the regime, Havel found himself under constant surveillance by State Security. He spent some time in prison, too.⁹

During the events that took place in November and December 1989, Havel turned into a symbol of revolutionary changes which led to the so-called Velvet Revolution. After the fall of communist regime in Czechoslovakia and after Gustáv Husák's abdication, there were discussions about the next president of the country. On 29th December 1989, it was Václav Havel who was elected by the Federal Assembly, so he became the new Czechoslovakian President. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, he was held the post as a Czech president until 2003.¹⁰

Václav Havel and the Visegrad cooperation: 1990-1992

After 1989, the conditions in Central Europe were quite favourable also because of the mutual bonds among Czechoslovak, Polish and Hungarian dissidents. They often supported each other and cooperated together. After 1989, some of them became political representatives.¹¹ There was an opportunity to form some kind of a regional cooperation.

One of the first impulses came from Václav Havel. In 1990, during his speech to the Parliament of Poland (he addressed *Sejm*), Havel appealed for some kind of a formation, a so-called trilateral conception of a return to the Europe.¹² He said: „we have a historical chance to transform Central Europe into a political phenomenon.“¹³ Even though we may consider this initiation as very important, we have to keep in mind that the vision of the Central European countries' cooperation is older and dates back to the '70s and '80s of the 20th century, in other words, it cannot be said that this concept was first heard in the *Sejm* in 1990.¹⁴ But regarding the regime changes in 1989, it was a huge step.

A meeting of Czechoslovak, Polish and Hungarian supreme representatives took place on 9th April 1990 in Bratislava. The meeting was initiated by the Czechoslovakian side. Czechoslovakia was represented by Václav Havel, Poland by Wojciech Jaruzelski and Hungary was represented by president Mátyás Szűrös. The summit was also attended by

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representatives of Italy, Austria and Yugoslavia, as the meeting in Bratislava was originally intended for members of the Alps-Adriatic Working Group.¹⁵

Václav Havel defined ten specific areas that were to represent the ideological basis for further debate within the framework of cooperation between the three countries (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary). The areas concerned the specific challenges facing the Central European countries; basic democratic values, protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms, including a common policy towards China and co-responsibility for the development of the so-called Third World countries. Havel said that the Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and Poles were facing a big task which could be described as a "return to Europe." According to him, it was absolutely crucial for Central European countries to be able to agree that they do not want to hinder or even envy each other while they are joining integration mechanisms. At the same time Havel also mentioned it is necessary for them to be able to clearly express a common position on topics such as the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance.¹⁶

Václav Havel had high expectations from the upcoming meeting in Budapest. He believed that concrete agreements would be concluded on how to proceed jointly in the process of joining Europe. The plan was to discuss the future of the Warsaw Pact and the Gulf War. Václav Havel told to the Czech News "Lidové noviny" about the planned meeting this:¹⁷ "... *On the way between democratic states and free nations, we are to help each other, not compete. That is our opportunity. The success of one country is the success of another. We know about this in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, but in practice this fact is not yet correctly reflected. I believe that after the Visegrad meeting, we will find a way to put the principles of mutual assistance into practice.*"¹⁸

The key meeting took place on 15 February 1991 in Budapest. On this occasion, Presidents Václav Havel, Lech Walesa and Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall signed a so-called "Solemn Declaration" which stated that they were "*firmly determined to take up their responsibilities boldly and, building on the common historical traditions that unite them, to do everything for peace, security and uplifting of their nations in accordance with traditional European values and mainstream developments.*"¹⁹ At the same time, the "Declaration on Cooperation of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary on the Path of European Integration" was signed during this meeting.²⁰ All of the three men - Havel, Walesa and Antall - were aware not only of the cultural and intellectual legacy born in dissident circles from the pre-1989 era, but also of the possibility of reviving the phenomenon of Central Europe.²¹ From now on, we are talking about the Visegrad Group.

President Havel said at a press conference that it was evident from the meeting that the representatives of the individual countries understood each other well and he wishes that such understanding would be also experienced among the population in the countries. He also mentioned that friendly relations among states should be confirmed by concluding new bilateral agreements.²²

In March 1991, on his foreign trip to Belgium, President Havel visited the NATO Council of Ministers. He mentioned there that the Visegrad Group countries would like to

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coordinate their development in the field of military and security policy, and therefore the Central European countries attach great importance to the cooperation with the North Atlantic Alliance.²³

In October 1991, another meeting of the Visegrad Group was held, this time in Krakow, in Poland. Václav Havel, Lech Walesa and József Antall signed two important documents, namely the "Krakow Declaration of Ministers and Foreign Affairs on relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" and the "Krakow Declaration", which specified in a little more detail the objectives of the already existing Visegrad Declaration.²⁴

On the 6th of May 1992, the main representatives of the Central European region met in Prague. It was the last meeting when the group met in a three-state format. The main subject of the meeting was to evaluate the cooperation's existence and also to evaluate current international political issues. The Prague Summit meant a huge shift especially in the area of security policy coordination. For the first time, it was officially stated that the long-term goal of the security and defence policy of the Visegrad Group countries is the membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. In Prague, the leaders of the countries also announced their unified intention and determination to apply for membership in the EC (European Community) together.²⁵ Havel also spoke about the cooperation of the regional initiative in his speech. He assessed the good progress in political and economic reforms that could continue in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc. According to Václav Havel, contemporary Europe is looking for a new face. The Visegrad countries should not stand aside in this process, but on the contrary, share their ideas. The Visegrad countries should also actively participate in the activities of NATO and the Western European Union, but above all their ambition should be the full membership in these organisations.²⁶

Václav Havel and the Visegrad cooperation: 1993-1997

The developing cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries was disturbed after the parliamentary elections in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, in June 1992. In the Czech lands and Slovakia won political parties whose main representatives (Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar) did not want the continuation of one state. On the 1st of January 1993, Czechoslovakia split up.²⁷ Two new international legal entities were established, suddenly there were two new states - the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.²⁸ This fact caused a lot of troubles to the Visegrad cooperation: the international position of both countries was quite weakened. Both countries had to renegotiate their accession to the Council of Europe. In addition, both the Czech and Slovak Republics had to deal with many other legal and economic complications such as the issue of legal succession, division of property including embassies, legal succession to international treaties, etc.²⁹ Since the Czech Republic and Slovakia first had to build and define their international status, the Visegrad project was simply relegated aside. The main promoters of the idea of Central European cooperation left the highest executive positions. The only person who actually supported the Visegrad idea and who stayed was Václav Havel.³⁰ After the

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break-up of Czechoslovakia, it seemed that Slovakia drifted towards becoming an authoritarian regime led by Vladimír Mečiar.³¹ For Visegrad Group's members was the leadership of Mečiar unacceptable.

On his first official visit to the Slovak Republic, during the inauguration of the new Slovak president Michal Kováč, Václav Havel met with the presidents of Hungary and Poland to discuss the future of the Visegrad cooperation. It was emphasized that future cooperation should reflect the new situation in the region, moving from general declarations to specific tasks that could be solved on this platform.³² In an interview with Germany's *Der Tagesspiegel*, President Havel said that a good relationship with neighbors is extremely important and that the Czech Republic should not repeat the mistakes of the interwar period, when Czechoslovakia relied too much on a one-power relationship.³³

Václav Havel seemed to be in a very complicated situation. As a president, he lacked the tools to force the Czech government to deal with the Visegrad Group when there was no will at all. Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus reckoned the Visegrad Group as a “*useless experiment*,”³⁴ minister of Foreign Affairs Josef Zieleniec regarded joining the European Community as a priority for the Czech Republic,³⁵ he refused to engage with partners in the Central European area. Since the Constitution of the Czech Republic stipulates that the government has the decisive word in terms of foreign policy, it was clear that Havel's possibilities would be limited. The President thus partially adapted to the concept of the Visegrad Group pioneered by Prime Minister Klaus. This fact explains some of Havel's almost resigned statements, such as when he said that “*the goals that this group had at its inception have already passed or have been fulfilled.*”³⁶ However, it cannot be clearly said that Havel was completely inactive in the Central European region. He introduced the tradition of meeting Central European presidents in a broader format.³⁷

In 1994, U.S. President Bill Clinton visited Prague with the vision of involving the Visegrad Group countries in the project called Partnership for Peace (PfP). However, the Prague government did not want to support the common position of the Visegrad Group or to adopt a collective statement. In addition, there was an unpleasant rift between Polish President Lech Walesa and Václav Klaus, as Walesa said that the Prague summit was more or less unsuccessful due to the lack of solidarity of Czechs and their excessive individualism.³⁸ A number of Czech politicians, such as Jiří Dienstbier or Petr Pithart, disagreed with the government's foreign policy. President Havel tried to oppose the direction of the government, too. He managed to create a regional forum at the PfP summit in Prague.

In 1995, Václav Havel organized an informal meeting in Litomyšl, in a town located in the Czech Republic. He invited representatives of the Visegrad Group and he also invited presidents from Germany, Austria and Slovenia.³⁹ Talks took place from 15th to 16th April. After the summit, Havel was happy to declare that this meeting was a proof that “*the phenomenon of Central Europe is still alive.*”⁴⁰ Next meetings followed, e.g. in Austria – in the Alps, where representatives of Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Italy also arrived.⁴¹ Although it was not possible to develop cooperation within the framework of

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the "Visegrad", Václav Havel created a new dimension of Central European identity based on regional political cooperation through the Litomyšl meetings. At the same time, Havel wanted to have at least some influence on the Czech Republic's foreign policy.⁴²

Václav Havel and the Visegrad cooperation: 1998-1999

During 1997, the Czech Republic was affected by a number of economic problems (stagnation of gross domestic product, bankruptcies of privatized enterprises, growth in the foreign trade balance deficit, etc.), the crisis also affected the political scene. The ODS (Civic Democratic Party) split into two wings.⁴³ In the autumn of 1997, the Klaus government fell, Josef Tošovský became the new Prime Minister. Jaroslav Šedivý occupied the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁴⁴ It was crucial that Tošovský and Šedivý together with the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group (Jaroslav Šedivý, László Kovács, Bronisław Geremek) agreed on joint coordination of foreign policy in the security policy area.⁴⁵

Early parliamentary elections to the Chamber of Deputies were held in 1998. The winner was the ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party),⁴⁶ which had always criticized the suppression of cooperation between the "Visegrad" countries. After all, the party's pre-election program showed that the cooperation of the Visegrad Group is very important and that there are benefits from it.⁴⁷ Miloš Zeman became the new Czech Prime Minister.⁴⁸ Under the minority Social Democratic Cabinet, cooperation between Prague, Warsaw and Budapest was revived. The new government in the Czech Republic started to coordinate with Poland and Hungary to prepare the accession to the NATO and the EU.⁴⁹

In January 1999, Presidents Václav Havel, Alexander Kwaśniewski and Árpád Göncz signed instruments of accession to NATO, and in March the Visegrad countries (except Slovakia) became NATO members.⁵⁰ Václav Havel commented on the Czech Republic's entry into the alliance: *"It gives us hope that our country will never succumb or be sacrificed again."*⁵¹

In November 1999, the first official meeting of the presidents of the Visegrad Group countries (Havel, Kwaśniewski, Göncz, Schuster) took place after the resumption of cooperation. It took place in Slovakia in the High Tatras. Representatives of the countries discussed support for Slovakia in the accession processes to the NATO and the EU. The outcome of the meeting was the so-called Tatra Declaration, about which Havel declared that: *"... The Visegrad cooperation is a political, economic and cultural cooperation of four Central European countries striving for Euro-Atlantic integration. It is a clear demonstration of the ability of the peoples of the participating states to live in authentic friendship and cooperation, which has not always been self-evident in their history."*⁵²

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Summary

Before 1989, Václav Havel had good contacts with several intellectuals (and dissidents) coming from Poland and Hungary. Their relationships were a considerable advantage when the communist regimes in Central Europe fell and this region started to search a new identity. The speech in the Polish Sejm in 1990 was very important, in which Havel voiced his interest in cooperation between countries that had similar pasts and he probably perceived this political region as a Central European area of common interests. It was the Czechoslovak side, or rather President Havel, who initiated the April meeting in Bratislava. Although the program of this meeting was not precisely planned, the Czech delegation headed by Havel was very interested in cooperation and mutual support not only in the matter of integration into Western European organizations, but also in the matter of security and defence. Since the meeting in Bratislava, things have taken a relatively fast turn when in February 1991 Havel, Walesa and J. Antall signed the "Ceremonial Declaration". The Visegrad Cooperation was born.

Václav Havel was definitely one of the most enthusiastic supporters of cooperation between the "Visegrad" countries. Complications arose after the parliamentary elections in 1992. Czechoslovakia collapsed, Václav Klaus was not interested in the development of Visegrad cooperation, so this topic was significantly sidelined. Havel had limited room for manoeuvre as president, so he adapted to some extent to the government's foreign policy. On the other hand, he still exerted some activity and effort to "unite" the neighbors again. He invited his presidential counterparts from the "Visegrad countries", and moreover, presidents from Germany, Austria and Slovenia to an unofficial meeting in Litomyšl. This could be followed by other meetings, for example in the Austrian Alps. These meetings confirmed to Havel that Central Europe is not a dead phenomenon and that it can still function as a platform where issues of both European integration and the development of civil society are addressed. It can be said that President Havel spent most of the '90s in opposition to the government on the issue of Visegrad cooperation. The situation was changed by the fall of the Klaus government, followed by the formation of governments and officials, and then by early elections to the Chamber of Deputies. They brought victory to the Social Democrats, which since previous years has made no secret of its support for the "Visegrad" project. After a long pause, the countries began to find their way back to each other, albeit with the reality that in the second half of the '90s, a two-speed Visegrad was being created,⁵³ consisting of ongoing negotiations regarding NATO accession between Prague, Warsaw and Budapest without Bratislava, while the concept of V-3+1 negotiations with Slovakia was created in parallel.⁵⁴

In January 1999, Havel, together with Kwaśniewsky and Göncz, signed the instrument of accession of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary to NATO. Havel attached great importance to the Czech Republic's membership in NATO, so to a certain extent we can speak of a certain satisfaction. Joining the alliance, however, did not mean for Havel to stop devoting himself to the Visegrad Party. In the autumn of the same year, the President of the Czech Republic met his counterparts with the participation of Slovak President Schuster.

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Let us have a look at the original question (issue) concerning the influence of Václav Havel on the formation of the Visegrad Formation. At this point, it cannot be unequivocally stated that without Václav Havel, the Visegrad Cooperation would not have come into being. This could be discussed at length – would someone else take the initiative? Would the Visegrad Group have been formed sooner or later? Would it even happen?

In my opinion, Václav Havel's involvement in the "resurrection" of the Central European region played a significant role. Thanks to dissident contacts, his words were not taken lightly by the representatives of Poland and Hungary, and his speech in the Sejm was a clear incentive for cooperation. After the collapse of Czechoslovakia which was related to the power struggles between the government and the president, Havel lost his range - Visegrad cooperation was not a priority from now on. Even so, Havel did not play the role of a government figurehead; he insisted on strengthening relations with his neighbours, at least through informal meetings. Eventually, the situation in the region changed (new government, efforts to cooperate on the part of Poland and Hungary). Havel fully supported the integration of the Visegrad Group countries into NATO and joining the alliance was achieved mainly thanks to the close cooperation and coordination of the Visegrad countries.

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Gender Equality in the Visegrad Countries

Tereza Žovincová¹

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to compare and present the position of gender equality in each of the Visegrad countries: Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. The author uses four main indicators to present the aspects of gender equality, namely gender pay gap, political representation of women, education, and women's reproductive rights. The main sources used in this essay are the official indexes conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality, Eurostat, and OECD. The essay focuses on the year 2022.

Key words: gender equality, women rights, gender pay gap

Introduction

In the history of the world, women were subjects of injustice and discrimination. The social constructs of global societies have allowed women to be subservient to men. A form of bias against women was formed during the centuries in means of carrying a double burden when they are still expected to care for the household while attempting to thrive in their job. This relates to the history of the position of women when all that was expected from them was raising children and keeping their men satisfied. In the last century, a large change in this came with women's right to vote and work. Another factor that changed the position of genders was globalization. It was intended to be means of erasing inequalities, for example providing fair pay and equal rights to all workers. Despite these intentions, in the 21st century, women still need to fight for equality and their rights.

Gender Equality was made part of international human rights law by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1948. This document says "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, ... birth or other status." (United Nations, 1948, art. 21.3) Eventually, with the rise of feminism, there is greater public pressure on the politicians, where feminists (both women and men) argue against immorality and inequality against women. They also mobilize about universal harms, such as violence against women and sexual harassment, of which the subjects are mostly of the women's gender. Those communities also stress that gender equality delivers major economic and social returns. For example, if there would be a gender balance in the corporate workplace, companies are more likely to fulfil the needs of the whole population, rather than just half of it. Another area that would be improved by gender equality is politics, with women's perspectives implemented into legislation processes and decision-making.

The subject of women's rights has been discussed for many years, yet progress is extremely slow. The World Economic Forum estimated that it will take another 132 years to close the global gender gap. This report also says that the most problematic sector is political participation, with only 22% overall representation of women. Other factors were over 60%, with the second most unequal - economic participation and opportunity which had 60,3% (World Economic Forum, 2022).

Moreover, in the European Union, we have a tool to measure gender equality, that was developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality, called Gender Equality Index. It focuses on 6 core domains (work, money, knowledge, time, power, and health) and 2 additional domains (violence against women and intersecting inequalities) (EIGE, 2022). This index is largely used in many essays and articles related to this topic, so I use it as my main source for this essay.

Gender Equality Index showed that Europe, as the second most gender-equal continent, generally reached 68,6%, with the highest scores in Sweden, Denmark or Luxembourg with over 75%. On the other side of this index are mostly countries of the former Soviet bloc, in which we find all four Visegrad countries with a lower average compared to western European countries. The only country below the Visegrad countries is Greece, with only 52,5%. These conclusions show a lagging trend in western Europe.

Czech Republic

Firstly, I would like to dive deeply into each country in Visegrad four, starting with the Czech Republic. The implementation of gender equality has not been an easy task during the evolution of the country. The most visible and discussed sector of gender inequality in Czechia is the labour market. According to Gender Equality Index, the country reaches 67 out of 100 points, which is profoundly under the European average of 72 points (EIGE, 2022). Additionally, the gender pay gap is 7th highest in the EU (World Economic Forum, 2022). In a study from 2019 conducted by Deloitte, one of the biggest companies in Europe, women's representation on boards was only 13,8%, which lags behind both the global and European averages (Deloitte, 2019). There is still a large bias around branches that are "typical for men" and "typical for women". As regards the unemployment gap between men and women, it is gradually decreasing. The biggest problem in the workforce of the Czech Republic stays the gender pay gap (Veselá, Křížek, 2021).

Another significant factor concerning gender equality is the political representation of women. The Czech Republic is under the world average as well as the European average for the representation of women in important political bodies. On one hand, the results of the last elections in 2021 raised the number of women in the Chamber of deputies to a historical peak of 25,5% (IPU Parline, 2022). But on the other hand, there are only 2 female ministers – which means 12% of women in government (Government of the Czech Republic, 2022). In politics, women face many barriers and the strongest are amongst the political parties in the country, where women are sufficiently represented in the member base but mostly excluded from the leadership. Only one political party (Green party) is

using quotas for assembling ballots (iROZHLAS, 2011). The only post that has not ever been occupied by a female is presidential.

In the matter of education, the Czech Republic has a great position. According to the World Economic Forum, the country is the leader in educational attainment (World Economic Forum, 2022). What is more, the enrollment of women in secondary and tertiary education is even somewhat higher than that of men. In the report, we can also deduce that men are more interested in studying technical, natural and social sciences, while women are choosing mostly education, arts & humanities and also law and business.

Last but not least, I would like to mention the situation of women's reproductive rights and violence against women in the country. Women are limited in a free choice of their place of childbirth and there is also mentioned a problem with facilities not fully adhering to legislation and therefore causing dissatisfaction and additional stress to the women in labour. (Department of Gender Equality in Czech Republic, 2019) Relating violence against women, "it is estimated that in the Czech Republic, 32 % of women have experienced violence, which is about the same as in the EU overall" Additionally, "16% of people in the Czech Republic said they knew a woman who has been a victim of domestic violence." (EIGE, 2016)

When it comes to comparison with other Visegrad countries, the Czech Republic has overall the best conditions and equality for women. However, compared to the European standards, it is still in the end of the list. Domains relating to the Gender Equality Index that the Czech Republic has the lowest numbers in are power, time and work. This country has still a lot to improve on its way to a prosperous and progressive society.

