

# V4 Perspectives

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*While in the middle of the 2010s, it seemed that as a result of the cooperation of the “Visegrad” countries —Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia— a new Central-European political pole was about to be born within the European Union, today, we are experiencing the excruciating agony of this partnership. In the last few years, Czechia and Slovakia have taken a liberal turn, which alienated their new elites from the Hungarian and, in part, the Polish political leadership. Besides that, the traditionally delicate Budapest-Warsaw axis has also become heavily burdened due to their different approaches to the Russian-Ukrainian war. The spectacular victim of these difficulties is the Visegrad Group, which, especially after Brexit, could have had the chance to become a conservative European counterweight to the fierce forces of European Union progressivism. It is not an exaggeration to claim that early elections in Slovakia will decide not only the republic's future but also Visegrad's prospects.*

**Keywords:** *Visegrad Group, political changes, the war in Ukraine, arms shipments, the rule of law mechanism, ideological barriers, offensive liberalism*

The Visegrad Cooperation is currently dysfunctional. In parallel with its difficulties, the Central European thought is disappearing. The primary beneficiaries of this breakdown are Berlin, Paris and the European Commission, which have been running for European leadership and do not want to be hindered by a Central-European counter-weight. Some signs indicate that Poland, realising it alone cannot prove its interests in the European Union, will try to maintain the V4. The leader of the Slovak opposition has also encouraged the aim of reviving the cooperation.

## From top to bottom

The political climax of the Visegrad Cooperation dates back to 2015 when the Old Continent experienced an unexpected and unprecedented migration crisis. Tens of thousands of people, without proper documentation or even the willingness to identify themselves, crossed the Schengen Area border daily to enter and settle in the European Union.

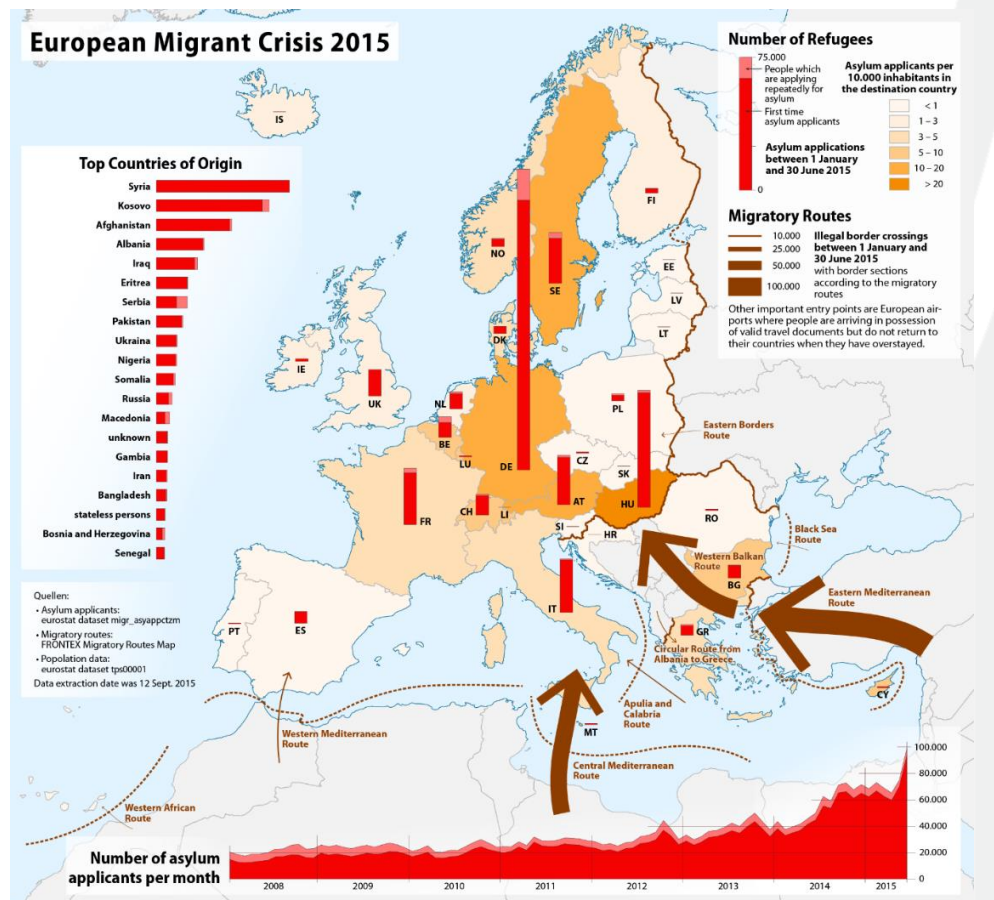


Figure 1: European Migration Crisis 2015 by Maximilian Dörrbecker<sup>1</sup>

The primary decision-makers of the community, instead of complying with their contractual obligation to protect external borders and stop the uncontrolled inflow, opened the door not only to migrants but also to philosophical discussions about whether cross-border migration can be understood as a fundamental human right.<sup>2</sup> Instead of supporting this discussion, Central Europe decided to act unilaterally to impede the apparent violation of the law. That was when all four Visegrad countries were led by patriotic governments that immediately realised what danger this undocumented inflow could mean to Europe in the long term. Hungary assessing that the illegal border crossing on such a scale could not be stopped solely by human force, decided to build a physical barrier on its southern state line towards Serbia and Croatia. Despite international condemnation, Hungary's Visegrad partners provided immediate help to safeguard this infrastructure and sent patrol units with adequate equipment to assist the Hungarian border police.<sup>3,4,5</sup> If it did not stop illegal migration, the cooperative V4 move made it possible to detour the human inflow partially and signal to the world that laws and regulations must be complied with in Central Europe. Although numerous similar fences have been erected in other EU member states since that time to protect the Schengen Area, the primary decision-makers in the European Commission have not yet changed their condemnation of the Hungarian government for its unilateral act.

## Political Stability in Hungary

Since 2015, some of the governments of V4 have changed, but others have remained in office. The most stable political position can be observed in Hungary, where elections in 2022 gave a constitutional majority for Viktor Orbán, who has now achieved his fifth term, and fourth in a row, as prime minister. After the landslide victory in 2010, his new government drastically changed its predecessor's pliant international policy. Not simply political, but many economic factors served as prerequisites to do so since the outgoing liberal-socialist government had left behind an empty treasury and an IMF loan to be repaid. These issues had to be resolved immediately. Orbán's reply to the challenge differed widely from international expectations as he adopted an unorthodox route and implemented actions that the markets were unprepared for. The new government broke with the International Monetary Fund and imposed special taxes on banks and non-manufacturing market actors. Besides that, the parliament passed a new law on the media<sup>6</sup> and announced an open-gate policy for Eastern investments

and funds. These moves immediately made Orbán a black sheep in the European Union, and his counter-orthodox views have not changed since. At the same time, these measures have not been proven ineffective. The Hungarian economy started to grow from year to year, which made the unemployment rate fall to historically low levels whilst raising the standard of living considerably.