Hungary

The second country on the list is Hungary. Overall, according to the World Economic Forum and their Global Gender Gap report, Hungary is one of a few countries that improved their score by at least 1 percentage point (World Economic Forum, 2022). Nevertheless, the score is still one of the lowest in Europe, in fact, the second worst. Furthermore, comparing the overall score in the Visegrad four, Hungary is the weakest in 3 of the measured categories.

The first aspect to consider is the position of women in the labour market. In 2021, about 68 percent of working-age (15- to 64-year-old) women were in employment, compared to 77 percent of working-age men (OECD, 2021). In contrast to many OECD countries, Hungary has made little to no progress in closing its gender employment gap over the past decades. While other countries in OECD making progress, from various studies and reviews, this gap in Hungary is at a continuous 10-15%. In addition, the gender pay gap compared to the other European countries is the fourth largest, with the latest percentage of 15,9 in 2020 (Flora Medve, 2022). Lastly, there is a need to mention that in Hungary, there are uneven rights when it comes to inheritance for widows and daughters (World Economic Forum, 2022).

Another element that is severely inadequate for a European country is political empowerment. Hungary along with Romania are the only 2 countries from the European continent at the bottom of the political empowerment list constructed by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2022). With only 14,3% of the female share of ministers and 13,1% of female members of the parliament, Hungary reaches only half of the European average (EIGE, 2022). Only one political party, the Hungarian Socialist party, has a 20 percent quota for women membership (IDEA, 2022). However, the year 2022 brought a step forward with female participation in politics when Katalin Novák was chosen as the head of the state.

On the positive side, there is no significant gender gap in terms of access to education and health. Considering the choice of study field when it comes to education in Hungary, there is only a small number of differences from the other Visegrad countries. For instance, women prevail in the field of journalism and social sciences and when looking at mathematics, there is no significant gap between men and women. Besides, the percentage of graduates in tertiary education is in the favor of women (World Economic Forum, 2022).

Just as important are topics of reproductive rights and violence against women. Over the last few years, there has been a rise in anti-abortion rhetoric in Hungary. Alarmingly, in 2022, the Hungarian parliament issued a decree limiting and threatening the choice of abortions. “Hungarian women seeking an abortion will be obliged to listen to the foetal heartbeat” (Guardian, 2022). Considering data issued by the UN, 21% of women in Hungary have met with physical or sexual harassment from their partners (UN Women, 2022). Every fifth Hungarian woman lives in a physically abusive relationship, according to 2018 data compiled by Women for Women against Violence, an NGO (Euronews, 2019).

To conclude, in comparison with other Visegrad countries, Hungary has numerous fields to improve in. Even though there has been an improvement, mostly in the area of work and salary, the biggest challenges are the topics of political empowerment of women and reproductive rights. Membership in the European Union could be an aspect that gradually improves the state of the gender gap in Hungary, considering the acceptance of policies implemented by the EU.

Poland

The third Visegrad country I am presenting is Poland. In the Global Gender Gap Report issued by World Economic Forum, Poland is fifth from the bottom, only a point lower than the Czech Republic and 2 spots higher than Hungary (World Economic Forum, 2022). Additionally, Poland has been decreasing in the gender equality index mostly since 2019, with the highest decrease in time and healthcare (EIGE, 2022). Needless to say, Poland is the weakest only in one category out of Visegrad's four and that is healthcare equality.

Regarding the labour force and work environment, Poland has a 16% gender gap in the employment category (EIGE, 2022). However, the percentage of employed women is over the European average, with 45% (EIGE, 2022). Another supportive source is the employment rate conducted by OECD, which proves Poland to be over the OECD average with a constant rise (OECD, 2022). "The gender pay gap at median earnings in Poland (10%) is one of the lowest in the OECD (the OECD average is 16%), and the pay gap among top earners in Poland is small." (OECD, 2020). Another point made by the OECD is the number of women in the manager position – 36%, which is one of the highest among the member countries (OECD, 2020). However, "the average representation of women on company boards is 24%, which is below the European average (31%)" (EQUILEAP, 2020).

The second aspect to look at is women and their position in politics. Poland is the only country out of Visegrad four, to implement quotas for the lower house and sub-national level. "The number of candidates who are women can not be less than 35% of all candidates on the list" (Ace project, 2011). Currently, there are 28% of women in parliament and 16,3% of the ministers are women (EIGE, 2022). Additionally, The Greens, a Polish political party, adopted voluntary quotas of up to 50%. "All elected bodies of the Green Party are made up of an even number of members and female members" (IDEA, 2022). Although this factor is the best out of the Visegrad countries, it still is under the European average, according to the Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2022).

In the category of education, women are more likely to have a university degree than men, with a difference of over 10%. Nevertheless, there are major gender differences when it comes to the subject of the studies: about 75% of graduates in both healthcare and education are women, but only 16% of females choose computing subjects (OECD, 2020).

Finally, looking at the aspect of reproductive rights for women, Poland has one of the toughest abortion laws. Even before the implementation of the abortion law in 2021, there has been some restrictions. But after the tribunal's decision, "the law forbids the procedure unless the pregnancy threatens the pregnant person's life or health, or is the result of rape or incest" (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This decision led to many protests in the country and ever since, over 1000 Polish women "have turned to the European Court of Human Rights to vindicate their rights" (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2022). Another alarming subject is domestic violence. A leaked study by the government found that over half of Poles have met with some kind of domestic violence and among women, the figure is over 60% (Gazeta.pl, 2019). Alternatively, an older study conducted by the European Agency for fundamental rights came with a different number – only 19% of women have experienced domestic violence (FRA, 2015). Undoubtedly, domestic violence at any number is alarming.

Poland, like every European country, has domains to improve in. Despite having political quotas, in the domain of power, Poland is declining, and it is one of the most urgent areas in the need of improvement, according to the Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2022). A

great number of experts also choose healthcare and reproductive rights as the most critical, because these problems jeopardize human rights in the modern world.

Slovak Republic

Last but not least, Slovak Republic is the last country of Visegrad 4 to present. With 56 points in the Gender Equality Index, Slovakia ranks 24th in the EU, which is still under the average. Comparing it to other Visegrad countries, Slovakia is generally the best out of the four (EIGE, 2022). However, there are still many drawbacks making Slovakia stagnate over the years.

To start with the labour-force participation rate, the gender gap is at 11%, which is around the average for V4 (World Economic Forum, 2022). According to OECD, the percentage of women of working age employed is over the median at 67% (OECD, 2022). Additionally, women earn 11% less than men (World Economic Forum, 2022). Furthermore, “Data from 2018 show that women earned less in all of the sectors monitored, with the biggest difference shown for managers (earning around 28 % less per hour) and professionals (earning around 24 % less per hour)” (Eurostat, 2020). At the same time, almost two-thirds of the workers that work for minimum wage in Slovakia are women (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, 2019).

The political emancipation of women in the Slovak Republic has increased in the last year. As stated in Gender Equality Index from the first quarter of 2022, Slovakia is at the bottom of European countries. Within Visegrad four, Slovakia is right behind Poland. Women occupy 21,3 of the parliament seats and 22,5 of the minister seats (EIGE, 2022). Concerning political quotas, only one party implemented them into their statutes – Progressive Slovakia. Since April 2022, “the party’s presidency of Progressive Slovakia has decided that women will be guaranteed a 40% representation in vice-presidential positions and at the level of members of the presidency – just like men” (Europe cities, 2022). Slovakia has had only one female prime minister – Iveta Radičová, with a shortened term. It is important to add that the Slovak Republic currently has a female president – Zuzana Čaputová, who has not yet announced her candidacy for the next 4-year term. However, she has been repeatedly chosen as one of the 100 most powerful women in the world (Forbes, 2022).

In the aspect of educational attainment, Slovakia is together with the Czech Republic on the top of the list (World Economic Forum, 2022). Women outnumber men in the means of tertiary education, nevertheless, major differences exist between the subjects of study. Following the trend of other Visegrad countries, women create over 2/3 of the healthcare, social sciences and education graduates, whereas men graduate mostly from technical and engineering subjects. (World Economic Forum, 2022). A special focus has been on promoting women in the IT sector, mostly conducted by the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic.

Domestic violence is a problem also concerning Slovakia. According to the data of the Coordinating-Methodical Centre for Gender-Based and Domestic Violence running

under the Institute for Labour and Family Research, one in five women has experienced violence. Moreover, 4.9 percent have experienced sexual violence. Only 15 percent of the women turn to the police (sme.sk, 2020). Additionally, the reproductive rights of women in Slovakia have been threatened by numerous proposals in the parliament – 24 proposals since 2018 (Noviny.sk, 2022).

The Slovak Republic has the biggest problem with stagnation and lack of reforms in many domains. With the ongoing political crisis, Slovakia has a limited chance of changing any of the problems concerning this country.

Conclusion

To summarize, all Visegrad group member countries are behind European standards. The Czech Republic being generally the most promising still lacks bigger reforms and improvements. The lowest scores in most categories have Hungary, mostly in the domains of the pay gap and political power. When analyzing all studies and indexes, it is shown that Visegrad countries reached excellent gender balance in aspects of education and health. As already shown in the essay, all Visegrad countries are in the first 10 best states when it comes to level of education in society and their access to education. However, all of the countries demonstrate weak positions in politics and work. Engagement of women in politics is a largely debated subject in the European Union, where northern countries, such as Sweden, and also Luxembourg or Benelux, have a fairly equal position of genders.

Gender equality still faces a conservative backlash in many aspects, considering this theme to be taboo in all of the Visegrad countries. However, there have been various attempts to open conversation on this topic, which led to the acknowledgement of issues in society. As seen in the politics of Visegrad countries, a change of thinking is needed to improve such progressive topic.

While the European Union has adopted Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, Visegrad countries are not meeting the needs and goals of the policy. Another topic to be discussed could be the Istanbul convention that recognizes violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. This convention has been adopted by many member states of the European Union but still is a controversial topic, mostly in Visegrad countries.

Gradually, gender equality is to be met within numerous countries, from which the Visegrad four is likely to inspire, in case of continuous progress of society. The European Union has already thought about implementing quotas, which is another wide topic that could lead to another analysis.

The Visegrad group is repeatedly shown to be lagging in the policies concerning gender equality.

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The Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2022 - June 2023)

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Abstract

This essay deals with the rotational annual presidencies and their importance in the work of the Visegrad Group. This essay also focuses on today's role of V4 in the context of international relations. The main focus is set on the Slovak Presidency, which started in July 2022 and continues still today up to June 2023. The author describes four areas, interconnections, economy, sustainability and people, which serve as the top priorities of the Slovak V4 Presidency.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, Slovak presidency, annual presidencies

There are numerous ways to understand the idea of the Visegrad Four. The Visegrad Four, which consisting of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, meets mostly informally. It has grown to be one of the most effective integration groups of Central European nations, operating on the principle of reciprocal cooperation, with the goal of promoting the general welfare and advancing the interests of the member states. The Visegrad Group was formed as an organisation of nations united by aspects of their shared history, close cultural ties, and socio-economic reforms that were implemented.

The Visegrad Four did not established as an alternative towards European integration or as a rival to already-functioning European organisations. Its actions are not in any way intended to isolate or deteriorate relations with other nations, instead, this forum wants to promote the best possible cooperation with all nations, especially its neighbours. Strengthening democracy across Europe is its top priority. The V4 aims to support the development of a European security architecture based on efficient coordination and cooperation amongst already-existing European and transatlantic organisations, that is functionally complementary and mutually reinforcing. The V4 group will increase the mutual transmission of values in the sectors of culture, education, and science in order to preserve and develop cultural coherence and information exchange (Visegrad Group 2023a). With the overall objective of regaining its influence in the region and weakening the EU and NATO, Russia, the main regional actor acting outside of the EU-NATO framework, is trying to project its power in the Central European region through diplomatic activities, energy and economic policy, information warfare, and support for domestic political forces (both mainstream and fringe) (Milo, Klingová 2017).

We celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Visegrad Group on February 15, 2021, which was created by gathering three states (now four states since 1993 due to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia). The Visegrad Four presidents celebrated the organization's 30th anniversary at the summit held on February 9–10, 2021, while Poland was holding the

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Presidency. A declaration that the leaders of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland signed on February 15 served as the proclamation's foundation (TASR 2021).

Although the Czech Republic and Slovakia were advocating for Austria's admission to the group in the past, there was no agreement on whether the V4 should be made open to additional nations. Depending on the themes on the Presidency's agenda of European and worldwide concerns, the V4 occasionally expands its activities to other EU nations and beyond in formats known as V4+. The V4 cooperation is currently the most well-known regional project in Central Europe. Mutual contacts at various levels, including high-level political summits, diplomatic and expert meetings, as well as the activities of non-governmental associations in the region, cultural institutions, research bodies, think tanks, and others, are thought to be the most crucial means of cooperation.

There are significant disagreements between the Visegrad Group members today, such as energy security, attitudes toward the Russian Federation, or the situation in Ukraine, despite the fact that historically these nations appeared to share similar interests or viewpoints on many global topics.. It's impossible to overlook their opposing views on Russia. No other EU Head of Government has met with Russian President Putin as frequently as Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán in recent years. They are almost as diverse as any other nation in the EU. Despite these distinctions, there has never been a similar community of nations in the history of Europe where the interests of each member are taken into consideration, regardless of the nation's size or economic might (Beribes 2021).

The Visegrad Group is founded mainly on the idea of regular meetings of its representatives at various levels and lacks any institutional character. Based on the rotation in order, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia alternately preside over the V4 for one year at a time. The conference of the heads of government of the relevant countries, which is held annually in the nation holding the Presidency is the highest form of intergovernmental cooperation. Meetings of other national government representatives, who gather irregularly, and address concerns and issues of separate ministries represent a lower form of cooperation. Additionally, the plan for collaboration is discussed in twice-yearly meetings of state secretaries of foreign affairs ministries, who then prepare recommendations for prime ministers' assemblies (Visegrad Group 2023b). The idea of periodic meetings of the member states' representatives at all levels serves as the primary foundation for V4 activities. Every year, there is a formal summit of prime ministers.

The rotational annual presidencies manage the Visegrad Group's activities. When handing over and taking over the Presidency at the V4 Summit of Prime Ministers in June, the country holding the Presidency is responsible for developing the programme of its activities. All V4 states must give their approval to the programme of the country holding the Presidency. This programme is mainly created by the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with other governmental and state organisations. The V4 Presidency's aims are outlined in the Presidency's programme, which also outlines political cooperation (Visegrad Group 2023c). For the upcoming year, it further specifies common goals, top priorities, Presidency activities, and scheduled events. The V4

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continues to operate under an informal intergovernmental framework and makes decisions through agreement (Recharging Europe 2023).

Typically, the European Council sessions or informal summits serve as the Presidency's compass. The majority of the time, common opinions on an issue are adopted in the context of high-level discussions.

The ambassadors of these states gather four times a year, each time in the country that holds the Presidency to strengthen Visegrad cooperation and offer advice on its status. The meetings of the coordinators of the Visegrad Group are the lowest form of intergovernmental collaboration. Four nations prepare V4 prime minister summits and host state secretaries' meetings. In the future, it is anticipated that cooperation between these nations will increase and that other forms of cooperation, such as frequent parliamentary discussions or close coordination amongst civil society mediation organisations, would also be encouraged (Visegrad Group 2023d).

Slovakia presided over the Visegrad Group in 2002–2003, 2006–2007, 2010–2011, 2014–2015 and 2018–2019. The first Presidency, in 2002 was very significant because it was in a pre-accession era and its primary goal was to complete all the obligations and priorities that had to be met linked to integration. The previous Presidency from 2018–2019 prioritised the Visegrad region's internal dynamism, competitiveness, security, connectivity, and cohesion as an integral part of the EU. The motto of this Presidency, *"Dynamic Visegrad for Europe"*, embodied the achievement of these goals (MZVaEZ 2019). At the beginning of July 2022, the Slovak Republic took over its 6th Presidency within the Visegrad Group. The Slovak Presidency follows the Hungarian Presidency, which lasted from July 2021 to June 2022. The Visegrad Group's key focus during the sixth Hungarian V4 Presidency, which ran from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022, was to strengthen cooperation in order to support common European solutions, our region's and Europe's resilience, security, and stability, as well as the post-pandemic economic and social reopening and recovery. At the same time, they wanted to strengthen V4+ partnerships in the context of reviving diplomatic life after the pandemic and reflect V4's positive ideals in the European Union. The Hungarian V4 Presidency adhered to the motto "United in Diversity," which alludes to close cooperation among Member States based on national and regional diversity, as well as national identities, which eventually unify the Member States along shared values and principles (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary 2021).

This year's Presidency of the Slovak Republic, also called SK V4 PRES, takes place at the same time as the Presidency of the Slovak Republic in the Slavkov format and with the Czech presidencies in the Council of the EU. The Presidency of the Slovak Republic in the Slavkov format focuses on cooperation in the field of international law, energy, transport and health. The programme of this year's Slovak Presidency was approved on 28 June 2022 at a meeting of the Government of the Slovak Republic (Ministerstvo pôdohospodárstva a rozvoja vidieka SR 2023a). Jana Juzová² in a podcast episode of Visegrad Insight Podcast: *Are Czechs or Slovaks Downplaying the V4 Presidency?* said: *"The timing of the Czech EU Presidency and Slovak Presidency within V4 is a very*

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interesting coincidence and I am also very curious to see how it changes the dynamic of V4 for such because basically, both countries are currently in process of sort of distancing them self from the rest of V4, meaning Hungary and Poland” (Juzová 2022). She added that Slovakia and the Czech Republic are also attempting to establish themselves as serious European partners for other EU members. This is obviously challenging to accomplish with Prime Minister Orbán representing V4 and advancing Hungarian themes. The task for both nations will be to maintain Visegrad collaboration in those areas where it is advantageous for all parties concerned, restore the V4's reputation while continuing to set the agenda and run the show, and avoid allowing the prime minister to steal the show (Przybylski, Maftean 2022).

The Visegrad Four, who had up until that point shared important political aims, were divided by the war in Ukraine. Ivan Korčok, former Slovak Republic's Minister of Foreign Affairs, has stated that he wants to minimize, if not completely eliminate, the Visegrad Four's foreign policy component during the Slovak Republic's Presidency of the group while highlighting the common goals that led to the formation of the Visegrad Four. In their 31 years of existence, the four nations that make up this regional alliance have never been able to develop a unified foreign policy strategy. We can see that Hungary, as well as Poland, took a different stance in favour of Ukraine than Slovakia and the Czech Republic right from the start of the conflict in that country. However, Hungary and Poland stood out due to their distinct political ideologies and autocratic rule under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, as well as their close ties to President Vladimir Putin. Due to its autocratic government, anti-EU policies promoted by the ruling Fidesz party, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's persistent closeness to President Vladimir Putin throughout Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia's southern neighbour, is not only in V4 but in the whole Europe becoming mostly isolated and we could also see it when it came to important statements. The prime minister of Hungary has occasionally appeared to view the regional alliance as a tool to expand his conception of Europe. Slovakia hopes to revive the group's common objectives while it holds the Presidency (Dlhopolec 2022).

The basic philosophy of SK V4 PRES is built on three main principles: a positive agenda and a contribution to common European solutions; a pragmatic approach and cooperation in areas where common positions can be reconciled, considering national interests; the sectoral dimension of cooperation with an emphasis on the citizen (Ministerstvo pôdohospodárstva a rozvoja vidieka SR 2023a). According to the former Foreign Minister of Slovakia, Ivan Korčok, the V4's primary objective is not to shape foreign policy. With the program that has been announced, Slovakia hopes to work with the Presidency to return this format back to the people and concentrate on more useful issues. Slovakia seeks to create a more recognizable Visegrad identity among the public and young people with the overview of the long-term gains. Slovakia included support for Ukraine in their list of priorities, which is interesting given Hungary's position because it is less ambiguous about its support than the other governments are (Zahraničná politika nebude... 2022).