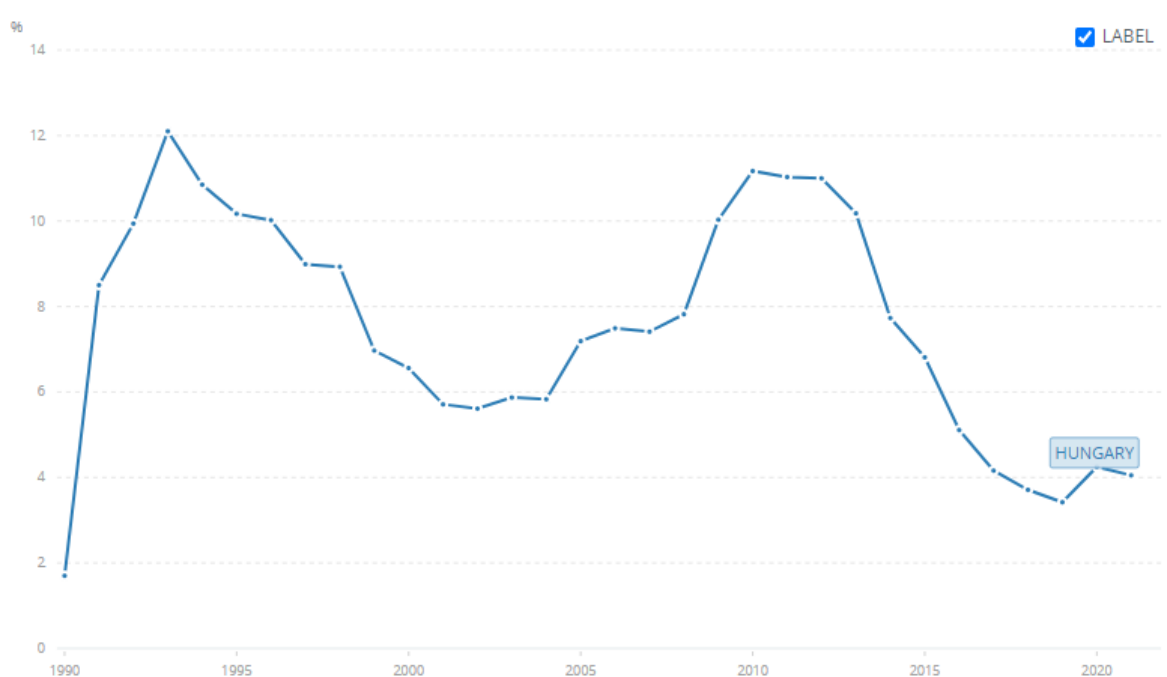


Figure 2: Unemployment in Hungary, total (% of the total labour force). Source: The World Bank<sup>7</sup>

Orbán's party, Fidesz, also won the elections in 2014, 2018 and 2022. In parallel with the country's economic strength, the Hungarian PM's role in European politics has been increasingly prominent. He has become a *bete noire* figure in Brussels, the one who is disliked but must be paid attention to. Viktor Orbán increasingly plays this role but is aware of his country's limitations. About his foreign policy in 2015, he noted that "we should not end up like Tigger in Winnie the Pooh, who overdid the jumping."<sup>8</sup>

## Liberal turn in Slovakia

By contrast, during the years 2012-2020, Slovakia was led by a socialist government, which despite its leftist orientation, was national in many senses. Although there were complex tensions between Slovakia and Hungary before 2010, the two nations' relations gradually improved over the last decade. At a certain point around 2015, Viktor Orbán and the then Slovak Prime Minister, Robert Fico, became allies on

international matters. Both understood they had to cooperate in asserting their interests in the European Union. The Visegrad Group has been an ideal floor for Central European advocacy. All this worked until 2020.

In 2018, the double homicide of an investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak, and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová turned political life in Slovakia upside down. The brutal crime shocked the public, blaming the “political elite and the mafia state it ran” for it.



Photo 1: *Martina Kušnírová and Ján Kuciak* <sup>9</sup>

Due to public pressure, the Minister of the Interior and later the Prime Minister had to step down.<sup>10</sup> Robert Fico was replaced by his SMER-SD (Direction – Social Democracy) party fellow Peter Pellegrini, who, despite his popularity, could not remain in office after the 2020 elections.



Photo 2: *The Prime Minister (centre), the Minister of the Interior (right) and the National Police Chief (left) offered one million euros as a reward for leads in the criminal case at a joint press conference.*  
By: Marko Erd, TASR<sup>11</sup>

He later left SMER-SD and founded a new party, HLAS-SD (Voice – Social Democracy). Pellegrini is among the most popular politicians in Slovakia today and one of the leading candidates for the position of prime minister after the upcoming elections in September 2023.

A similar scenario occurred a year earlier, in 2019, during the presidential elections. The vice-president of the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič, who was supported by SMER-SD but ran as an independent candidate, was defeated<sup>12</sup> by the progressive-liberal lawyer and environmental activist Zuzana Čaputová, who was previously completely unknown at the national level. Čaputová is an active president who strives to put Slovakia on a liberal-progressive track in the European Union.

In 2020, Pellegrini was followed as PM by Igor Matovič<sup>13</sup>, who aimed to maintain the Visegrad Cooperation and strove for good Hungarian-Slovak bilateral relations. Since entering politics, Matovič has embodied the classic opposition troll figure, who gained popularity by criticising the government and highlighting the elite's mistakes and corruption. As prime minister in many cases, however, he kept behaving as if he had still been a member of the opposition, causing confusion and fury among his supporters and partners. Matovič's biggest sin in the eyes of his liberal partners was not his misconduct but something for which he could have been justly honoured. In the Spring of 2021, when the SARS-CoV-2 virus was raging, and no Western vaccines were available in sufficient numbers, he, as PM, decided to secretly procure the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine, with Hungary's help, from Moscow.<sup>14</sup> Because of this move, many of his allies resented Matovič sealing his fate. He stepped down in March 2021, and his former partner, Eduard Heger, succeeded him as prime minister.<sup>15</sup> Since then, their relationship has soured, resulting in Heger's joining a new party called "Demokrati" (Democrats).

In the past years, Slovakian foreign policy has gradually turned away from Visegrad cooperation and simultaneously also from Hungary. This trend was begun by President Zuzana Čaputová, who criticised the Hungarian government during her visit to Budapest shortly after her election.<sup>16</sup> The series of unfriendly statements was continued by the Slovak Foreign Ministry, especially after Matovič stepped down. In the coalition government, foreign affairs were controlled by the liberal party SAS (Freedom and Solidarity), and it has remained progressive and liberal, despite the

government's fall. As Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, neither Ivan Korčok nor his successor Rastislav Káčer saw Hungary as a partner but rather as a potential rival. Káčer's recent statement that if Russia had succeeded in annexing Ukraine, Hungary would likely have formulated a territorial claim regarding the southern part of Slovakia can be interpreted in light of this. Significantly, former PM Igor Matovič called on the head of foreign affairs to apologise.<sup>17</sup>

In Slovakia, the government lost a no-confidence vote in December 2022<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is clear that neither the former governing parties nor the president herself is interested in calling early elections. Currently, it looks like the status quo will continue until September 2023. The opposition is enraged, claiming the country is led by a government that no longer has the mandate to do so. President Čaputová is currently conducting negotiations regarding the appointment of an expert government. According to the opposition leader, Robert Fico, it is not Hungary but Slovakia in the EU where the rule of law is consistently violated.<sup>19</sup>

## Czechia and the Visegrad Group

In recent years, the political developments in Czechia show much overlap with those in Slovakia. While not very long ago, both the president and prime minister promoted the Visegrad Cooperation, today, the line-up is different, and the foreign policy they represent has significantly changed. Until the October 2021 elections, the Czech government was led by a coalition under the leadership of Andrej Babiš, whose party, the ANO 2011 (Yes 2011), supports the Renew faction of the European Parliament. Before entering politics, Babiš had become one of the wealthiest businessmen in the country; some even nicknamed him the “Czech Donald Trump”.<sup>20</sup> He maintained good relations with his Central European colleagues and strongly supported V4 cooperation. These facts together proved to be decisive in his later political career. In recent years, Babiš has faced several corruption allegations from Brussels regarding EU agricultural subsidies to companies linked to him.<sup>21</sup> These accusations led to mass protests against Babiš in Prague and terminated his political career. Although his party, ANO 2011, almost won<sup>22</sup> the 2021 parliamentary elections, he could not continue to govern due to lacking an ally.