Additionally, this Presidency will support Ukraine and Moldova, both of whom have been granted candidate status for membership in the European Union, as well as support for

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the Western Balkans as they make their path toward membership. The Visegrad Group has gained recognition in Europe and beyond as a trustworthy partner and symbol of successful political and economic transition, a crucial concept of the historical project of Europe's reunification, as well as a model of successful regional cooperation within the European Union, contributing to its continued development, including in particular policy areas, and to the continent's economic competitiveness (Bendarzsevszkij 2021).

Slovakia is also a member of the 3 Seas Initiative, a grouping of 12 nations - Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Austria, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria - that are situated between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic seas. The primary objectives of this forum are regional economic development, collaboration in present geopolitical environment, increased investor attraction, energy security, and connectivity. Although Slovakia appears to be unwilling to carry out the obligations and make the declaration required by this initiative, the Slovak Republic has made the key themes of this declaration the focus of its agenda for the V4 Presidency (Przybylski, Maftean 2022).

Due to the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine, the Slovak Presidency is unique, and as a result, the circumstances under which the Slovak Republic assumed the Presidency are unusual. The Visegrad Group is currently dealing with a number of issues in addition to the challenging circumstances brought on by the conflict in Ukraine, including conflicting internal and external policies as well as an unclear future. The Group must return to its roots and strongly cooperate in the areas of rule of law, democracy, neighbourly relations, cooperation with transatlantic human rights partners, and, in particular, regional cooperation.

We may view the goals that have already been laid out in previous presidencies, with an emphasis on European solutions and good impacts on citizens, as the priority of the Slovak Presidency in the Visegrad Group. Slovakia largely concentrated on 4 topics during its Presidency which we will discuss in more detail about in this work. The interconnections within the contexts of energy security, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and human mobility with a focus on interpersonal interactions are the four topics on which Slovakia places the most emphasis.

Due to the previously mentioned crisis in Ukraine, the topic of energy security took on the biggest significance in 2022. Nearly the entire continent of Europe is dependent on Russian oil, gas, and coal; this dependence must be gradually reduced. Furthermore, Slovakia committed to the advancement and modernization of transportation during its Presidency, constructing cross-border connections and establishing new routes that would provide improved logistics, as a result of the unsteady conditions that prevailed around the world in 2002. Slovakia, as well as the other Visegrad Group nations and the nations of Europe, have been compelled to begin working on initiatives that would lead to a decrease in reliance on Russia and an increase in source diversification as a result of the deteriorating geopolitical situation. Supporting the construction of LNG infrastructure should just be one of the strategies for reducing reliance on Russia. Providing enough room for the REpower plan's implementation, which should be a component of another

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plan to address the consistently high cost of energy, is another crucial task for the Slovak Presidency. The Slovak Republic will work to guarantee that all low-carbon technologies to have an equal opportunity to compete as well as to consider the advantages of nuclear energy (MZVaEZ 2022a).

One of the key goals of the Slovak Presidency in the area of transportation is to encourage the use of railroads, which is one of the fundamental goals of European transport policy. The Visegrad Group will assist in putting into practise of fast speed rail project in the Visegrad region. The Slovak programme also covers collaboration in the area of hybrid threat and defence in this aspect. Documents like *the Visegrad Four Defence Cooperation Action Plan and the Long-Term Vision of the Visegrad Four countries on their defence collaboration* outline the defence and military cooperation between the V4 nations. Of course, the invasion of Ukraine will have an impact on the targets in this region as well. Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad' said: "*During the SVK V4 PRES, we will concentrate on strengthening defence cooperation with our traditional V4 partners. In doing so, naturally, we will be closely aligned with the now successfully established direction of our mutual defence cooperation. Therefore, our main defence priorities are reflective of and shaped by the situational developments in Ukraine as they occur due to Russia's unprovoked and unjustifiable invasion*" (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic 2022). A hybrid threat is one of the hazards to state security that have surfaced recently. In order to lessen the effects of hybrid attacks and increase their prevention, the V4 states will work to improve their collaboration in this area. Disinformation propagation and cyberattacks have become increasing threats in the Visegrad region.

The second pillar of the Slovak Presidency's programme, which primarily focuses on the green and digital transformations, is the economy. Two crucial components of this economic revolution are investments and reforms. The Visegrad Group and all of Europe must boost their economies in order to strengthen their positions in the market since the current events in Europe threaten security and stability. The COVID-19 epidemic and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have both brought attention to the need for the populace's digital literacy, which we view as a chance for the growth of the country's economy. In order to strengthen market resilience and the expansion of these countries' economies, the Visegrad Four countries must adopt the newest technologies in the economic sector. One such technology is artificial intelligence (MZVaEZ 2022a).

The Slovak Presidency's programme is primarily focused on investment, innovation, small and medium-sized businesses, tourism, and, last but not least, agriculture within the context of economic priorities. The prevention of money laundering, the growth of cryptoassets, the advancement of the digital euro, and assistance for the twin transitions of economies inside the European Union are the three key issues pushed by the Slovak Presidency in the framework of investments. Finding a middle ground on economic issues is another goal of this Presidency because it is precisely these agreements that would make it easier to negotiate at the European Union level.

The Slovak Presidency will work to advance innovation, which serves as the pillar for the development and growth of the economy, and to put some of the recoveries plans into

action. Cities and regions are significant actors with the potential to encourage and support innovation. Supporting small and medium-sized businesses is essential in the COVID-19 pandemic scenario since they are the main sources of innovation (MZVaEZ 2022a).

Another goal that the Slovak Presidency will focus on is cooperation with overseas partners. Continuing to work with eastern partners like South Korea, Israel and Japan is a must, but Slovakia will attempt to forge relationships with other nations as well, such as Singapore or India. We might use the meeting of V4 ambassadors and the Japanese ambassador at large, Kimitake Nakamura, which was arranged by the Slovak ambassador to Tokyo, Mr. Marian Tomášik, as an illustration of effective collaboration. The attendees decided to keep working together in the V4+ format at this conference. These partnerships focus mostly on information sharing in the fields of research and innovation with the goal of maximising the potential of the region (MZVaEZ 2022b).

Under the part dealing with tourism, the Slovak Presidency's policy primarily conceals the collaboration of travel companies from the V4 nations under the slogan "*Discover central Europe*" the restoration of tourism to the area following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the aggression in Ukraine (Discover central Europe 2023).

Since sustainability has been a major issue in recent years, and not just in the Visegrad Group region, Slovakia has incorporated it in its presidential programme, where it will work to provide specific proposals to improve the sustainability of the region's development. In recent years, not only in debates inside the European Union but also globally, climate change and air pollution have risen to the top of the agenda. Since this is the region where people are most affected, the Slovak Republic has made it one of its top goals to protect the environment, biodiversity, the circular economy, sustainable financing, and natural resources. The different initiatives and agreements are mostly based on the climate policy of the European Union, which emphasises lowering emissions, eliminating energy poverty, mainstreaming, and creating a resilient society and a common economy. Slovakia will continue to prioritise forestry by fostering a sustainable economy that can contribute to carbon neutrality or climatic stability (Ministerstvo pôdohospodárstva a rozvoja vidieka SR 2023b).

Agriculture, like any other industry, has been strongly influenced by Russia's actions in Ukraine, which is why the Slovak Presidency is also paying attention to this sector. Developing a sustainable agricultural sector with a focus on regional collaboration and food security will be the key goal. Additionally, the soil policy of the European Union will be taken into consideration, particularly in light of digitalization and carbon farming (MZVaEZ 2022a).

As it was already mentioned, the European Green Deal served as the model for the economic goals that the Slovak Presidency in the Visegrad Four set. Long-term goals, however, include making the European Union a climate-neutral continent and cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 55%. Reducing material intensity is crucial for the circular economy, which also falls under the area of sustainability. This can be done by increasing product lifespans, cutting waste, and preventing waste (Ministerstvo životného prostredia

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Slovenskej Republiky 2019). The Slovak Presidency's programme includes the goal of relocating the discussion of geology and natural resources to the Visegrad Region of the Visegrad Group because those topics don't receive enough attention. The exchange of information with the Nordic nations and resource recovery will be the main areas of concentration in order to maximise investments in the environmentally friendly and low-carbon extraction of essential raw materials.

People, culture, and education are the main topics of the Slovak Presidency's final section of the Visegrad Group Presidency programme. Slovakia served as the International Visegrad Fund's presiding nation in 2021. By increasing its yearly budget to 10 million euros starting in 2022, the leaders recognised its extraordinary significance and contribution to fostering regional collaboration. The major objective and goal of the MVF project activities is to develop Visegrad identity, friendliness, close cooperation among countries, and relationships between the region's residents. The fund supports collaborative projects in the sectors of culture, science, research, and education, as well as exchanges of artists and young people, programmes to promote cross-border cooperation and tourism development, and individual scholarships and creative residencies (Visegrad Fund 2023).

The emphasis will, of course, also be on assisting Ukraine in overcoming the humanitarian crisis and enhancing and improving regional cooperation, as well as improving youth exchanges and cooperation. Here, it is crucial to draw attention to this budget increase, which is a success of the Slovak Presidency and will primarily support youth mobility as well as assist to portray the Visegrad Group region as a hub of European culture. The Slovak Republic sees promise in the area of culture, particularly in the administration of the Visegrad Group nations' cultural legacies. Events like the Visegrad Heritage Academy or a working group of specialists will be organised within the scope of collaboration in the field of cultural heritage management to enhance tourism by raising knowledge of the castles of the Visegrad Four region. Additionally, the Slovak Presidency will work to raise interest in filming in the Visegrad Four region for foreign productions, support the growth of the audiovisual industry as a profession, and enhance the region's standing in terms of global productions through these efforts (International Cultural Centre 2021).

Sports and educational advancement for young people are also included in the Visegrad Four Slovak Presidency's agenda. This section concentrates on the expansion of non-formal education through making room for it and introducing new non-formal learning models, as well as the internationalisation of higher education. The Slovak Presidency will work to maintain collaboration in quality assurance in higher education, which is connected to the creation of the Visegrad Four Forum on Quality Assurance, in the sector of education. The Slovak Presidency will examine potential project collaborations in the area of youth work as well as collaborations that may be related to future investments. The primary goal is establishing a forum for exchanging best practices and a standard operating process for laying out the groundwork, both of which were produced at EPSCO Council meetings. Of course, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has an impact here as well, therefore Slovakia establishes a space for collaboration in the area of receiving refugees

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from Ukraine, ensuring their integration into society, and guaranteeing their protection (MZVaEZ 2022a).

After Slovakia, the Czech Republic will take over the Presidency of the Visegrad Group, which we can say will follow Slovakia's ambitions and will carry its Presidency in a similar direction the Czech Republic will cooperate closely with Slovakia during its Presidency on the basis of their close relationship.

The Visegrad Group's role today has altered from the one back at the foundation of the Group. Its initial purpose was essential to prevent potential wars between nations with tense historical ties. It involved converting former communist states that were freed from the previous geopolitical superpower and trying to fill the security gap with a regional framework that would ensure a suitable level of stability based on mutual confidence between individual governments (Gyárfášová, Mesežnikov 2021). The V4 has drifted away from the ideals of its founding founders, Lech Wasa, Václav Havel, and József Antall. European integration is seen as a growing danger to national sovereignty by Budapest and Warsaw, but less so by Bratislava and Prague. Hungary and Poland are constantly emphasising the importance of returning to Europe's Christian heritage, which the "West" has abandoned (Beribes 2021).

The Visegrad Group provides its members with a practical example of how to discuss, advocate for and defend shared interests in a group setting within a local and more global political context. Analysis of the V4's attitude on significant topics (such as the migration and refugee crises) of the EU policy-making process can be used to assess the effectiveness of the group. The Visegrad Group is able to function as a bloc that takes advantage of the current governance gap in the EU and maintains its capacity for mobilisation against the redistribution of refugees and migrants around the EU, while at the same time using billions of EU money for economic development. It is significant to highlight that the V4 nations have undergone a political and economic transformation since their founding (Zucconi 2020).

Today, the Visegrad group is not only a symbol and a respectable brand that is recognised in Europe and around the world, but it is also full of obvious benefits for the citizens of the V4 member states that may be documented through specific and observable outcomes in the fields of culture, art, education, regional development, cross-border cooperation, tourism, and, most importantly, by promoting human relations and contacts. The Visegrad group's purpose has unquestionably been validated during the last three decades.

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The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Economy of the Slovak Republic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemics generally had a negative impact on all the world economies. This essay deals with the short-term impacts of the pandemics on the economy of Slovakia in terms of the GDP growth, inflation, unemployment, debt ratio and other factors. The author also describes what measures the Slovak government introduced to mitigate the pandemic-related economic impacts. It focuses on the period before the pandemics, specifically the end of 2019, then continues with the first pandemic year 2020 and most of 2021.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Slovak economy, economic impact

From the perspective of public health, it is necessary to implement social distancing policies when facing a pandemic. Those pandemics-stopping policies however also bring a certain negative impact on economic activity. The health crisis caused by the disease Covid-19 has prompted governments to take extraordinary measures to save lives, including virus testing, curfews and social disengagement measures all over the world. The combined effect of the spread of the virus and these measures led to a sharp decline in economic activity as affected sectors were essentially closed (Laeven 2020). This course of action can be observed on different levels in most of the states, as well as in the Slovak Republic. The first part of this essay explains the measures taken by the Slovak Republic to fight the pandemic. The second part of the essay concerns directly the impact of the pandemic on the Slovak economy and the measures adopted by the Slovak government to mitigate its negative economic effects.

The measures taken by the Slovak Republic and other countries to fight the spread of Covid-19 can be divided into two groups. The first was the anti-pandemic, so-called protective measures, designed to directly prevent the spread of the virus. The second group was made up of supportive measures. These measures were intended to help employers, employees and other entities that were affected by the anti-pandemic actions. The adoption of the measures was often based on the evolution of the pandemic situation. Measures were taken on national and regional scales or on selected population groups. The number of infected people has fluctuated over time, as a result of which we distinguish pandemics in waves. When the epidemiological situation worsened, the measures were tightened. In summer months the situation usually calmed down and measures were relaxed. The situation was particularly serious during the first and second waves of the pandemic when the situation had the most significant impact on the economy (Bečka 2020). To assess the impact of the pandemic, the simplest way is to go through the indicators of GDP, inflation, unemployment, economic growth rates and national

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indebtedness. These indicators are one of the most important indicators of the state of one country's economy.

The Slovak Republic recorded its first Covid-19 case on 6 March 2020 (Coronavirus confirmed in Slovakia 2020). Subsequent uncontrolled spread of the virus required immediate action. Measures taken during the first wave of the pandemic were mainly restrictive and were adopted on a nationwide basis. The first anti-pandemic measure in the Slovak Republic was a ban on mass gatherings and a ban on holding any mass events, which entered into force on 10 March 2020. The government has subsequently taken further measures. A state of emergency was declared in Slovakia on 12 March 2020 (UVZSR 2022). It included changes to the border regime; compulsory 14-day isolation for foreign citizens as well as Slovaks who returned from abroad; a ban on being in public without covering the upper respiratory tract; restriction or complete ban on catering and accommodation establishment, restriction of other services such as healthcare, education, culture, body care; restrictions and closure of retail outlets and also restrictions on transport such as the ban on taxis, closure of internal borders, designation of routes for the movement of goods vehicles (UVZSR 2020).

After three months, the pandemic situation began to gradually improve, and the number of infected people declined sharply, leading to the relaxation of measures and the end of the state of emergency on 13 June 2020. The measures were phased out gradually in 4 phases (Úrad Vlády Slovenskej Republiky 2020). In September 2020, the epidemiological situation in the Slovak Republic deteriorated. Again, the nationwide anti-pandemic measures have been re-adopted. The measures in the second wave were almost identical to those in the first wave and were supplemented by more detailed regulations or exemptions. From 1 October 2020, a state of emergency was re-declared, and it did not end until 14 May 2021. In October and November 2020, two nationwide testings for the presence of Covid-19 in the population took place in Slovakia. Testing played an important part in the public health response to the second wave of the pandemic. The obligation to provide a negative test became mandatory in workplaces. Despite the fact, that over 80 % of the age-eligible population got tested, infections and deaths rose strongly again in the winter. A nationwide lockdown coupled with a curfew began on 19 December 2020 (OECD 2022). Home Office was introduced in businesses where the workload allowed such measures (Miškerík 2021), and in February 2021 the government launched the so-called Covid automat (UVZSR 2022).

The Covid automat worked on the principle of semaphore. It contained a total of 5 colours: green, orange, red, maroon and black, with black being the most restrictive (Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic, 2021). When the Covid automat was first established, all regions were in black colour. Subsequently, according to several indicators, such as the number of hospital admissions or the number of vaccinations, the development of the epidemiological situation in each region was determined separately. In case the region improved in the given parameters, the area was moved to a paler colour, measures were relaxed and vice versa. With the onset of the third wave, a state of emergency and lockdown was declared again on 24 November 2021 (OECD 2021). In connection with the vaccinations, the measures in the third wave were considerably more

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lenient than in previous waves. There was no complete closure of establishments, but the number of customers for different services was limited. The restrictions largely affected mainly unvaccinated people (Laca, Chamonikolas 2021).

The government has sought to help businesses and employees overcome the difficulties caused by the anti-pandemic measures through support measures such as employment support and assistance to businesses for income shortfalls, rent subsidies, payment deferrals of taxes, or insurance premiums, then loans and other forms of assistance such as pandemic sick leave, or sick leave for the treatment of family members and targeted support (Prehľad a porovnanie opatrení 2020). The employment measures were intended to help businesses that had to cut back or close down their operations to keep the jobs and to provide the employees with sickness benefits in the event of sickness. Entrepreneurs who had to close down, downsize or suffered a drop in sales could apply for a wage replacement allowance of up to 80 % of average earnings, a flat-rate allowance or compensation for loss of income from a given activity, according to precisely defined criteria. Measures in the area of taxes, social security and rents included a deferral of advance payments of income taxes for entities with a drop in sales of more than 40 %, extinction of arrears for late filing of tax returns, the possibility to offset unused losses of previous years, deferral of payments of social security and social insurance contributions. SMEs and self-employed persons could apply for deferment of repayment of loans and mortgages without deterioration of the credit quality of the borrower for a maximum period of nine months (Vývoj maloobchodu v SR 2021, Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic 2020 and 2021).

Measures in the area of financial resources included guarantees for loans granted by the bank and interest payments on loans granted by the bank, covered by Eximbanka and the Slovak Guarantee and Development Bank (TASR 2020). The Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic launched a bank guarantee scheme called "anti-covid guarantee" which provided guarantees to financial institutions and thus facilitated the provision of soft bridging loans to small and medium enterprises and self-employed people (Vývoj maloobchodu v SR 2021).

Other forms of assistance included temporary protection for entrepreneurs; the introduction of pandemic sick leave; changes to the Labour Code, allowing home offices; across-the-board and targeted support for accommodation, catering, tourism and gastro services; compensation for customers of missed trips; grants to support culture, the arts; subsidies for technical, support professions, cultural professionals, and operators of scheduled and non-scheduled transport (Nepriaznivý vplyv pandémie 2021). The Government of the Slovak Republic took measures to eliminate the vulnerability of human resources to the pandemic, which resulted in a slowdown or even a halt in the economic activity of business entities in most sectors. The pandemic affected the interconnectedness of economies, causing a decline in demand for final products and services, as well as complications in subcontracting relationships. These actions posed a challenge for the state as the Slovak Republic is heavily tied to the sales of industrial products (Bečka 2020).

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When measuring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic it is important to take a closer look also at the economic situation of the country before the outbreak of Covid-19. Slovakia had already witnessed a decline in global demand before the pandemic started, but at the end of 2019, the pandemic measures itself exacerbated the situation (Report on the Slovak Economy 2019). In the case of the Slovak Republic, the decline in industrial production, further extensive restrictions in the service sector and other sectors, and the overall situation led to a reduction in consumption, followed by a decline in production, which ultimately reflected in a decline in GDP in 2020. The Slovak economy has experienced a deep recession. GDP fell by 4.8 % in 2020, with a much larger investment collapse (Frank & Morvay 2021). The sharp fall in demand and production due to blockades and supply chain disruptions led to a historic decline in activity in the second quarter of 2020. However, activity rebounded and had become more pandemic-proof by 2020. Factories remained operational and helped the strong export demand and restocking. Overall, the effect of the pandemic in 2020 was milder in Slovakia than in the euro area average and smaller than initially expected (International Monetary Fund 2021).

The rapid onset of strict health protection measures caused the decline and suspension of the main driver of the Slovak economy, car production, in all car manufacturing factories. According to the FinStat portal, over fifteen thousand enterprises in Slovakia with annual revenues of 8.7 billion euros were directly threatened by the pandemic (FinStat 2020). In this respect, the European Commission has approved aid of 2 billion euros to support employment during the pandemic. The unemployment rate in the Slovak Republic slightly fluctuated between 2019 and 2020. As a result of the worsening economic situation and the suspension of production, several large companies resorted to mass redundancies. Due to the restrictions, more than three thousand self-employed people suspended their work at the beginning of 2020 (Bečka 2020).

After a downturn in the first quarter of 2021, economic growth picked up in the second quarter of 2021, helped by easing measures and a gradual recovery in economic activity, especially in the services sector. Rising infection rates and slow progress in vaccination have led to a re-tightening of restrictions in the hardest-hit districts. As a result, GDP growth slowed again in the third quarter of 2021. Automobile manufacturers had to temporarily suspend production due to semiconductor shortages, leading to a significant slowdown in industrial production and exports. Consumer price inflation rose at the end of 2021 as a result of rising food and energy prices, increased taxes on tobacco and higher construction prices for materials (OECD 2022).

Economic growth depends mainly on GDP growth but is also indirectly influenced by other macroeconomic indicators. Slovakia's GDP increased steadily in the period before the pandemic, from 84 442.9 million euros in 2017, to 87 472.5 million euros in 2018 and 89 676.5 million euros in 2019. After the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, GDP fell below the level of 2019 to 86 650.2 million euros, but in the following period, it experienced a positive development and reached the level of 89 262.1 million euros in 2021. The growth rate of real GDP had a value of 3 % in 2017; 3.8 % in 2018; 2.6% in 2019, -4.4 % in 2020 and 3 % in 2021 (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2022). As we can observe, the Slovak economy had a growing tendency in the pre-pandemic

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period. The first slight decline was already recorded just before the pandemic in 2019 due to the negative development of the global economy. As was already mentioned, Slovakia is relatively dependent on the export of cars and therefore the development of the economy is very much influenced by the development of the global market. Strict mobility restrictions during the first wave and a drop in foreign demand in early 2020 have caused major complications for Slovak largest industrial enterprises. They have manifested themselves both by a fall in private consumption and a sharp drop in industrial production, which ultimately caused a fall in GDP in 2020. In both the second and third waves, measures were more benevolent and systematically adopted so as not to restrict large businesses, and industrial production, which was reflected in a rebound in GDP in 2021.

The pandemic situation also had an impact on the inflation rate. Inflation was on an upward trend in the run-up to the pandemic, with a value of 1.4% in 2017, 2.5 % in 2018 and 2.8 % in 2019. However, the inflation slowed and declined in 2020 to a value of 2 %. This reduction in the inflation rate was the result of a chain of factors. Lower oil prices due to reduced demand and thus lower agricultural input prices have muted the rise in food prices. Prices of services and tradable goods have responded to the downturn in the economy with delay. As demand gradually recovered, price growth only took effect at the beginning of the year 2021. The economy then opened to a greater extent and there was a pick-up in demand and a rise in inflation itself to the value of 2.8 % (Nepriaznivý vplyv pandémie 2021).

The negative development concerning inflation was mainly perceived through the rise in the price of commodities or raw materials. The most significant impact was on the price of electricity. While in April 2020, 1 MWh was sold on the Prague Stock Exchange for 44 euros, in April 2022 the price was 186 euros per MWh. During the period, the price approached 330 euros in December 2021, which was seen as an unprecedented increase. Similarly, negative developments have occurred in the case of other essential commodities for business: oil and natural gas. In particular, the price of natural gas has risen several times. The rise in petrol and diesel prices continued uninterrupted throughout 2021. A certain slowdown in growth and a month-on-month fall in fuel prices can only be observed in December 2021, by around 1.83 %, but year-on-year, fuels were almost 21 % more expensive (SITA, TASR 2021).

The period up to 2020 was characterised by price stagnation in the construction sector. The first wave of the coronavirus saw prices fall by 1.8 % in October 2020. Construction prices during 2020 grew at a rate of around 4 %. In 2021, there was a significant fall in prices of construction work, by 2.6 % year-on-year in March 2021. However, from April onwards, not only prices of construction work started to rise gradually, but also prices of construction materials. In a year-on-year comparison, the price of construction materials rose gradually by up to 31 % and the price of construction work by up to 20 % (COVID-19: Dopady a cesty z krízy 2022).

The pandemic also had a disproportionate impact on certain sectors of the economy in terms of employment. The tourism, hospitality, and retail sectors were particularly hard

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hit, as the restrictions on travel and social gatherings reduced demand for their services. The catering sector experienced a large loss of staff, as catering outlets were restricted or completely closed during most of the pandemic. In the second quarter of 2020, the turnover of the hospitality industry in Slovakia declined by 44 % compared to the same period the previous year, both domestic and foreign guest nights declined by 94 %. This decline was one of the largest in the European Union (Slovak Hotel Market 2021). In the service sector, work is often seasonal and many businesses did not recruit new staff in the uncertainty of the measures. Employees from the most affected sectors changed jobs and took up employment in another sector. The government also almost immediately took measures to boost employment. During the pandemic, although there was a slight increase in unemployment compared to 2019, tightening, easing measures, seasonality, turnover of employees to other sectors and the timely adoption of support measures meant that unemployment did not deviate significantly from normal values on an annual average basis. Despite the pandemic crisis, Slovakia achieved a noticeably lower unemployment rate with values of 6.7 % and 6.8 % in 2020 and 2021 respectively, than in 2017 when the unemployment rate stood at 8.1 %.

Concerning the tourism industry, travel restrictions and social distancing measures put in place to control the spread of the virus disrupted travel and led to a decline in tourist arrivals. According to data from the Slovak Statistics Office, the number of tourist arrivals in Slovakia declined by 68 % in 2020 compared to the previous year (Slovenská Športiteľňa 2021). This was largely due to the travel restrictions and quarantine measures put in place by the government to control the spread of the virus. The decline in tourist arrivals had a significant impact on the tourism industry in Slovakia. Many tourism-related businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions, were forced to close or significantly reduce their operations due to the lack of demand. This led to job losses and economic losses for these businesses. The decline in tourism also had a knock-on effect on other sectors of the economy, such as retail and transportation, which rely on tourism for a significant portion of their revenue.

Slovakia was entering the 2020 period with an approved budget deficit of 0.49% of GDP and forecast GDP growth of 2,3 %. The cash deficit of the state budget was to amount to 2.76 billion euros (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic 2021). The pandemic caused unexpected expenditures from the state budget and a significant increase in Slovakia's indebtedness. The consolidated debt of the public administration climbed to 55 billion euros, and compared to 2019, it increased by almost 10 billion euros. Despite the unfavourable development, the Slovak Republic was 2020 still in the middle of the EU member countries with a debt of 60.6% of GDP (Supreme Audit Office 2021). The rise of the debt value can be attributed to a complex set of effects, in particular, the purchase of large quantities of medical supplies, the cost of providing healthcare, financial assistance to affected businesses, expenditure on economic recovery and other pandemic-related expenditures.

The amendment to the State Budget Act foresaw a general government deficit of 11.58 % of GDP as of 5 August 2020 and an economic slump of up to 9.8 %. The year 2021 was even worse in budgetary terms. The budget envisaged a deficit of up to 7.41 % of

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GDP (Slovenská Sporiteľňa 2021). The estimated poor performance of the state, which is well below the expectations of the Maastricht criteria, the criteria of the Stability and Growth Pact, as well as the Slovak law on budgetary responsibility, was mainly the result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic 2022; TREND 2021.).

However, the government was eventually able to achieve a better economic result, despite the fact that, according to the Slovak Supreme Audit Office (2021), spending on to tackle the epidemic, was increased by 3 % of GDP, compared to the approved plan. The improved economic performance in the year 2021 was mainly due to higher tax and levy revenues by 1.9 % of GDP, which compensated for these increased expenditures, but also a decrease in capital expenditure and its lagging by 0.8 % of GDP behind the budgeted level, and the performance of local governments and other governmental bodies by 0.6 % of GDP (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic 2021).

In conclusion, Slovakia has been affected by the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, as have many other countries. The beginning of the pandemic in Slovakia saw a decrease in industrial production and car exports to global markets and, as the Slovak economy is heavily dependent on these items, this fact contributed significantly to the decline of the Slovak economy in 2020. Through more targeted measures and a gradual opening up of the economy, the Slovak economy was able to grow again in 2021.

The Slovak government has implemented numerous measures to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic and support businesses and individuals such as financial support to businesses through grants, loans, and tax breaks. The government has also implemented measures to support employment by expanding unemployment benefits and introducing a program to subsidize the wages of workers who have been temporarily laid off. In addition to these measures, the government also took steps to support households affected by the pandemic, including through the provision of financial assistance and the expansion of social services.

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on the economy of Slovakia, but the measures taken by the government and central bank helped to mitigate the damage and support the recovery, which implies that the response of the Slovak government to the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic has been generally positive.

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Assistance from Visegrad Group Countries on the War in Ukraine

Wiktoria Cieniuch, Kamil Skórski¹

Abstract

The war in Ukraine is a common and topical issue in Europe. The purpose of the discussion is to present the positions of the Visegrad Group countries on aid to Ukraine. Focusing on individual V4 countries illustrates the approaches of their governments and citizens to the conflict. The analysis allows noting the diversity of involvement of the Visegrad Group members. One can notice similar attitudes to aid, although implementation ends up with varying degrees of commitments. We observe a differences from the Polish - the mostly involved country in various forms of assistance, to the Hungarian point of view remaining rather reluctant and distanced from the whole situation going on in Ukraine.

Key words: war, support, Visegrad Group, Europe, Ukraine

On February 24 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine began. The topic of the war, which is still ongoing and carries many casualties, is all the time relevant and concerns all people, especially residents of European countries.

The events happening in Ukraine are known to all and are of concern to the citizens and governments of various countries, especially those that directly border or are quite close to the war-torn state.

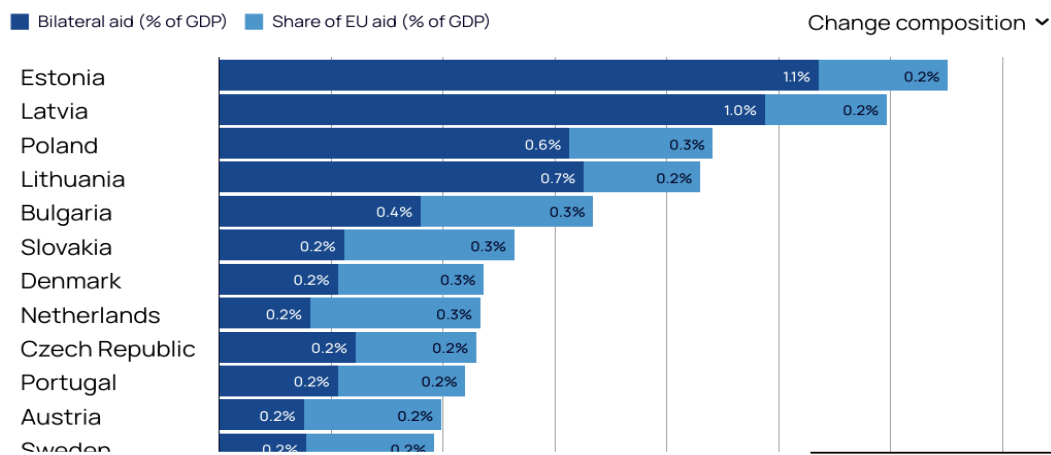
It is extremely important what kind of help has been provided to Ukraine and what kind of assistance can still count on. This topic is important because this war affects us all and it must be stopped in order not to spread further. On our continent, people feel fear, especially we, the Eastern countries directly bordering Ukraine, fear the further consequences of this war. Thus, we think it is very important to help Ukraine. They cannot be left alone and watch passively as the country is devastated by the Russian invasion. By providing appropriate support on military or humanitarian level, we not only help the Ukrainians themselves to defend themselves, but also preserve peace in the rest of Europe.

In the context of considering the international implications of the crisis in Ukraine, it is worth mentioning the cooperation of countries within the Visegrad Group. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are the most interested EU countries in the situation in Ukraine, as they are direct neighbors. The reaction of the societies of the Visegrad Group countries to the conflict and to the role of Russia and Ukraine has become an important indicator of public opinion in these countries, as well as an indicator of the general views of Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and Slovaks on foreign policy (Zyguła 2018)

Government support to Ukraine: By donor country GDP, incl. and excl. EU share



Commitments Jan. 24, 2022 to Jan. 15, 2023. Data on 40 donor countries; scroll to see more countries



Source: Trebesch et al. (2023) "The Ukraine Support Tracker" Kiel WP

ifw-kiel.de/ukrainetracker

i Disclaimer

The crisis situation in Ukraine has actually been going on since 2014. Since then, the Visegrad countries have been supporting the occupied state in different ways. The approaches of the V4 members to the crisis are different.

Helping Ukraine:

Since the beginning of the Russian aggression war, the EU and its member states have made some €67 billion available to support Ukraine and its people:

- €37.8 billion in economic aid
- 17 billion euros for refugee assistance
- 12 billion euros for military support
- 67 billion euros is the total amount of EU and member states' aid to Ukraine (Rada UE i Rada Europejska, 2023).

The European Union, of which the V4 countries are members, is trying to bring aid to war-stricken Ukraine. Support is needed in many areas: economic, humanitarian, support for the military, and help for refugees.

Individual countries are also trying to help. Poland is a frontline state in the matter of support, so this topic is very important to us.

Poles have been supporting Ukraine since the beginning of the war. According to the Border Guard, 9.945 million refugees from Ukraine, mostly women and children, crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border from February 24, 2022 to February 19, 2023. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 8.4 million people have fled Ukraine since the beginning of the war, of which up to 3.1 million have returned so far (as of 2.07.2022).

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According to UN data, the largest share of refugees - 51 per cent. - have arrived in Poland (UNHCR, 2022) (Baszczak, Kiełczewska, Kukołowicz, Wincewicz, Zyzik 2022).

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) publication "International Migration Outlook 2022," the preliminary amount of Polish humanitarian aid to Ukraine in 2022 has reached €8.36 billion (about 1.5% of GDP), putting Poland at the top of 27 European donor countries for Ukraine. The €8.36 billion in humanitarian aid to Ukraine includes €6.2 billion spent on housing and direct financial assistance, €1.5 billion on education and €664 million on health care. The average per capita cost of aid in Poland is €5,225 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022).

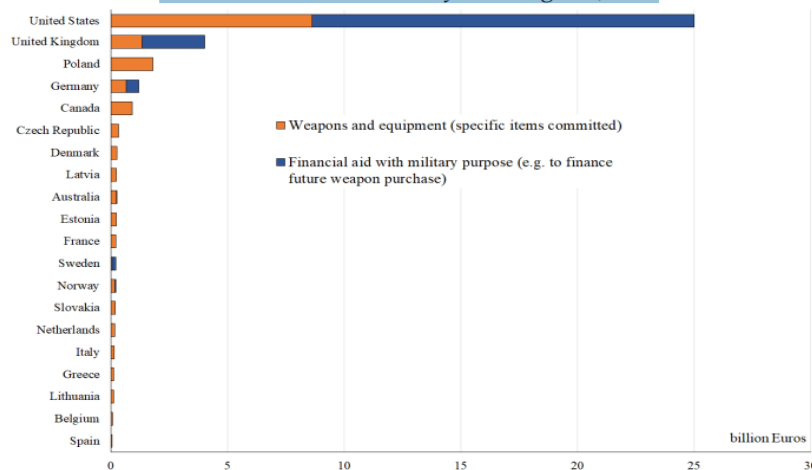
In-kind aid and remittances are the two most popular forms of support for refugees after the outbreak of war. Polish society, from the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, took care to provide Ukrainians with a good existence in our country. Civilians and organizations, such as Caritas, Polish Red Cross, took care of adequate humanitarian aid, medicines, food and dressings. Polish society has been mobilized to help from the very beginning. Poles welcomed refugees from Ukraine into their homes, collections were organized in stores and institutions and churches also got involved. The Polish government also made sure that Ukrainians had access to medical care and education, and received financial support and employment opportunities. Ukrainians accepted by Poland were given PESEL numbers, which enabled them to function in the country, deal with official matters, and made it easier to adapt to a system that was new to them. The government of the Republic of Poland is constantly striving to make it easier for refugees to function in the new, difficult reality. To citizens of Ukraine who entered Poland legally from Ukraine after February 23, 2022 because of the war and wish to remain in Poland, the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) grants and pays an educational benefit from the Family 500+ program (so-called 500+) (Social Security Institution 2022).

According to information made available by the largest institutions involved in providing aid to refugees, the value of the support provided through them can be estimated at a minimum of PLN 326.7 million. Caritas Poland declares to have collected 100 million PLN worth of funds and in-kind donations worth 132 million PLN, Siepomaga.pl Foundation - 52 million PLN, Polish Humanitarian Action - 32 million PLN, while Solidarity with Ukraine Foundation - 11.7 million PLN (Baszczak, Kiełczewska, Kukołowicz, Wincewicz, Zyzik, 2022).

Military aid is also an important form of assistance from Poland. Since the Russian invasion began, the Republic of Poland has firmly and boldly stated the fact that there is a real war going on in our Eastern neighbors, where weapons and ammunition are needed to help attacks by Russian soldiers stop.

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Figure 5. Military aid (including financial) in € billion (top 20 of 40 donors)
Bilateral commitments January 24 to August 3, 2022



This figure shows a ranking of the top 20 donors (out of 40) that have offered military aid in the form of weapons and equipment and financial aid with military purpose to Ukraine between January 24 and August 3, 2022 (bilateral disclosed military commitments only, in billion Euros). To avoid double counting, we do not include EU (Commission and Council) contributions (Antezza, Frank, Franz, Kharitonov, Kumar, Rebinskaya, Trebesch 2023)

Many data indicate that Poland is on the podium of countries supporting Ukraine militarily. The Polish government, to the best of its ability, is trying to help in the conflict and is not leaving the fighting Ukrainians alone.

The Republic of Poland on the issue of the war in Ukraine has taken many measures to help the injured fighting, as well as those seeking refuge. Poland has been courageous in speaking out about the problem of the war and trying to support its victims through its commitment to help on many levels.

Our eastern neighbors in the difficult wartime situation facing them have also received tremendous support from the Czech Republic. According to a Median agency survey from early March, 87% of Czechs strongly condemn the Russian Federation's aggression, while according to a STEM/MARK agency analysis from late February, 97% of Czech citizens say they need to help refugees (67% of those surveyed indicated that the Czech Republic should help any refugee, and 30% favored helping at least some refugees). The Czech public has become involved in conducting collections, receiving and housing war refugees (Lewkowicz, Czarnecki, Hejj 2022).

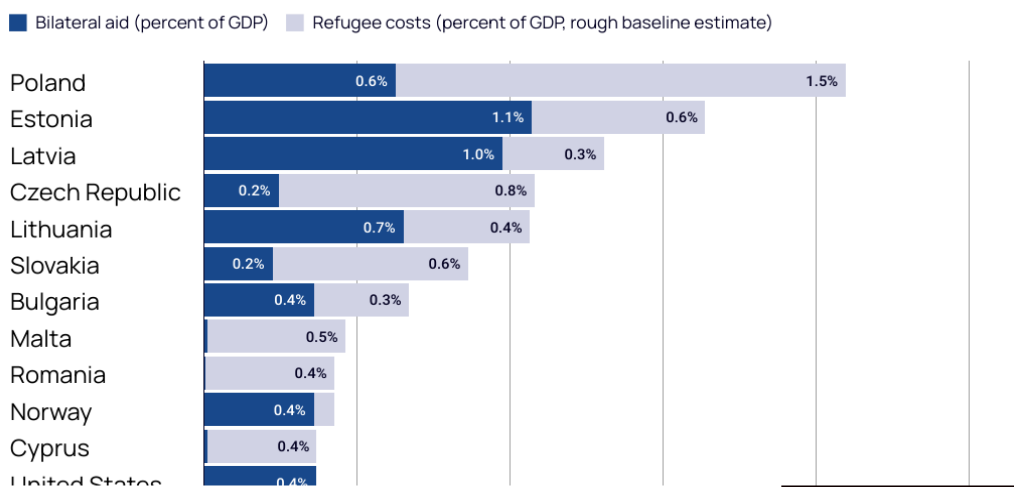
The assistance offered by the Czech Republic can also be seen at the government level. The Czech government is creating laws that define the stay of Ukrainian refugees in the country. Refugees from Ukraine who fled to the Czech Republic from Russian aggression and received temporary protection will be given the opportunity to extend their staying until March 31, 2024. This is possible due to the package of laws "Lex Ukraine IV" (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic 2023)

Military assistance from the Czech Republic is also highly visible. The Czech Republic and Poland are sending additional weaponry to Ukraine as it struggles against a renewed Russian offensive in the Eastern parts of the country, government officials and local media report. Czech Defense Minister Jana Cernochova told public broadcaster CT on May 29 that Prague intends to soon send Kyiv armaments worth \$26 million to \$30 million. "It's crucial that the aid is steady," she said, adding that the country has sent more than \$150 million in military aid supplies since the start of Russia's invasion on February 24.