Strana		Platné hlasy	
číslo	název	celkem	v %
1	Strana zelených	53 343	0,99
2	Švýcarská demokracie	16 823	0,31
3	VOLNÝ blok	71 587	1,33
4	Svoboda a př. demokracie (SPD)	513 910	9,56
5	Česká str.sociálně demokrat.	250 397	4,65
6	Volte Pr.Blok www.cibulka.net	586	0,01
7	ALIANCE NÁRODNÍCH SIL	5 167	0,09
8	Trikolora Svobodní Soukromníci	148 463	2,76
9	Aliance pro budoucnost	11 531	0,21
10	Hnutí Prameny	8 599	0,15
11	Levice	639	0,01

Strana		Platné hlasy	
číslo	název	celkem	v %
12	PŘÍSAHA Roberta Šlachty	251 562	4,68
13	SPOLU – ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09	1 493 905	27,79
14	SENIORŮ 21	3 698	0,06
15	Urza.cz: Nechceme vaše hlasy	6 775	0,12
16	Koruna Česká (monarch.strana)	8 635	0,16
17	PIRÁTI a STAROSTOVÉ	839 776	15,62
18	Komunistická str.Čech a Moravy	193 817	3,60
19	Moravské zemské hnutí	1 648	0,03
20	ANO 2011	1 458 140	27,12
21	Otevřeme ČR normálnímu životu	21 804	0,40
22	Moravané	14 285	0,26

Figure 3. *Elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic*<sup>23</sup>

The new PM, Petr Fiala,<sup>24</sup> takes a more moderate position than his predecessor concerning the Visegrad Group. At the same time, there are areas where his appearance on the scene boosted cooperation. Few would think it, but the most significant dispute within the V4 in recent years did not involve Hungary, which has still been considered the “bad boy” of the region but occurred within the Czech-Polish bilateral relationship. The subject of the conflict was the functioning of the Turów open-pit coal mine in Poland, near the border with Czechia, which lowers groundwater supplies and pollutes the air. Because of this, Czechia turned to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). This was the first time in the history of CJEU that an EU member state sued another member state for environmental reasons.<sup>25</sup> The court ordered Poland to suspend the activities of the mine temporarily, but Warsaw refused to do so. Consequently, the CJEU ordered Poland to pay the European Commission a €500 thousand per day penalty for failing to comply with the measures.<sup>26</sup> The litigation alienated the Czech and Polish leaders (Babiš and Morawiecki) so much that they were unwilling to meet even in the V4 framework. This changed with the stepping up of Fiala. The two countries reached a compromise, according to which Czechia withdrew the lawsuit while Poland paid them €45 million in compensation. The Polish side also committed to shielding noise and light pollution attributable to Turów.<sup>27</sup>

In 2023, presidential elections were held in Czechia, where the acting president, Miloš Zeman, who had completed his second term, could no longer remain in office. After former PM Andrej Babiš lost his prime ministership, he decided to run for president. In the last phase of a highly heated election campaign, the court verdict on the charges related to EU subsidies acquitted him.<sup>28</sup> However, all this proved insufficient in the campaign finale, and the Czech voters installed a former military general, Petr Pavel, in the presidential seat.<sup>29</sup> To the consternation of many, the President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová, appeared in person during the second round of the Czech presidential election in Petr Pavel's campaign team.<sup>30</sup>



Photo 3: *Čaputová and Pavel.*  
By: Petr David Josek (SITA/AP)<sup>31</sup>

It was already visible that the chemistry between the Czech and Slovak Presidents was close. There are many clear parallels between them: both had almost been utterly unknown at the national level before their election; they are uncritical Atlanticists; both intend to reduce the Visegrad Group's role and openly express antipathy towards the Hungarian government. The latter is especially the case with Pavel, as he openly criticised the Hungarian PM Orbán even before he had the opportunity to meet him personally.<sup>32</sup>

## Poland and its Dilemmas

For a long time, it seemed that the Polish-Hungarian unity could not be broken. The peak of this partnership was in 2020 when the two countries jointly tried to assert their will against the European Commission during the negotiation process of the community's 2021-2028 budget. The dispute was due to the acceptance of a debatable “rule of law mechanism”, which, according to the Hungarian and Polish prime ministers, the European Commission and some member states created to discipline them. This dispute was partially resolved by Angela Merkel, who promised that the new procedure would not be applied until the European Court of Justice ruled on its legality. Hungary and Poland won the battle then, but at the same time, they lost the war in the long run inasmuch as the court ruled against them, and since then, the European Commission has refused to transfer funds to the two countries.<sup>33</sup> The paradox of the situation is that, over time, the European Commission's procedure raises the dilemma of compliance with the rule of law to a much greater and more disturbing extent than Budapest or Warsaw may have ever had.