Government support to Ukraine: by donor GDP, incl. refugee costs



Commitments Jan. 24, 2022 to Jan. 15, 2023. Data on 40 donor countries ; scroll to see more countries



Source: Trebesch et al. (2023) "The Ukraine Support Tracker" Kiel WP

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Cernochova did not provide details on the type or extent of the military aid for security reasons, but said heavy weaponry would be included. Czech media have reported that T-72 tanks, BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles, Dana howitzers, and potentially Soviet-made combat helicopters would be among the supplies provided (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2022)

Although the Czech Republic is not a leading refugee destination, the assistance provided to disadvantaged Ukrainian citizens is significant and visible. The Czech government works all the time to provide refugees with medical care, educational opportunities and humanitarian aid. Prime Minister of the centre-right coalition government in Prague Petr Fiala said that the West should help Ukraine with "clear words and deeds," and that "Russia must know that there are limits it must not cross." Defense Minister Jana Černochová said that while she hoped to avoid a Russian-Ukrainian war, the Czech Republic "historically, politically, allies are on the side of Ukraine" and will try to help it when needed (Dębiec 2022).

Condemnation of Russia's attack on Ukraine and providing necessary assistance to Ukrainians can also be seen in Slovakia's actions. The Slovak authorities have all the time

been providing political, military and humanitarian support to Ukraine attacked by Russia. At the same time, the position of some opposition politicians advocating, among other things, the preservation of Slovakia's neutrality is unclear. (Lewkowicz, Czarnecki, Hejj 2022).

Understanding the nature of the problem and taking care to convey true information about the war is an important form of assistance. It is not only humanitarian and military aid that is needed, but it is also important to take the right position, both by those in power and society as a whole.

Although the attitude of Slovak society is not as pro-Ukrainian as that of Poles or Czechs, one can see quite a change in the attitude of Slovaks towards the war. The majority of Slovaks are in favor of sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine (77.8% of respondents support this) and accepting refugees from war zones (74.6% of people). On the other hand, respondents are less keen on the ban on the spread of Russian propaganda in Slovakia regarding the war in Ukraine, seen as a restriction on freedom of speech, as well as the introduction of very strict sanctions against Russia, in particular, the restriction of visas for Russian citizens and their presence in Slovakia (Lewkowicz 2022).

March 16, 2022 Slovakia has adopted Lex Ukrajina, a comprehensive package of laws including the Asylum Act and the Alien Residence Act, aimed at facilitating the integration of those fleeing from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The legislative package covers temporary residency and protection, labor market access, education, transportation, housing, social protection and health care (Sekulova 2022).

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Slovakia has made sure that the public is properly informed about the ongoing crisis, boldly informing the public that the aggressor threatening not only Ukraine, but all of Europe, is Russia. It is very important for the public to realize the seriousness of the situation and to know about the harm that is being done to Ukraine all the time. Key politicians in Slovakia have unequivocally condemned Russia for its military attack on Ukraine. Following an emergency meeting of the Slovak Security Council on February 24, President Zuzana Čaputová, Prime Minister Eduard Heger and Speaker of the National Council Boris Kollár presented a joint statement on events across the eastern border. Representatives of Slovakia's three most important constitutional bodies defined Russia as the aggressor that carried out the military invasion of Ukraine. They announced that Slovakia condemns Russian aggression and will support the Ukrainians. In addition, they said that together with NATO and EU allies, the Slovak side is ready to assist Ukraine in ending the conflict and protecting human life. In their view, making peace is an absolute priority (Lewkowicz 2022).

A different stance on helping the Ukrainians can be seen in Hungary. Analyzing the statements of Hungary's leading politicians, it would seem that they are distancing themselves very much from the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The Hungarian government was not in favor of sanctions imposed on Russia. The Hungarian prime minister pointed out that this "is not our war," and Hungary remains a member of NATO, which Russia "will never attack." He also stressed that Ukraine will not win this conflict, while sanctions are more painful for the West than for Russia (Sadecki, Catus, Kobeszko

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2022). Most of Hungary's pro-government media is very reserved about Russian aggression. There is no clear recognition by the authorities that the conflict taking place is a war that could affect not only Ukraine itself, but the rest of Europe.

What significantly differentiates Hungary's position on the war in Ukraine from that of the Visegrad Group countries is its failure to unequivocally state that Russia is the aggressor and its lack of government support for sanctions against Russia. Since the beginning of the war, when other countries considered Russia's actions in Ukraine to be a war, Hungary has spoken of the situation as, "a Russian military operation". It is noticeable, however, that Hungary does not support any armed conflicts. It can be seen in the statements of politicians that they consider the attack itself unnecessary and do not support military actions in Europe. Hungarian authorities have stressed more than once that they care about the independence of their country and do not want to get involved in the existing conflict.

Hungarian support for Ukraine includes only humanitarian aid, which is directed mainly to Transcarpathia. Logistical support for Ukrainians arriving in Hungary, including representatives of the Hungarian minority, was mainly provided by NGOs, local governments and civilians in the first days of the war. The government offered 600 million forints (about 1.5 million euros) in aid to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, while - according to the prime minister's statement - Hungary will not send weapons to support Ukrainian forces. Nor have they taken any bilateral action to sanction Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. They did not close their airspace to Russian aircraft before Feb. 27, when such a decision was made by the EU (Józwiak 2022).

According to UNHCR data from March 23, 2022 approximately 330,000 people have crossed the Hungarian-Ukrainian border. However, Hungarian authorities report a figure more than twice as high, which is based on adding up the number of people crossing the Hungarian border from Ukraine, but also from Romania, which is unsubstantiated. There is a lack of statistics showing what percentage of refugees remain in Hungary. With a high degree of probability, it can be assumed that it is the Hungarian minority from Transcarpathia, and a large part of the remaining refugees from Ukraine move either to the west of Europe (Austria, Germany) or the north, towards Poland (Lewkowicz, Czarnecki, Hejj 2022).

Analyzing the facts and diagrams presented, one can conclude that the Visegrad Group countries know that assistance to Ukraine during the still ongoing war is badly needed. As a rule, one can see the commitment of the countries to provide humanitarian aid.

It is also noticeable that individual countries are investing a lot in supporting Ukraine. What is common to all V4 countries is the involvement of the public and non-governmental institutions in organizing assistance in various forms. However, we can see a significant difference in government positions. The opinions of those in power and the opposition's are divided/controversial, with the majority dominated by a desire for support and understanding, which equates to unequivocally recognizing Russia as the aggressor and condemning the war effort. On the other hand, some of those in power, however, do not want to involve their country in a conflict that they do not officially

recognize as a war started by Russia. The problem of division of opinion is also on the issue of military aid.

The most important thing, however, is that the Visegrad Group countries are trying to help. Despite different positions, different views and political sympathies, Ukraine has not been left alone. Countries still need to do a lot of work to make the involvement of the entire Visegrad Group greater and more committed?

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The Visegrad Group and the Influx of Waves of Refugees

*Piotr Klódka*¹

Abstract

For many years, Europe has been facing a very serious problem: immigrants are fleeing from their homes. Primarily out of fear for their lives, but also for economic reasons. They do so because of ongoing armed conflicts in their neighbouring countries or simply in search of a better life. Opinions across Europe are divided on the topics of ways and means to help and concerns about what the influx of people from other countries might bring. It is not different inside the Visegrad group, whose members sometimes do not speak with a common voice.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, refugees, migration crisis, problem, war, Ukraine, Russia, foreign policy, divisions, conflict

A few words about the formation of the Visegrad Group

It is a political alliance of 4 Central European countries: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. It was established to strengthen the cooperation among these Central European states in the post-Soviet era in order to synchronize their steps and evolve best practices in their democratic transition and in the creation of a free market economy. Furthermore, coordination of the goal of joining the European Union was also a common aim. and these countries became part of the EU in 2004. V4 was established in the city of Visegrad on February 15, 1991, when the presidents of Poland and Czechoslovakia and the prime minister of Hungary signed a joint declaration defining the objectives and conditions of mutual cooperation (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych).

1. Map of the Visegrad Group



Source: Trinet, *Grupa wyszehradzka – czym jest, państwa czlonkowskie*, <https://www.trinet.com.pl/grupa-wyszehradzka-czym-jest-panstwa-czlonkowskie/>, (access 15.02.2023).

At this point, I really miss some sentences/paragraphs about the aim of the essay or the methodology applied below.

War in Ukraine since 2014

Euromaidan

Viktor Yanukovich, as Ukraine's new president, despite prosperous? relations with Russia, continued the previous cooperation with the European Union, but in late 2013, he stepped back from signing the Association Agreement with the EU. The Ukrainian side explained its decision on the grounds that certain agreement could result in difficulties in trade relations with Russia. As a consequence, public protests, generally known? Euromaidan, took place in Ukraine, wanting Ukraine to maintain better relationship with Western Europe. Over time, those taking part decided to demand the resignation of the state authorities, including President Yanukovich. The authorities used militia forces and its special forces against the strikers, resulting in the deaths of about 100 people and the wounding of about 1,000. Viktor Yanukovich fled the country, and the Ukrainian parliament took full power and as a result, early elections were scheduled to be held on May 25, 2014 (Czyż 2017).

After the 2014 Sochi Olympics, Vladimir Putin ordered Russian special forces to seize Crimean airports and the Regional Parliament buildings. On March 18, Putin declared that Crimea had been merged with Russia, violating the agreement on the inviolability of borders. Local government buildings in Eastern Ukraine were then seized. The Russian president announced the creation of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (Tim Weiner 2022). On August 24, 2014, the Russian army crossed the borders of these imaginary republics by capturing parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This was due to the possible collapse of these people's republics (Żochowski, Sadowski, Menkiszak 2014).

2. Map of Ukraine with Crimea highlighted



Source: kresy.pl *Kolejna runda rozmow rosyjsko-ukrainskich ukraina gotowa do negocjowania statusu krymu*, (<https://kresy.pl/wydarzenia/polityka/kolejna-runda-rozmow-rosyjsko-ukrainskich-ukraina-gotowa-do-negocjowania-statusu-krymu/>) Access: 20.02.2023

3. Map of Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics



Source: TVN24.pl Wyszedł po chleb, został wcielony do wojska. Jak działa przymusowa mobilizacja w samozwańczych republikach, (<https://tvn24.pl/swiat/wojna-w-ukrainie-samozwancze-republiki-doniecka-i-luganska-przymusowo-wcielaja-mezczyzn-do-wojska-by-walczyli-po-stronie-rosji-5715519>) access: 20.02.2022

In the first stage, representatives of the Visegrad Group countries issued a joint statement expressing their concern about what was happening and called for dialogue. There was a fairly large convergence of views at the time. Solidarity with the Ukrainian government and its people was then expressed (Czyż 2017).

Later, this solidarity began to dissolve

In the Czech Republic, there were opposite point of views between the head of state and the head of government, President Milos Zeman believed that there was a civil war in Ukraine. Opinion of the Prime Minister?

A similar situation occurred in Slovakia where the Prime Minister Robert Fico, who expressed a more pro-Russian stance compared to President Andrej Kiska, criticized sanctions against Russia.

As for Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban was and still is an enormous supporter of Hungarian-Russian cooperation, focusing primarily on the energy field. He did not openly support sanctions against Russia, but the Foreign Ministry condemned the violence in Ukraine calling for an end to it for both sides.

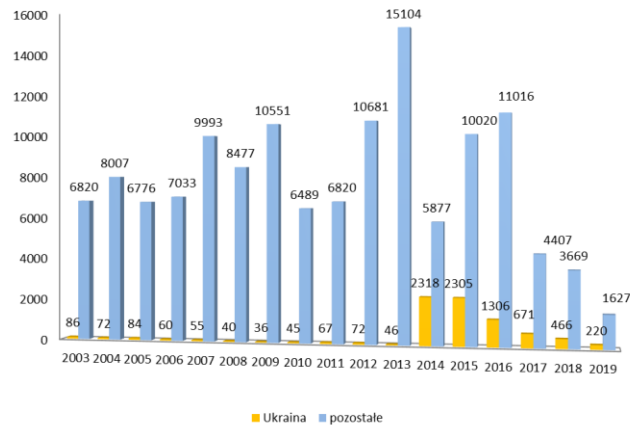
Poland, of all the Visegrad Group countries, was the advocate in condemning the actions of the Russian Federation and criticizing its intervention in Ukraine's internal affairs (Czyż 2017). The influx of refugees from Ukraine to the Visegrad Group countries took place mainly in Poland, with very negligible numbers to the other V4 countries, although the numbers in Poland itself weren't considerable either.

Before the war, which was caused by the aggression of the Russian Federation in Eastern Ukraine, Ukrainians did not very often apply for the refugee status in Poland, as well as in the other Visegrad Group countries. In 2013, only 2 refugee status decisions were issued. Despite this situation, this did not affect any significant changes in the percentage

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of Ukrainians living in Poland, as the western part of Ukraine was a relatively safe place and most of those fleeing from the East preferred to stay in their homeland, and also a larger group of presidents chose to apply for refugee status to the Russian Federation (Chmura, Cegiełka 2015).

- Below you can see the number of refugee applications filed in Poland by year. On the left - the number of Ukrainian applications, on the right - the number of total applications.



Source: GOV.pl *Raport na temat obywateli Ukrainy* (raport na temat obywateli ukrainy - Gov.pl) access: 20.02.2023

The number of Ukrainian citizens seeking refugee status in Poland in 2014 accounted for 34% of the total number of asylum seekers, while in 2015 it was only 19% (gov.pl).

Migration crisis 2014/2015

The most important background cause of this crisis was the internal situation in areas such as the Middle East where there was a civil war in Syria caused by the activities of the so-called Islamic State and also crises in Afghanistan and other countries. People fled from those areas mainly by land from Turkey through Greece, Macedonia or Serbia towards Germany and also by sea through Libya and Tunisia headed to Greece, Italy and Spain. Along with them, people from poorer areas in Europe like Kosovo and Albania, decided to emigrate too (Czyż 2017). This led to serious problems at border crossings and also throughout the entire borders of the countries through which the refugees usually wanted to get to further parts of Europe. As a consequence, debates in the EU became common about a proportional deployment of these refugees in member states and dealing with the sudden increase of arrivals from different parts of the world. Social problems were also emerged. During the discussions in the European Union, some countries criticized the ideas for handling this problem. The main opposition to the deployment of the refugee numbers in question was expressed by the Visegrad Group countries (Czyż 2017). In 2018, during the debates in the European Union, talks were held on the migration crisis and V4 member states did not participate in this summit (TVN24.PL 2018).

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Initially Poland agreed with the European Union's proposal, but after the change of government, she joined the rest of the V4 countries position, which opposed the mandatory deployment of refugees from the beginning. This was explained by the fact that there were terror attacks in Brussels in the beginning of 2016 after which the government PiS decided to quit? the commitments of the previous ruling party to accept refugees from Greece and Italy (Jarecka 2016). In 2014, 262 foreigners were granted refugee status and among them, 115 Syrians were the largest group.

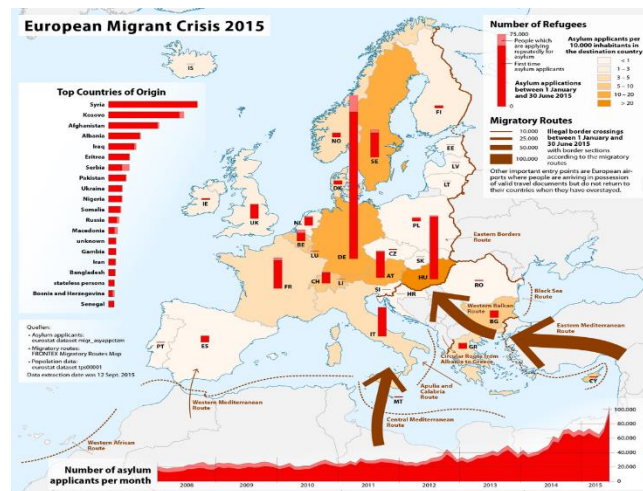
All members of the V4 group supported their view with the fact that they have no contacts or historical affiliations with that culture and have bad associations and experiences with minorities from the Middle East (Czyż 2017).

The Czech Republic had increased the number of police checks at railroad stations, and initially facilitated the registration of migrants to be marked on the wrists of them, but after criticism in the media the Czech Republic abandoned the idea.

Slovakia also decided to implement similar steps, also increasing the number of people guarding the borders with Hungary and Austria. The head of government expressed readiness to accept only 200 Christian Syrians, and accused the countries that bombed Syria and Libya of being responsible for the crisis and identified a link between migration and terrorism. At the same time, president Andrej Kiska announced that Slovakia had the "moral obligation" to help immigrants.

The most difficult situation could have been experienced in Hungary because the country is located along the main routes of the refugee flow. Prime Minister Orban spoke about defending Europe's Christian heritage against a wave of Muslims.

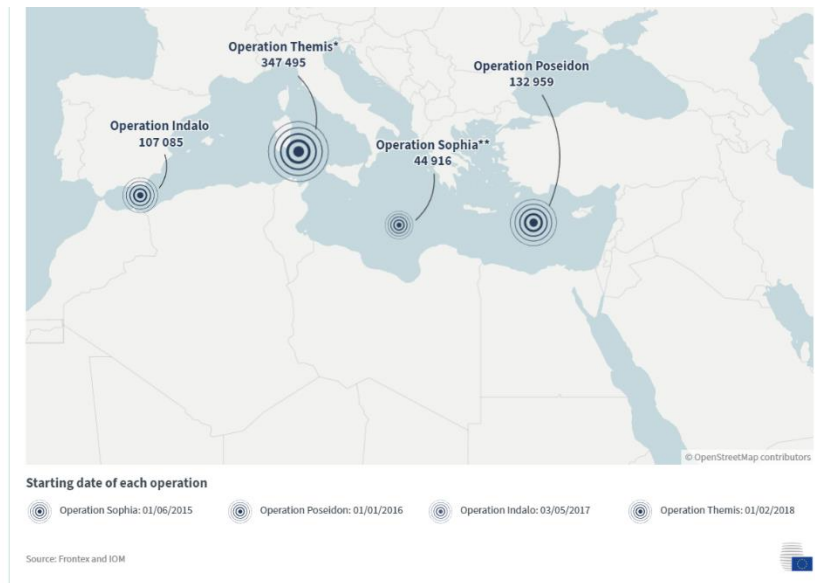
5. Map depicting the migration situation and showing the directions of refugees



Source: Wikipedia (https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kryzys_migracyjny_w_Europie)

By the end of 2022, 632455 people were rescued on the routes in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, 25594 people died while trying to get to Europe (European Council).

6. Below is a map with the locations of rescue operations along with the number of people rescued.



Source: European Council. Council of the European Union, Infographic - Lives saved in EU Mediterranean operations (2015-2023) (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/saving-lives-sea/>).

War in Ukraine since 2022

Causes

There are rich deposits of mineral resources in Ukraine, which are estimated at about \$26 trillion according to the company "SecDev", and in the area where the war is being fought at \$12 trillion. Meanwhile, according to the State Geology and Deposits Service, there are 2233 exploited deposits of energy minerals, 147 deposits of metal ores, 4676 deposits of non-metallic rut, and 1705 deposits of medicinal groundwater and oil in Ukraine. A lot of hard coal, iron ore, graphite and others were mined there (Iwaniak 2022).

A huge part of Russian citizens believe that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation with one Church or religious background, language and culture. They also believe that the Ukrainian state should not exist outside of Russia's sphere because it is a part of Russia, and the existence of an independent Ukraine is a threat to Russia (Wasylenko 2017).

During the 2019 presidential election in Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenski declared his candidacy and he won in the 2nd round against then-President Petro Poroshenko. The new president was previously an actor, starring in the TV series "Servant of the Nation," where he played the role of a history teacher who became president. He won the election on behalf of the party bearing the title of the series.

The Russian Federation, after its failures to take control of Ukraine and its move away from the Russian sphere of influence toward the European Union, decided on military aggression. Vladimir Putin, after introducing the possibility of running for presidential title again, decided on the armed attack with the goal to improve his image with a quick,

easy and victorious war. This was to help him win in the upcoming elections (Iwaniak 2022).

On the night of February 23-24, 2022, the President of the Russian Federation made an address to the nation in which he announced the start of a military special operation to protect the Russian people and aimed at "demilitarization and denazification" of Ukraine (Domańska, Wilk 2022). Putin also called the Ukrainian government Nazis. But this was denied by U.S. President Joe Biden and the Ukrainian president himself, informing about his roots. He came from a Russian-speaking Jewish family, some of his ancestors and relatives were victims of the Holocaust and others from his family fought against the enemy during the "Great Patriotic War" as part of the Red Army (Poreda 2022).

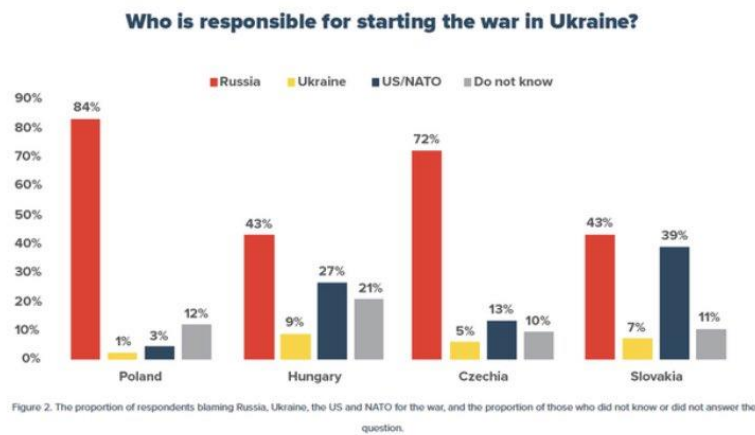
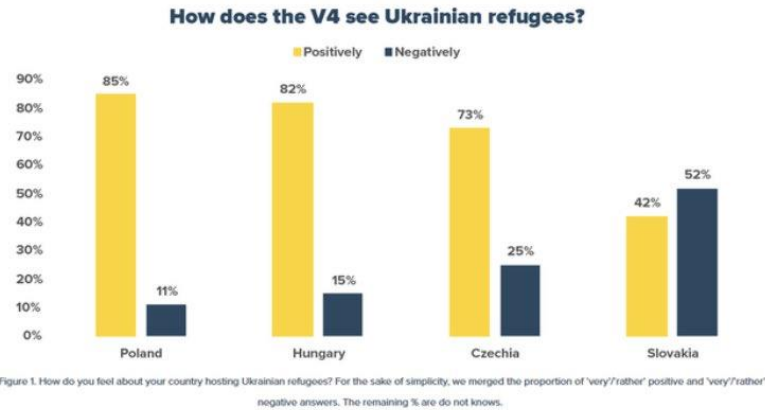
The attack by the Russian army began at 4:55 a.m. local time with air and missile attacks that aimed to destroy Ukraine's military and border infrastructure facilities along the borders with Russia and Belarus. This marked an escalation of a conflict that has been going on since 2014. The goal of Russia's head is to subjugate all of Ukraine and establish a favourable government (Domańska, Wilk 2022). The Ukrainian president did not flee the country, but remained in it, thus giving encouragement to his compatriots. It can also be noted here that he was an actor and reads very well what the public, the citizens, expect from him.

Russian troops are committing a number of war crimes inside Ukraine to bring terror to the civilian population. One remarkable example are the crimes committed by Russian militias in Bucha, revealed in early April 2022 after Ukraine's armed forces regained control in the Kiev area. The people who lived there, who were civilians and who did not take part in the ongoing war, were tortured and murdered by the army of the Russian Federation and many of the victims of the Bucha events were buried in mass nameless graves. Volodymyr Zelenski then announced the creation of an institution to bring those responsible to justice (Zareba, Piechowska 2022).

The reactions of the Visegrad Group to the war in Ukraine

According to a poll by the "GLOBSEC think-tank" in late 2022, the population's view of the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war, according to the Hungarians, 43% blamed Russia, 9% blamed Ukraine, and 27% blamed the USA or NATO. 72% of Czechs considered Russia to be blamed for the conflict, 13% point to the U.S.A or NATO, and 5% considered Ukraine to be blamed. Among Slovaks, 42% blamed Russia and at 39% they considered the U.S.A or NATO to be responsible, 7% pointed to Ukraine, and 11% had no opinion. In Poland, an overwhelming majority, 84% believed Russia was to blame, 3% believed the USA or NATO, and 1% pointed to Ukraine.

As for the attitude of the residents of the V4 countries, Slovakia is the only country where the majority of citizens have a negative view of accepting Ukrainians at 52%, while 42% view them positively. The rest of the citizens of the Visegrad Group countries mostly rate the reception of refugees positively (Kresy.pl).



Source: [Visegrad24-twitter.com\(https://pbs.twimg.com/media/FILrSI-WQAM_uw1?format=jpg&name=900x900\)](https://pbs.twimg.com/media/FILrSI-WQAM_uw1?format=jpg&name=900x900) (access 20.02.2023).

Hungary

After the start of hostilities in Ukraine, Viktor Orban did not openly support, but also did not question the sanctions imposed by the European Union against Russia occupying independent Ukraine. The Hungarian government has refused to provide military aid to Ukraine and opposed ending cooperation with Russian companies and also refused to stop Russian investment in Hungary. This attitude is in opposition with the aid provided by other V4 countries, mainly the aid provided by Poland. However, in London, in March 2020 there was a meeting of representatives of the Visegrad Group countries with the British Prime Minister where the importance of aid to refugees was noted (Gruszczak).

The Hungarian government announced that Hungary would not support a proposal that could jeopardize the supply of gas to Hungary. Viktor Orban disagreed shortly after the war began with the transfer of arms to Ukraine. The Hungarian prime minister justified his opinion on the grounds that he did not want to involve his country in the conflict (Instytut Europy Środkowej 2022).

The Hungarian government then decided to grant Ukrainian refugees the same access to health care as Hungarian citizens, and Ukrainian children and/or students can enjoy free education. Despite the lack of military aid to Ukraine, Hungary has donated tons of food,

hygiene products and medical supplies to its neighbours to the east. More than 2 million refugees from Ukraine have crossed its borders (Włoczyk 2023).

Hungarians are not opposed to giving shelter for Ukrainians, and more than 28,000 temporary protection refugees have taken refuge in the country (European Council).

Czech Republic

The Czech government was one of the first to take decisive steps after Putin's military aggression, and among other things, decided on providing military support to Ukraine, donating arms and ammunition to help Ukrainians fight against occupying forces, and closing airspace to Russian aircraft. The Czech Republic is also supporting victims of the war politically as well as with humanitarian aid, donating 60 million euros to refugees. The Czechs have also supported the country's willingness to accept refugees. The country is openly and strongly in favour of imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation. (Ogrodnik 2022).

Among countries not bordering Ukraine, Germany and the Czech Republic received the most refugees, with more than 400,000 Ukrainians receiving temporary protection (Polsatnews.pl 2023). More than 100,000 refugees found work (Forsal.pl 2022) there.

Slovakia

Like the Czech Republic, Slovakia also fully supported and sided with Ukraine after the Russian aggression, providing military and humanitarian aid, as well as taking in refugees from the neighbouring country. Slovakia did not voluntarily close its airspace to Russian aircraft, the Slovak government did so on February 27, 2022, as this was a decision of the entire European Union (Ogrodnik Łukasz PISM 202).

The Slovak government provided aid to the Ukrainian side with about €11 million, followed by an additional delivery of military equipment worth more than €4 million. In many places along the borders of Slovakia and Ukraine, special places were established where refugees were sheltered. The majority of Slovak citizens support the state's action condemning Russian aggression and also fully agree with providing of aid to the victims of Vladimir Putin's regime, including by sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine and accepting refugees (Instytut Europy Środkowej 2022).

More than 90,000 refugees receiving temporary protection have found refuge in Slovakia (European Council).

Poland

Shortly after the aggression of Russian troops against Ukraine, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said in his speech in the Sejm that Ukraine is not fighting only for its freedom, but also for the freedom of all of Europe. A similar view expressed by President Andrzej Duda who unequivocally condemned the attack of the Russian Federation on a sovereign and independent state such as Ukraine. On the same day,

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February 24, 2022, the Polish government announced that it would demand that the European Union impose sanctions against Russia. In this situation, most Polish politicians – even with various political background – agreed that Ukraine was a victim of Putin's military onslaught and the Ukrainians needed to be helped (Bankier.pl).

According to the information provided by the Polish border guards, more than 10 million people entered Poland between the beginning of the war and February 2023, while more than 8 million people returned to Ukraine during this period (300gospodarka.pl).

At the beginning of 2023, Poland had about one million refugees from Ukraine who enjoyed temporary protection (European Council).

Despite the historical controversy in the Polish-Ukrainian relationship, especially because of the Volhynian slaughter carried out in 1943, mostly against Poles by Ukrainian Nationalists, and which resulted in more than 50,000 Poles being killed, but because we live in different times than our ancestors, Poles willingly helped Ukrainians after Russia's aggression and welcomed innocent refugees to their country.

In 2022 Poland spent about 10 billion Euro to help Ukraine, including about 2.5 billion spent by Polish citizens from private funds to help their neighbours. Ukrainians on the territory of Poland have the right to collect benefits similarly to Polish citizens are entitled to. It is estimated that between 60 to 70% of the Ukrainian adults have taken up employment in Poland. 191000 Ukrainian children have found a place in schools and 43000 in kindergartens. According to data from the end of 2022, more than 300000 Ukrainian children benefited from the 500 plus benefit, i.e., they received 500 zlotys per month, and 141000 benefited from the 300 zlotys benefit for a child's school attendance. 53,000 refugees benefited from family benefits.

According to a CBOS survey, 75 percent of Poles are concerned about Poland's security because of the situation happening across the eastern border (Karpińska 2022).

Summary

In recent years, the Visegrad Group countries have been distancing themselves from each other mainly through different opinions and geopolitical views of both state leaders and citizens. There are times, however, when the V4 speaks outwardly with one voice, but this does not happen very often. It has been and continues to be noticeable in the moments of any crisis.

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The Roots of Unity between Central European Nations

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Introduction

The Visegrad Group was formed in 1991 by three Central European countries and was transformed into its current form in 1993 with the split of Czechoslovakia. The quartet of Central European countries is composed of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The alliance was originally formed to promote cooperation, economic reconstruction and mutual understanding among its member states following the collapse of communism. They also shared a common interest in promoting continuous economic growth, innovation and competitiveness and the main purpose, to become a member of the European Union. Despite their diverseness the Visegrad countries share a number of values and principles including a commitment to democracy, human rights and the belief in the importance of regional cooperation and integration. Over the 30 years of its operation, the V4 has become a platform for the discussions of common interest, challenges and concerns. However, these four countries have faced their share of internal and external challenges in recent years and still face many today, the alliance continues to serve as an important forum for dialogue and cooperation.

Present essay is written to examine why the nations of the Visegrad countries could feel united and why it would be more beneficial to concentrate on the advantages of joint work than on the conflicts they have. On the one hand, the topic of the research derives from the question what binds these nations together, apart from the fact that their political leaders have formed an alliance? On the other hand, most importantly, in these difficult times for the Visegrad Countries we should remember the roots of unity between these nations and the reasons why it is beneficial for them to be an alliance in the global arena of international powers. As the region continues to evolve and face new opportunities and threats, the shared values and unity of the Visegrad countries should remain a source of strenght and resilience.

The history of the formation of the Visegrad Four

The 1991 Visegrad Declaration and the alliance itself was inspired by the meeting of kings in 1335, in the small hungarian town, Visegrád. At that time, the kings of the three Central European kingdoms of that era – Czech, Polish and Hungarian – met to settle their conflicts, thus opening a way for a closer political and trade cooperation. In the early 14th century, these countries were experiencing enlargement and development, with many similarities although fragmentation and internal problems were present. The difficulties they faced have also complicated their relations with each other. Before the royal meeting particularly the Czech and Polish rulers were in conflict with each other, but both parties soon became interested in smoothing over their conflicts to unite against

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greater threatening powers. There were, for instance the Holy Roman Empire and the Duchy of Austria, that meant a serious obstacle to trade. The result of the kings' meeting was a peace agreement and according to some chroniclers, they also agreed that if one state is attacked by one of their enemies, the others are obliged to come to its aid. Also, it was an agreement of great importance from trade perspective too, as the kings agreed to create a trade route to avoid Vienna, which imposed heavy customs on traders passing through the city. Therefore, trade towards German territories was diverted in the direction of Brno. At that time, the alliance was a highly developed form of international cooperation, and the large number of written reports about the meeting from the side of all the three countries shows its outstanding importance. (Rácz, 2009)

So the Visegrad Declaration signed on February 14, 1991 in Visegrád echoes the aforementioned former successful cooperation. At first the alliance was called Visegrad Three, but after the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993 it became a group of four Central European countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist regime, these countries saw the way to economic catch up and European integration through cooperation. They aimed at joining the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, stabilization of the Central-Eastern European region and transformation from a totalitarian regime to a free and democratic society. Alongside the creation of their alliance, they signed the CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement) agreement on 21 December 1992 in Kraków. It was an effort to create closer binds in the region's cooperation in the economic field and to create a new international market for their export products, as with the collapse of the Soviet Union they were left without a foreign market and experienced major economic setback. The establishment of stronger economic cooperation and the stimulation of economic growth was supported by the elimination of trade barriers, especially tariffs and quotas. After a few years of starting its operation, it was already proving to be beneficial for all the member states. CEFTA has shown that Central Europe has a considerable potential for intra-regional trade. Trade among the countries of the Visegrad Quartet became more dynamic, they created more bilateral trade relations within the agreement and their economic and total foreign trade growth rates increased spectacularly. In that period, the Visegrad Four became a truly strong and credible cooperation, which resulted in the successful joining to the European Union on 1 May 2004. (Bársony, 1998)

After the Euro-Atlantic integration the alliance's prime ministers declared that they will continue their cooperation within the Union, and reformed their main aim regarding the future which was to become an active shaper and participant of the Union and carry a greater weight in the European arena while preserving their cultural identity. This alliance is also profitable for the participating countries not only because of its tangible political and economic results, but in calming the tensions between them both in the 1990s and these days. As the Visegrad Cooperation proved many times during its history that it is a great way of alleviating emerging conflicts or tensions in practise, if these countries are facing a greater goal, for which they need each other and to work jointly. Their cooperation proved that despite any former or emerging tensions, their joint work is beneficial for them at the end of the day. Especially within the European Union, since as

the part of the Union the V4 is not an alliance competing with the EU but strengthens effective regional assertion of their interests from the inside. The 2004 enlargement was also profitable for the European Union not only because it increased geographically, but also joined the Central European region into the political, economic and cultural relations and just as the states need the support of the Union, the Union needs the support of the states. (Szakálné Szabó, 2021)

The Visegrad Four has the principle of „unity in diversity”, which could be considered either their failure or their success, but the 30th anniversary of the cooperation seems to be more testimony to the latter. These countries believe that the strength of Europe resides in diversity. With this principle they also emphasize their feeling of necessity to preserve their national identity and sovereignty within the Euro-Atlantic community. Therefore, the Visegrad countries do not represent the same viewpoint on all issues, as they have their own separate policies, which are primarily serving their own interests. Obviously, in the case of clashing interest between the member countries, conflicts arise in the alliance. Still, with their belief in „unity in diversity” and flexibility they have been able to overcome these conflicts to this day.

The parallel between the Visegrad Cooperation of 1335 and 1991

Central Europe always had to suffer for its identity as it experienced continuous control by Western, Eastern and Southern empires. Historians often call this region a buffer territory, as it was a place for the battle of power interests of the West and the East, also a symbolic edge of Europe which divides powers arriving to gain influence from both directions. Over the centuries, they have therefore had to struggle not only for the maintenance of their independence and identity but even for their mere survival. Central European countries suffered too much through their history, Hungary was traumatised mostly by its losses due to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, Poland has its incomplete ambitions and the two nations of the former Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, carry the historical burden of inferiority complexes and fears. In addition, after the Soviet Union’s influence and the communist regime, all four countries faced similar difficulties, both politically and economically, in rebuilding themselves again after the rule of a great power. (Terenzani, 2010)

Thereby the formation of this cooperation was not only because the geographical, historical and cultural cohesion but also because of the development of a Central European identity, as a result of the constant struggles between the great powers and against their authority. This is compounded by the double standards towards the countries of Central-Eastern Europe, which often feel themselves defined on the periphery of Europe, considered by the west as „second class” European countries, often compared to Eastern countries. These assumptions of the Central-Eastern European countries were perhaps verified when they joined the European Union as it was labelled as the enlargement of the EU and not as the reunification of Europe.

It is important to highlight that despite all of this it cannot be stated that the common solidarity and the willing to work jointly for progress is only based on shared traumas, but it certainly contributes to it to some extent. (Szakálné Szabó, 2021)

The Visegrad Cooperation is also an intellectual and cultural cooperation, the fulfilment of the Central European identity both on the fields of politics and economy. As it has been mentioned on a few occasions, the V4 countries have had several conflicts with each other, both in the past and today. Still, just as in 1335, in 1991 they had to decide whether to deal with the conflicts of their past and pursue a culture of confrontation in the region of Central Europe or to recognize that they are stronger together and have a greater chance to fulfil their interests. As we know, they decided to unite their forces just as in the 14th century, which once again turned out to be a good decision. The creation of a V4 image as a single cooperative region with shared cultural heritage and mutually supportive developing economies, explicitly helped the accession process to the European Union and to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The successful join verified their presumption that „together their voice is better heard”. (Bagoly, 2021) After they joined the European Union, they had to reshape their goals, but they did not abandon their position of being stronger and more effective together in pursuing their future goals, which is why the V4 cooperation did not cease to exist after joining the EU. The Visegrad Quartet is aiming on carrying a greater weight both in the European and the global international arena and creating a „brand” for itself to seem as a serious political or economic partner. By the 21st century, the alliance collectively could become a countervailing force against the influence both Western and Eastern powers. Although, many political analysts believe that this can only happen if the member countries would be in agreement on all the fundamentals. Whether this will happen is remains to be seen, but what is certain it that, for the sake of continuous development and the interest of regional community, the V4 countries need continued and further cooperation for the future. As Lech Wałęsa, former President of the Republic of Poland said, „The Visegrad Group is based on mutual foreign policy objectives, similar historical experiences and geographical proximity.” (Macek, 2021)

Cooperation of the Visegrad countries

Since its formation in 1991, the Visegrad Four have become a Central European pole, a true „brand name” in political life. The alliance is not specifically institutionalised and does not have a specific headquarter, it is framed by a so-called rotating presidency. The presidency rotates annually, with a season running from July to July, therefore the Presidency’s task and administration are handled by a different member state each year. At the beginning of each season, they set their goals for the coming year, and at the end of the year they evaluate their results. Obviously, during its Presidency, each member state aims to set an agenda which is serving their own interest. What makes this system work is that none of the states taking over the presidency can fully turn the alliance to its own interest, as the upcoming president has to define his/her vision in the light of the achievements, results and ongoing projects of the previous presidency. V4 countries are

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aiming at avoiding institutionalization, with the rotating presidency they can collaborate only on their shared interests. This way they are able to preserve their own identity while collaborating on those policy directions which are beneficial for all of them. The downside of this in terms of brand-building is that in many cases the four states do not appear as a single entity in the political arena at all, either because of ideological or conflict of interest issues. This particular structure and cooperation makes the group diverse and often contradictory. On the contrary, for a coherent V4 image they are using many of the fields of soft power wisely. The focus is mainly centred on the value of their shared cultural heritage and attractive tourist destinations. (Bagoly,2021)

In 2000, the only institutionalised organisation of the Visegrad Cooperation was established, the International Visegrad Fund. The IVF is a donor organisation created by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries, primarily serving as an umbrella organ for the maintenance of the V4 brand. It is an organisation for cultural image building and supporting regional cooperation. (Bagoly, 2021). It strengthens regional cooperation through supporting seven main areas, culture, education, innovation, democratic values, public policy, environment and tourism and social development. Their vision is „a Central Europe with full understanding of its shared history and the necessity of mutual respect and cooperation towards a better future in the broader European context”. The Fund supports civil society organisations to help the flow of exchanging ideas, promote understanding and advance their relations. More concretely, it is providing financial support to studies on the region, publications, organizing cultural events, meetings and conferences on V4, funding scholarships and several kinds of educational programs. The V4 governments are equally contributing to the IVF’s annual budget, which is 10 million euro, in addition, on occasions contributions from external countries to V4 projects have been administered as well. (IVF,n.d.)