Photo 4: *Hungarian PM Orbán and Polish PM Morawiecki.*  
By: MTI-Hungary-Today<sup>34</sup>

Mateusz Morawiecki has been serving as prime minister of Poland since 2017.<sup>35</sup> He has led a patriotic government in the crosshairs of liberals since its inception. In the 2019 election, his right-wing coalition took 235 seats in the 460-seat Sejm.<sup>36</sup> After the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections, it seemed that the Visegrad Group could turn into a “double two” subgroup since, although the nominal unity existed at the systemic level, neither Czechia nor Slovakia stood by the Hungarian-Polish tandem during the EU budget debate. Former Slovak PM Robert Fico, whose party had just lost governance, openly criticised Slovakia's new leadership because of its indifference towards the position of Warsaw and Budapest.<sup>37</sup> The axis between the two Central European capitals seemed unbreakable. However, this weakened significantly in the aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Poland also faces parliamentary elections this year. The biggest challenger to the governing Law and Justice party is the Civic Coalition, headed by one of Orbán's most prominent international critics and opponents, Donald Tusk. If he is elected, further erosion of Visegrad Cooperation must be expected.

## Impacts of the War

What seemed solid in 2020 has melted into the air, damaged by the Russian-Ukrainian war that broke out on 24 February 2022. The reason for this is rooted in the different attitudes of Hungary and Poland towards the armed conflict. Budapest emphasised from the first that, on the one hand, Ukraine has suffered a severe violation of its sovereignty; on the other hand, this is a Russian-Ukrainian bilateral conflict taking place between states that are neither members of the European Union nor NATO, which implies no obligation from any members of these communities to intervene. Warsaw, on the contrary, has become the loudest and most visible supporter of Kyiv in Europe and openly calls for the international armed punishment of the Russian Federation.

Without going into the bilateral tension in more detail, it should be said that Hungary has constantly called for a ceasefire and peace and is conducting the largest humanitarian operation in its history, supporting the people under attack.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, it refuses to transport weapons into the war zone, thereby protecting the extensive Hungarian community living in the Western part of Ukraine. The latter decision is subject to intense criticism from many of its allies. Indicating its international affiliation, Hungary voted for all of the anti-Russian sanctions but, at the same time,

was not willing to support embargoes that would seriously harm its national interests. This applies primarily to the energy sector.

In an interview held in September 2022, the PM of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, stated<sup>39</sup> that the Visegrad Group is essential and must be maintained along the lines of common interests and values. This is an encouraging sign from the point of view of both Hungarian-Polish bilateral relations and the future of the Visegrad Group. The leading party of the Slovak opposition shares this opinion.<sup>40</sup> The Slovak and Polish parliamentary elections will both take place this year. By December 2023, we will have a much clearer picture of the future of the Visegrad Cooperation.

## Conclusion

The Visegrad Group was created not by mutual love but by mutual interest. If the Central European countries wish to assert their claims on a European level, their regional cooperation is an inevitable necessity. Although the short-term goals of individual political actors may differ, the long-term interests of the local nations in the past and the present show significant overlap. While earlier, this was primarily expressed in Euro-Atlantic integration; it is now represented in the desire for economic catch-up with Western Europe. A prerequisite for this is enhancing regional economic and political cooperation, in which field the Visegrad Cooperation has already proven itself. Abandoning this framework would result in harm to all current participating parties and offer no long-time benefits.

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## Endnotes

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