The Visegrad Countries further strengthened their soft power skills and image building through creating and promoting a common tourist programme. In 2002 they created a brand-building project, called „European Quartet – One Melody” to promote their common cultural image and historical roots. Despite their similarities, all of the countries have some surprises in store for the visitors due to their own identity in architecture, art, religion, folklore, traditions and landscape. Still, joint promotion of the region with a good slogan and programme is much more effective in attracting overseas tourists and reinforcing the image of unity. (Discover Central Europe, n.d.) Overseas tourists are targeted by this programme as it is more common for visitors from so far away like Russia, China, Japan or the United States to not just visit one country, but to prefer to take a tour in the Central-European region. The programme promotes the region’s shared values as well as the specificities of the four countries. In this way, they maintain a unified image while retaining their uniqueness. The programme is managed through the joint coordination of national tourism offices to promote the project as effectively as possible. As Márk Kincses from the Hungarian National Tourist Office summed up, „within the framework of this cooperation we are producing brochures, organising road shows and workshops, exhibiting at both public events and travel trade fairs and organising familiarisation trips for travel agents and press trips”. Programme plans include historical

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sites, capital cities, spas, museums, exhibitions. One Melody not only makes the Visegrad countries a more attractive destination for overseas tourists, but also boosts tourism among the countries' citizens. As there are events where the member countries promote each other, for example Slovak Cuisine days in one of the most well-known restaurants in Budapest. After events like this, member countries reported increased number of visitors from the Visegrad region. (Liptáková, 2009) Another sport and tourism programme financed by the Visegrad Fund is the annual Visegrad Bicycle Race. It is a tradition since 2013, which attracts a large number of participants. (V4 Recharging Europe, n.d.)

Cooperation is not only expressed through cultural and tourism projects. Improving regional connectivity is a major priority for the Visegrad countries. In 2019 the four countries started planning a high-speed railway network project to connect the four capitals. (V4 Recharging Europe, n.d.) On the long run a welldeveloped high-speed railway system would not be beneficial only in the field of transport, but also in economic, social and regional development. The basic concept of the project is to connect the capitals and the most important economic centres of the four countries, with newly designed and build lines for a speed of at least 250 km/h. Negotiations on possible routes have been ongoing since 2019, but because of the conflicting conditions of the countries mutually acceptable and satisfactory plan has not yet been found. Still, all of the V4 countries agree on the necessity of the connecting railway line. According to estimations the implementation could take place by 2030. (Rail Target, 2021)

Since the Visegrad Countries joined to the European Union, they not only improved their economy, image and position in the international arena, but became more influential in the political sphere as well. With their EU membership they were able to become policy shapers from policy takers. It is well demonstrated by their voting weight in the European Council, which is equal to France's and Germany's votes together. This means that if the V4 countries collectively represent a common goal and position on an issue, they have a good chance of succeeding. A spectacular example of this was when the Visegrad Countries decided to be a force for good changes in the Union and announced an initiative to achieve „equitable representation of all EU member states”. To reach their aim they created an informal coalition, which was supported by 11 other countries, thus they modified the functioning of the EU's instrument system and foundations to its own advantage. (Macek,2021)

In political circles, it was mainly in the beginning of the 2015 migration crises when these four countries became more influential, compared to their previous minor role. Their joint action at that time could be even seen as a renaissance of Visegrad Cooperation, as the last time they worked this closely together was during the accession process to the European Union. The migration crises meant an unprecedented security threat to the European countries, which required a very rapid and coordinated response from the region. The Visegrad Group represented a quite different position from Brussel's „open-door” approach. The Group created and presented a declaration with solution proposals against the mandatory relocation mechanism. They advocated for making irregular migration safer and for preserving the voluntary nature of the Member State's

action. The solution proposal included the importance of the enhanced protection of the EU's external borders, stricter border management and the Visegrad Countries represented another important and common standpoint in migration policy, the on-site approach. This concept means that the root causes of migration should be handled right at their source, meaning to attempt to tackle the causes of migration that make people want to leave their homes and start a new life in Europe. In addition, in the „spirit of solidarity” providing further support for the countries primarily affected by migration, for example for the countries of the Balkan migration route and Eastern countries. The Visegrad Group has become an influential regional actor in European migration policy as they consistently advocated its position on the issue. (Bagoly,2021)

Contrary to the threat of the 2015 migration crises, the V4 countries did not acted together when the Covid 19 pandemic emerged. However, they took similar steps to prevent the spread of the pandemic, relatively simultaneously, those were not collectively concerted actions. Still, during the first wave of the pandemic the spread of the virus remained linear in all four countries thanks to the strict measures. On the contrary, the second wave of the pandemic affected the Visegrad Countries more seriously. Overall, the epidemic has resulted in the loss of many lives, heavily affected the economy, citizen's living standards and triggered inflation in all the four countries. Although, close cooperation was not present during the Covid 19, but stabilisation after the pandemic was set as a common V4 goal, in 2021 during negotiations on the new season's objectives. Regional cooperation on the way to economic recovery was the main focus of the objectives that the four countries discussed. In addition to the main objectives included the restoration of Europe's security and stability along with social recovery, through European cooperation and common solutions. The purpose of the Presidency is always to react well and effectively in the present situation, in a way to probably benefit from the results of the changed situation and make them among the winners in the changed situation. Therefore, the three main priorities of the 2021 season were stability and stability within Europe through cooperation, economic and social recovery and V4 partnership both in Europe and globally. (V4 Recharging Europe, n.d.)

Conclusion

In the main focus of the present essay were the roots, benefits and successes of the cooperation, and not their difficulties. Although, that does not mean that the Visegrad Countries do not face many challenges and political criticism. There are many challenges ahead, especially in today's complicated and rapidly changing international arena, but it is safe to say that the countries of the Visegrad Quartet have come a long way on the road of development since 1991. They undoubtedly have achieved great successes separately as well, but their flexibility and cooperation have been necessary to achieve greater common goals, for instance, to be able to act as equal partners with any EU Member State, to have a stronger voice in international politics and to achieve development in the Central European region. The road ahead is not without its challenges, but the experience of the past 30 years shows that, the Central European region needs this alliance and with fewer

or more conflicts, but these countries are able to overcome the appearing internal or external problems and challenges and continue to work together effectively for development.

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Cultural Heritage Management and Protection in the V4 Countries

Luca Szakács

Introduction

During the years of the Cold War, the ideologies of the two competing powers caused divisions and social antagonisms in Europe, the effects of which threatened the economies of countries and made it impossible for peace to develop. After the fall of the Soviet Union, European countries needed stability and cooperation to rebuild their economies and recover from all the hardships caused by the Cold War.

This was the original aim of forming the Visegrad Group, to create and maintain regional peace and to initiate cooperation with other European countries. In the case of the Visegrad Alliance, cooperation has very quickly brought significant changes for the member states because they were able to communicate and act together in order to protect and strengthen not just their own countries, but the whole region as well. However, it is not only the geographical proximity that has made this cooperation effective, but also the shared roots and values from cultural, historical and religious perspectives. The Group of initially three, later four countries, has many common values to be proud of, and the preservation and protection of these values is a shared national interest.

According to the UNESCO's definition of cultural heritage it includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, religious, scientific and social significance, and it is the legacy that we have received from the past, we live in the present and that we pass on to future generations. [UNESCO, n.d.] According to Riganti and Nijkamp, the definition of cultural heritage can itself be quite controversial. Broadly speaking, cultural heritage can be defined as a record of humanity's achievements and its relations with the world. Therefore, it always has a local dimension, although it sometimes also includes universal values. The concept of heritage is not given, but a created by a community of people who attribute values to certain objects, rituals, languages, contexts, ways of life, historical sites and monuments. To label something as heritage is to make a value judgement that distinguishes that object from others and gives it a new meaning. Cultural heritage encapsulates the identity of people, the identity of communities, and as such contributes to the creation of social capital.

A wide variety of cultural heritage can be identified, and this cultural diversity becomes a new form of capital, embodied in both tangible, like monuments, historical sites, and cultural landscapes and intangible assets such as languages, traditions and religious beliefs. [Riganti & Nijkamp, 2004]

Cultural heritage shapes national identity. Since Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland abound in national cultural values and there are similarities amongst their

national identities, therefore it has become a common aim and strategy to nurture, protect and maintain what makes these countries united.

Cultural heritage management worldwide and within the European Union: Origins and benefits

In order to understand how heritage management works in the Visegrad Four today, it is necessary to look at certain steps and processes that have been taken to promote the importance of cultural heritage preservation worldwide.

In fact, it is difficult to define from when can we talk about cultural preservation, since throughout history every community and society has had protected – or at least tried to protect - natural sites, objects and traditions that had some kind of social or cultural significance. According to Ken Taylor, some major advances were made in the 20th century after the first World War, when the demolition of buildings and the destruction of many objects with social significance caused great concern in societies. In 1921, the International Museums Office (IMO) had been established in Paris with the aim of protecting and promoting the activities of museums and public collections in all countries by organising their joint work and research. The IMO has organised a number of key events that have laid the foundations for the development of an international movement for the preservation of cultural heritage. [Taylor, 2010] Soon afterwards, when the United Nations was formed in 1945, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) had been created to ensure the conservation and protection of the world's inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science (UNESCO 2007). Here the consolidation of globalised thinking on the protection of cultural heritage was established, with practices that could be applied throughout the world, regardless of differences in local cultures. [Taylor, 2010]

Today, UNESCO supports cultural heritage protection on many fronts around the world. Its mission includes the encouragement of countries to sign the World Heritage Convention to ensure the protection of their natural and cultural heritage, it provides emergency assistance for World Heritage sites in immediate danger and encourages international cooperation in the conservation of our world's cultural and natural heritage.

As heritage protection became an important factor of the international policymaking, from the mid-20th century onwards, it also became one of the objectives of the European Union's agenda. An interesting correlation is that the first initiatives to protect cultural heritage were taken in Europe, with the establishment of the IMO, but the first formal institution for the global heritage preservation was created in the United States, following the European example. With the creation of the European Union, an institutionalized system was formed that allowed the opportunity of taking more effective actions to preserve values, as it made it possible to cooperate between member states, solve financial problems and promote European culture worldwide. Luigi Petti with his expert colleagues stated that the Council of Europe was the first institution in the world that mentioned cultural heritage in an official document in the 1954 European Culture Convention. The

European Union has introduced a number of funding schemes that have focused on promoting the European dimension and the narrative of places such as the European Heritage Label, created as a European response to UNESCO's World Heritage List. Other actions, such as the City of Culture, launched in 1985, and the European Year of Cultural Heritage aims to ensure that EU citizens have a broad understanding of their cultural heritage in all its aspects, democratically share responsibility for it, celebrate it and benefit from the creation it inspires. (Petti et al., 2019)

The European Union's cultural – strategic policy focuses on the maintenance of the resources what cultural heritage offers: economic growth, employment and social cohesion. It helps revitalise urban and rural areas and promote sustainable tourism. In the European Union, over 300,000 people are employed in the cultural heritage sector and 7.8 million jobs are indirectly linked to heritage such as hospitality, interpretation and security. (EU, n.d.) Nowadays, the EU has many plans and ongoing projects that enable stakeholders, international organisations and member countries to collaborate in this field, therefore, it strengthens cooperation between the V4 countries and helps to solve problems that may have common roots.

V4 countries' cultural heritage management

All four countries consider it important to protect their cultural heritage and are making efforts to do so. In the Czech Republic there are three institutions working on the cultural heritage management, the The V4 Cultural Heritage Experts' Working Group (including the V4 Heritage Academy and the The Heritage Forum of Central Europe), the The Colloquium of Library and Information Workers from the Visegrad Group and the SEFO Cooperation (The Olomouc Central European Forum).

The V4 Cultural Heritage Experts' Working Group is coordinated by the International Centre for Culture (ICC) in Krakow. Since 2007, the group has been working on heritage management, capacity building and addressing the problems of historic sites and places on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The Colloquium of Library and Information Workers from the Visegrad Group provides the opportunity for an annual meeting of library and information staff, mainly from the V4 countries. The main objectives of the meetings are to exchange experiences, present technical and organisational solutions to current issues and to solve problems and discuss relevant issues in the field of digitalisation.

SEFO cooperation (Olomouc Central European Forum) has established an extensive international network of partners and created a documentation and research centre, the Central European Art Database (CEAD), on which there will be more information later. SEFO's activities have included an extensive research programme for the project "The Years of Turmoil 1908-1928. Avant-garde Art in Central Europe", based on long-term cooperation between professional institutions in the V4 countries. The exhibition project was presented in all V4 countries. (ICC, 2021)

Hungary also has its own strategies to preserve national values and cultural heritage. For example, the László Teleki Foundation was one of the governmental organisations established in 1991 under the aegis of the new minority policy. The original main objective of the Foundation was to establish a research institute for history, sociology and minority rights, with a special focus on neighbouring countries. Thanks to the Foundation, about 300 monuments were conserved or partially restored between 1999 and 2006, during the same period, about 20 monuments were entirely restored. Despite these results, in 2006, the actual government closed the László Teleki Foundation but in 2015 got its original work back. Although the main objective is to protect the built heritage, the Foundation also pays attention to the intangible aspects of heritage. Particular attention is paid to the training of transnational conservation professionals and to strengthening the identity of ethnic Hungarian minority communities, the main stakeholders of the heritage in this regard.

In Poland several V4 collaboration institutions can be found in order to protect culture and historical monuments. As an example, Villa Decius Association, based in Krakow, runs various programmes in the field of culture and heritage within the V4 framework. These include the Visegrad Summer School, a two-week training programme for young people from the Visegrad Group and Eastern Europe, which has been run annually since 2002. The initiative aim was to promote the intellectual and cultural heritage of Czech, Polish, Slovak and Hungarian societies and to promote a positive image of the region at international level. In addition to this long-term project, there have also been shorter ones, such as the Visegrad Academy of Cultural Management - a one-year training programme for young professionals in the cultural field in the Visegrad Group countries, focusing on developing skills and competences in the field of cultural and community policy and management.

Last but not the least, Slovakia also put a lot of efforts to preserve national and common values. For preserving, presenting, and promoting traditional crafts in the cross-border area, a special project was launched in 2018, which aims to develop the cultural potential of the Slovak-Polish border area; namely, of two historic royal towns – Bardejov and Grybów – linked by a common history and location on historic trade route from Bardejov to northern Poland. Mutual contacts translated into common elements of craft, which nowadays form an important part of our shared heritage. (ICC, 2021)

V4 Cultural heritage management in practice: A common example

It is very unique that an organisation that was originally aimed at solving and preventing economic problems, such as the Visegrad Cooperation, has subsequently also paid great attention to the protection of cultural values. Since its formal establishment, it has implemented a number of cultural projects, including the creation of the Central European Art Database.

The idea of the project was born in 2011 to create a dynamic online database on visual art and culture in post-WWII Central Europe. The content of the database focuses

primarily on the preservation of the cultural scene and artistic manifestations of the V4 countries. The main part of the CEAD project is to conduct in-depth research on key artistic personalities who have been active in the development of the culture of the region. The project aims to create an open interactive archive of cultural memory, with an emphasis on social and international context. The database was created using a special program called Collective Access designed for cataloguing and presenting museums, archives and online catalogues on the web. Using modern technology, the data is sorted into separate categories according to individual needs, and a short film has been created for each artist in every category, bringing the essence of Central European art and culture closer to the public. [CEAD n.d.] The content of the database is freely and unrestrictedly accessible to all users, both professionals and the general public interested in the art, social and cultural life of post-war Central Europe. The database is a multinational research project carried out in cooperation with a number of institutions from all the V4 countries, and later from all over the world including the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, Art Exhibitions Office in Krakow, Gallery of Art in Karlovy Vary, European Culture Centre in Slovakia, Budapest Gallery, Georgia Museum of Art, Dallas Museum of Art and many more.

During the communist period, the cultures of all four countries were under serious attack, and lots of attempts were made to stifle cultural development as much as possible in order to manipulate people even more and make them believe in the communist ideology. The primary reason for this was the eradication of European culture based on Christianity, as it represents those real and socially important values that were completely at odds with communist ideology. The Visegrad countries have had to suffer this devastation, but thanks to CEAD, many values are preserved for future generations.

Conclusion

The V4 countries have made efforts in many aspects to preserve their cultural heritage. Throughout history they have been able to preserve their values to the best of their ability and capacity, but as time goes on and new governments are formed in countries, the preservation of values may not be as important in the future if there will be more important priorities. Today, in 2023, we live in a world where culture and national values have been eclipsed by the energy crisis, epidemics, and wars. These are the times to better understand the importance of the sometimes seemingly invisible cohesive forces that can help society overcome the social damage caused by serious external factors. The great cultural destruction that has occurred many times in history, for example during the two world wars and in other conflicts, reminds us that we should do everything we can to ensure that it never happens again.

The cultural mission of the V4 countries aims to do the same, therefore, it is constantly working on new projects and actions, and by doing that it is not only protects cultural values but also strengthens the close cooperation between the four countries and it represents the significance of the V4 Alliance. Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary has a similar in a sense that the development of their national identities is due to

the fact that these cultural values have been preserved and are still in the focus of attention within all the nations.

In these times, when new ideologies are taking hold often having a non-constructive effect on societies, it is important to be aware of the principles and values that have shaped our identity into what it is today. The Visegrad Countries can be proud of their culture and cultural heritage, which they can preserve even more by working together, because protecting culture today is essential for building peace tomorrow.

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Multidimensional Cultural Cooperation in the Visegrad Group

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Abstract

The essay describes the importance of multidimensional cultural cooperation among the member states of the Visegrad Group. It draws attention to the various aspects and forms of such cooperation. It presents the numerous benefits that result from its implementation, such as the mutual exchange of experiences, the effective protection of cultural heritage, and the building and strengthening of ties between nations.

Keywords: art, culture, cultural cooperation, cultural exchange, cultural heritage, festival, integration, tradition, Visegrad Group

Introduction

The cultural cooperation of the Visegrad Group is an example of the positive effects of intercultural dialogue. It was taken by Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary as a way to counteract the forces of disintegration and destabilization which dominated the area of the former communist states at the time. Today, the V4's activities are focused on strengthening neighborly relations between the countries while respecting their distinctiveness and identity. "Visegrad Group's cooperation in the field of culture is intense and regular. Every year V4 organizes meetings of ministers of culture and experts. The goal of these meetings is to formulate together the aims of the cultural politics in the member states. The most important goals are fostering shared cultural heritage of Central Europe and creating an environment for many varied projects in the field of culture." (European Academy of Diplomacy, p.7). Presidency programs provide a framework for the future cultural diplomacy of the Visegrad Group. "Every year one of the V4 countries presents a programme of its presidency in the group. The programme includes a list of ongoing projects as well as new initiatives, mainly coordinated by governmental cultural institutions." (European Academy of Diplomacy, p.8).

The Working Group of experts on the cultural heritage of the Visegrad Group countries

It consists of experts dealing with cultural heritage related to archaeology, museology, or cultural tourism. From each V4 country, two representatives are delegated to participate in the deliberations, and the overall chairmanship of the entire initiative is held by the International Cultural Center in Krakow. "The concept of creating such a group of experts was put forward by Poland during the meeting of culture ministers in Krakow in 2006. The first meeting of the group was organized in Krakow in June 2007. and it was devoted to the issues of protection of urban complexes included in the UNESCO World Heritage

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List.” (GOV). The initiative focuses on the exchange of experiences in the process of cultural heritage management and especially in the field of heritage conservation. The Group also aims to promote the value of cultural heritage and its impact on shaping national and European identity.

The Working Group of experts on the cultural heritage of the Visegrad Group countries is the patron of two projects on the national heritage of the V4 member states. The first is the *V4 Heritage Academy*. It is an educational programme focused on introducing the principles and ways of managing objects and places included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Editions take place every year. The organization of this venture was abandoned only in 2020 and 2021 due to the intensively ongoing covid-19 pandemic. Each time, the project focuses on a different item from the list contained within the V4 countries. It lasts approximately one week. Employees of cultural institutions, conservation services, and students from Central Europe attend it. The organizer of this event is the International Cultural Center. *The Central European Heritage Forum* is the second project implemented under the auspices of this group. It is a conference held every two years. Experts discuss the relationship between the past and the present, based on a broad understanding of heritage. An example of this is the importance of heritage for Sustainable Development.



Figure 1. (<https://mck.krakow.pl/konferencje/6-forum-dziedzictwa-europy-srodkowej-dziedzictwo-i-rozwoj>), (access: 20.02.2023).

Nevertheless, an important element of cultural cooperation is the area of literary creativity. Reading allows us to learn about the history and experiences of people from different parts of the world. It has a significant impact on the formation of sensitivity, as well as empathy for cultural differences. It is also one of the pillars of the agreement between the countries by alleviating the negative stereotypes associated with them. Through popularized international pop culture literary works, the state increases its tourist attractiveness and strengthens its position on the international stage. The Visegrad group supports this area of culture by undertaking various initiatives in this area.

New Spaces of Reading- Visegrad Conference 2017

It is a conference organized by The Book Institute in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The event was organized on 16-17 May 2017 at the National Audiovisual Institute in Warsaw. It consisted of discussion panels, lectures, and workshops led by experts in the field of literature, technology, and the arts. The event discussed, among other things, national reading programs and the influence of state institutions on their dissemination. The participants also had the opportunity to learn about the impact of modern technologies on the way of reading and to share ideas on adapting traditional reading spaces to new requirements and needs of readers. Discussion panels also covered the issue of the book market related to the cultural policy of the state countries.



Figure 2. New Spaces of Reading Logo (<https://instytutksiazki.pl/aktualnosci,2,nowe-przestrzenie-czytania-%25E2%2580%2593-konferencja-wyszehradzka-2017,281.html>), (access: 20.02.2023).

.Visegrad Literary Residence

It provides funding for writers from member states to conduct research and writing projects in one of the other V4 countries. The Visegrad Literary Residency programme, launched in 2012 by the International Visegrad Fund, is aimed at writers, poets, literary translators, critics, essayists, and journalists from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The programme is implemented by four host institutions from V4 countries: Institute of Arts in Prague, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum in Budapest, Villa Decius Association in Krakow, and Literárne informačné centrum in Bratislava. Villa Decius Association is the coordinator of the whole project.

Visegrad Summer School

The project annually brings together young and interested scientists, journalists, and teachers from Central and Eastern Europe. A significant part, however, is students and graduates of fields such as political science, cultural studies, economics, international relations, or social sciences. The topics discussed during the classes describe the issues of current problems and challenges faced by the Society of the countries of the region.

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Through discussion, participants can gain a broader perspective on issues they are familiar with and understand different points of view. Classes are conducted by many experienced cultural experts, which makes the knowledge transmitted valuable and reliable.

The partners of the Visegrad Summer School are the International Visegrad fund, the Ambassador of the Czech Republic, The Ambassador of Hungary, The Ambassador of the Slovak Republic, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, the Vaclav Havel Library in Prague, the Bratislava Policy Institute, the Cracovia Expressz Foundation - the Hungarian Centre in Krakow, the National Association of Regional Development Agencies in Kyiv, the Lesser Poland Voivodeship and the city of Krakow.

Touring Exhibition “From Visegrad to Visegrad”

The exhibition took place in 2016 as a result of cooperation with the Visegrad group of archives. The Polish Archival Society together with the Polish Academy of Sciences played a significant role in this project. “The exhibition is an attempt to depict the development of political, commercial, and cultural relations between the states that make up today's Visegrad Group, starting with the medieval congresses of the rulers of Poland (Casimir the Great), Bohemia (John of Luxemburg) and Hungary (Karol Andegawenski) in Visegrad in 1335 and 1338, and ending with the meeting in the same place in 1991 of Czechoslovakia (Václav Havel) and the prime minister of Hungary (József Antall), when the "declaration on cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic" was signed, The Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in the pursuit of European integration, which initiated the cooperation of the Visegrad states.” (Biuletyn). The materials collected in the Polish, Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian Archives form the basis of the information contained in the exhibition. They include events common to the Visegrad states of both historical and social character. The Second World War, and the attitude towards communism after it, are just some examples. The texts are available for reading in the national language of each Visegrad country and English.

The exhibition was organized by the Polish Academy of Sciences Archive in Warsaw, the Polish archival Society, the Association of Czech archivists, the Association of Slovak archivists, the Hungarian archival society, and the Hungarian State Archives.



Figure 3. Poster promoting the exhibition

(https://archiwum.pan.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=531:zapraszamy-na-filisaz-wystawy-od-wyszehradu-do-wyszehradu-zapraszamy&catid=9&Itemid=145)
(access;22.02.2023).

Visegrad Film Forum

It is an annual event held in Bratislava, whose main objective is to present and promote cinematography from neighboring European countries, as well as to establish contacts between producers, distributors, and other film production professionals from all over Europe. The 4-day event includes screenings of competition films and panel discussions with actors and filmmakers.¹ The Forum is also educational in nature, as it allows students and film enthusiasts to participate in workshops and training conducted by experienced professionals from the film industry. Young creators have the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge, as well as make contacts that can contribute to the development of their careers. This form of integration makes it possible to present the cultural wealth of the region of the V4 countries to a broader audience. It makes the cinematography of the V4 countries more recognized. An event of this type is also a source of inspiration for artists and creators of film culture.



Figure 4. Visegrad Film Forum Logo

(<https://www.visegradfilmforum.com/>), (access:23.02.2023)

Another interesting form of cooperation in the field of cinematography is the Visegrad Animation Forum. The initiative “focuses on supporting animation in Central and Eastern Europe, where the industry is not fully developed through co-production activities and networking”. The Forum is an opportunity for meetings between producers and distributors of animated films, as well as the presentation of new trends in this field.

V4 Kids Film Festival

“This festival is a regular event, organized since 2016 by the Japanese National Film Archive.” (Polish Instytute in Tokio). In this way, film productions of Central European culture are promoted on the Asian continent. Sharing the cultural heritage of one's region allows people from distant countries to get to know it more deeply. By the way, it is also a way to show skills and advertising. The works are presented in an interesting way for an audience of all ages, which makes this event even more attractive. The film technique used in this project is animation. “Animation allows us to tell stories and convey emotions and ideas in a unique, easy-to-see way that is understandable to children and adults. It helps connect people from around the world in ways that sometimes writing and live-action films are not able to.” (Children's Art Foundation–Stone Soup). Such an initiative can be helpful in the cultural development of children and young people.



Figure 5. A fragment of the poster promoting the event

(<https://instytutpolski.pl/tokyo/pl/raport-v4-countries-kids-film-festival/>) (access: 21.02.2023)

Visegrad Classical Music Concert

A classical music concert was held as part of the programme “Young talents from the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans”. It took place at the Palace Museum of Princess Ljubica in Belgrade on 17.10.2020. It provided an opportunity for outstanding young musicians to showcase their skills. Soloists from Poland and Slovakia and with them musicians from the Western Balkan countries performed on stage. The concert was conducted by Conductor B. Haemhotus. The event was organized by ArtLink Belgrade together with the Visegrad Fund and the Embassies of the Czech Republic and the Republic of Poland.

International Visegrad Fund photo contest

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the foundation of the International Visegrad fund, this organization created a photo contest. It took place in late summer 2020, and anyone who has an account on the social network Instagram could participate. It was necessary to put on your profile a photo that refers to the attractions taking place in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, or Hungary. They were supposed to cover the topics of culture, tourism, nature, or simply travel among the countries of the Visegrad Group. The main prize was undoubtedly attractive, and concerned weekend stays in four castles located within the V4.



Figure 6. A photo promoting the contest

(<https://www.gov.pl/web/V4prezydencja/konkurs-fotograficzny-miedzynarodowego-funduszu-wyszehradzkiego>) (access 20.02.2023)

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¹ For example, in 2019, one of the panels was attended by Mark H. Weingartner, who collaborated with director Christopher Nolan in the production of visual effects for films such as *Dunkirk* or *Inception*.

Polish-Hungarian Friendship: the Past, the Present and the Future

Mikołaj Perz

Abstract

This paper aims to show different sides of the Polish-Hungarian relations, which in the most part of the history, were positive. To illustrate the friendship between the countries, several cases of the most important historical events that included both countries were mentioned. Moreover, this paper should also serve as a reminder for Poles and Hungarians that this relation should not be forgotten and abandoned, despite current difficulties and differences in the politics of the two nations.

Polish-Hungarian relation is very unique in the world scale. As both countries have existed in some shape or form for at least a thousand years, this friendship – despite a few instances – has lasted until today. However, nowadays due to several reasons, the relation between the two countries has deteriorated. To illustrate this relation, it is necessary to look at the past and the creation of the two nations, then the very important interwar and cold war period when the friendship has truly proven to be a real phenomenon, and then look at the current situation.

The most important part of any culture or a nation is its language. Before the unification of the most influential Western Slavic tribe of Polanie with other minor tribes that have resided in the territory of what we know today as Poland, the people of these tribes were already connected to other tribes and groups. One of the other groups - Lędzianie was the tribe that has had the closest relations with whom we would call today Hungarians. (Moczulski, 2007) Because of the Polish name of the tribe, Hungarians unlike in other languages have a unique name for Poland which is Lengyelország. The naming convention does not stop there however. For the centuries the main enemy of Polish and Hungarian kings and rulers were the Germans. Because neither Poles nor Hungarians could communicate with the Germans, they have called them respectively Niemcy and Németh. The connection here is the core word Niemy and Néma which means mute in both languages. That shows that despite not being able to communicate with each other – as Hungarian and Polish come from different language families - , Poles and Hungarians did not see each other as strangers who are unwilling to listen to each other and cooperate. Unlike Germans who would have been proven to be a threat for a very long time. A threat that could connect both the nations even in the moments of great danger. As mentioned previously despite not having any similarities at first glance as both languages come from different families, Polish and Hungarian have greatly influenced each other. Plenty of construction sites?, clothing or events have the same or a similar name in both languages. However, the most important part about the language influence has taken place during the Cold War. At that time many Polish people have decided to take their family

car of Fiat 126p and drive all the way to Hungary to trade their goods in exchange of other goods or a stronger currency. People would usually trade their goods from the open trunk (technically Fiat 126p had the engine in the back bonnet) and thanks to this custom, two terms have appeared that are still in use today in Hungary. One of this terms is Lengyel piac literally meaning Polish market which is a marketplace filled with different items that locals are trading. The other one however refers to the car itself and the common name for Fiat 126p in Hungary is Kispolszki meaning little Polish one. (Origo, 2021)

While talking about any country to country relations it is very important to look at the history of two nations and their common points, events, allies and enemies. The earliest common point for Poland and Hungary was the adoption of Christianity in 966 by Poland and in 974 by Hungary. This event, in medieval Europe has made the countries equal to each other in the eyes of the Pope, who was one of if not the most influential person this time. The will of the Pope was the most important thing for any ruler that wanted to be meaningful in the bigger picture.

During the long years of Medieval Europe, many events have occurred. Many wars were fought, many marriages were arranged, kings came and went but the relations between Hungary and Poland were stable for years. The first time when the two countries got very close to each other was during the rule of Louis the Great, who was both the ruler of Hungary and Poland. However, despite being regarded as one of the greatest kings in the history of Hungary, he was not so popular in Poland. As the king has mostly focused on Hungarian affairs, he has delegated his authority to several noblemen to fulfil his will in the Kingdom of Poland. Nonetheless it was the first time that a Hungarian king was officially a ruler of Poland as well. Another ruler who was very unique that time was Jadwiga who was coronated as the King of Poland, as there was no such term as the Queen of Poland that time. Jadwiga was of Hungarian origin, however by many she is regarded as Polish – this myth arose to further justify her being a ruler of Poland (Kozuchowski). Poland was quite unique during the late Medieval times, as it was an electoral Kingdom, meaning that the nobility from all regions of the country has met after a king had passed away. One time a Hungarian nobleman (as the ruler of Transylvania, because Hungary was almost fully occupied by Turkey this time) known as Stephen Bathory has won the elections and became the King of Poland. Despite not knowing Polish, he managed to strengthen the country and reconquered the lost land. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998)

The most important events for both countries took place in the 18th and 20th centuries, as the idea of nationalism, which we know today, was born. As previously, the ordinary people neither knew nor cared about the king, as long as there was peace and stability, the common folk was happy. However, the idea of nationalism after being introduced to the people spread very easily and could not be stopped. Alongside the idea of nationalism, the idea of fight for our freedom and yours was also born. The main propagator of this idea was Józef Bem – a Polish general who fought in the Springtime of the Peoples. In Poland he is well known to everyone, however his true importance is visible in Hungary, where he fought alongside the revolutionaries of 1848. He is regarded as one of the most

well-known national heroes of Hungary, several streets and other places are named after him, there is also a statue dedicated to Bem in Budapest, which is being taken care of both by Hungarians and Poles, as both national flags of the countries are waving by the monument. (Hungarian Free Press, 2019)

This idea was very much alive years later during the dramatic events of Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920 and after the capitulation of Poland in 1939. Firstly, during the events of 1920, thanks to the actions of Hungarian prime minister Pal Teleki, Poland did not lose thanks to the weapons, ammunition and the humanitarian aid and could face the Soviet Union and push the aggressor away.

Even during the German aggression in 1939, after being asked for a possibility of an attack together with Germany, Teleki has stated that „I'd rather blow up our railroads, than commit to an invasion of Poland. From the Hungarian point of view, it is our national honourable duty not to get involved in any military operation against Poland.” After the defeat of Poland, many Poles have sought refuge in Hungary. Until the German attack of 1944, several Polish organizations were operational in the territory of Hungary. Unofficially the Hungarian government has also helped the Polish military, to transport the troops to France, to continue the fight against the Axis. (Maróti, 2015) (Świsłowski, 2020) (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej)

After the war was concluded, and people were rebuilding their countries under the new red banner, the ideas were very much alive and the tensions in the nations were high.

Everything that has been happening in Poland and Hungary since the implementation of socialism will lead to two revolutions in the year of 1956. The first events have begun in Poznań in June of 1956, also called Poznan's June. During that time a big international industrial fair called Poznań International Fair was taking place. Because of that, the city was full with domestic and foreign industrial workers and the tensions were slowly rising. Despite the situation started being so tense, nobody has predicted that the workers will go on a strike, as nothing like this has happened before.

On the 28th of June the first strikes begun, around 100,000 people have gathered and demanded that the government changes the newly proposed norms of working hours, lowers the prices and raise the payments. Despite the protesters being peaceful, around 10:00, the minister of defence, Konstantin Rokossovsky has made a decision that the army should intervene. The order was simple, to pacify the city at all costs. The government has allowed the use of firearms against the protesters. During those bloody fights on the streets of Poznan many people have met their demise, and even more were taken into custody. Overall outcome of these events was 70 civilians, 4 soldiers, 4 policemen dead and approximately 600 wounded. (Tischler, 2019) (dzieje.pl, 2020)

In the autumn of 1956, the Hungarian society has also had enough of the new regime. On the 23rd of October group of students from Budapest have officially manifested solidarity with the Polish events in Poznan, people have started to protest by Józef Bem's monument, more and more people have started to gather up to the point that by the evening approximately 300,000 people were gathered by the Parliament and the situation

was slowly getting out of control. The situation has escalated to a bigger scale than in Poznań, after some of the party officials have decided to invite the Red Army to help and intervene in the protests. On the November 4th 58,000 Soviet soldiers have started to recapture the key points of the city that were overrun with the revolutionaries. (Harmat, 2015) (Histmag.org, 2021)

Certain Western power from beyond the Pacific Ocean has stated through the Free Europe Radio, that Hungary will receive a military aid from the West. However, this promise was never kept, as stated by the American secretary of State „We do not treat this country as a potential military ally”. Hence Hungary was left alone, until Poles have not learned about these events.

The reaction of the Polish society to Hungarian events was spontaneous and very vigorous. Approximately 12,000 people have donated blood all over the country, the hospitals had problems keeping up with the people who were coming to send help to the brother country. Poles have ensured 15 airplanes, to quickly transport the goods to Budapest, it is estimated that over 44 tons of medication, first aid kits, and other necessities were delivered. More items were sent through land by cars and trains. It is estimated that this help was worth approximately \$2,000,000 which was an unthinkable amount at that time, especially considering that a Polish worker got only a few dollars a month in general. In the end, after Poland sent help, the US government has also decided to get involved, however Poland still sent the largest amount of necessary items. It is important to add that this is not the last time that Poland is donating to those who are willing to oppose the Russian aggression, as Poland is the biggest donor of weapons, mercenaries and equipment to Ukraine as of December 2022. (Kubicki, 2006)

This leads to the current events that have spoilt the relations between the two countries – the Russian aggression on Ukraine. The two governments, despite being very friendly towards each other and having common interests in many fields could not find a common ground regarding the Ukrainian situation. Poland will be the first country to fight off Russia in any part of the world that Russians want to invade. Poles have put aside their rough past with Ukraine – in a name of a bigger good, to help out a brother nation to fight off the biggest natural enemy of Poland. The Hungarian government, on the other hand, was not so eager to help Ukraine, unlike the citizens and non-governmental organisations were gladly helping the people of Ukraine and have organised incentives to support their integration after arriving to Hungary. However, it was not as widespread as it was in Poland. Because of this situation, the relations of the two countries have got worse.

One can ask a question, why is Ukraine such a difficult question for Hungarians? After the First World War an international treaty called the Treaty of Trianon has partitioned Hungary's territory among its neighbours. (The American Hungarian Federation , 2020) One of these territories was Zakarpattia, a part of today's Ukraine, which at that time was given to Czechoslovakia. After the Great War many ethnic Hungarians were forced to move out of their homes and move to Hungary with the borders we know today. The Kremlin propaganda has justified the aggression on Ukraine by claiming that ethnic Russians are being prosecuted in the Eastern regions of Ukraine. This has spoken to

Hungarians who are still very often disappointed? about the infamous Treaty of Trianon. By looking at various statistics, we can see that Hungary is the only country in Europe that borders itself in many bordering regions of Hungary, Hungarians are still a big ethnic group. (Piotr Żochowski, 2015) That is why Hungarians have seen the similarities between the ethnic Russians in Donbas and ethnic Hungarians in Zakarpattia.

Poles on the other hand have buried their past with Ukraine, which was a rough one as it was not built on friendly terms. The territory of recent Western Ukraine was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth and later the Second Polish Republic, right before the Second World War. Majority of the Polish population is not bitter about losing the territories of Ukraine anymore, as those were mostly inhabited by Ukrainians anyway and that could create tensions and lead to another ethnic and racial tension. Polish people were the ones who were Polonizing the other ethnic groups and have moved Poles to their territories. (Brittanica) This phenomenon has occurred mostly after the Second World War when the current borders of Poland were created. Many cities especially in Silesia and Pomerania were inhabited by Germans, who were then forcefully expelled from their houses, just like Hungarians from Zakarpattia (Kacprzak). After that, these territories were claimed as Polish ones. However, as mentioned earlier there is no nation in the world that Poland would not help in case of a Russian invasion, especially if it is a nearest neighbour.

Despite this situation, Hungarians and Poles should solve the political divisions as the world is not black and white and focus on what truly matters. Despite everything that is currently going in the world politics, we should always remember that 1000 years of history connects the two nations and that: Lengyel Magyar két jó barát, együtt harcol s issza borát or Polak Węgier dwa bratanki, i do szabli i do szklanki.

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