

V4 Relations with Ukraine

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The V4 countries – Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – have taken different approaches to bilateral cooperation with Ukraine. In 2019, when Zelensky defeated Poroshenko in the elections, many expectations were born towards policy changes. In Budapest, there were hopes for re-establishing an optimal level of collaboration with Kyiv. However, Moscow's aggression has changed everything. The V4 countries are in a crucial position to help Ukraine. In this analysis, the authors will examine the different narratives and interests of the V4 countries concerning Kyiv that came into view in the previous years. It is not just geopolitical concerns that influence the decision-makers. Traditional ways of thinking, domestic politics, public opinion, politics of memory and national feelings also have an essential role in forming them. These mixed concerns of small states make this region unique.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, the war in Ukraine, arms deliveries, mutual relations, minorities, geopolitical interests, geopolitical exposures, politics of memory, political changes

Hungary – Defending the Minorities

Although Hungarian-Ukrainian bilateral relations are not the most cordial nowadays, there is still an ongoing dialogue and cooperation between Budapest and Kyiv, mainly in economics, culture, humanitarian aid, and development programmes. In 2019, Hungary was Ukraine's ninth most important trading partner, while Kyiv was only the sixteenth for Budapest.¹ Unlike Ukraine, Hungary is fully integrated into the European market structure, as a result of which it trades foremost with other members of the European Union.

There are not only geopolitical reasons why both countries have interests in a fruitful relationship. The Hungarian government's constitutional obligation is to help the Hungarian national communities beyond its borders. Since the Euromaidan takeover, Kyiv has adopted a more Western approach in many of its policies. The new leadership constantly talks about Western- and Euro-Atlantic integration. The 'aye' from Budapest is inevitable for the successful completion of these objectives. There are also critical geopolitical links between the two neighbours. Budapest imports oil and gas from the Russian Federation, mainly via Ukraine. Hungary has a unique trading partnership with Russia, which also benefits Kyiv. Earning payment from transit is indispensable for Ukraine. Of course, the war has changed Kyiv's narrative but hasn't changed the geopolitical realities. Decreasing Russian export potential means a loss of income from transit fees, which is against the interest of both Ukraine and Hungary. This drastic change in European mainstream attitude to Russian raw materials caused several problems in Budapest. The Hungarian conservative government aims to maintain some general social policies based on cheap energy, which requires Russian oil and gas flow.²

Nevertheless, there are mutual misunderstandings between the Hungarian and Ukrainian leadership. In particular, after Euromaidan, the Ukrainian state became more liberal. However, its deeds became increasingly intolerant and nationalist. The Hungarian minority was one of the victims of this policy change, which will never be acceptable to Budapest³. The situation in Transcarpathia (Zakarpattia Oblast) worsened after the Euromaidan takeover. In 2012 Kyiv acknowledged the languages of the minorities, and many standard rights were granted to them. However, all these measures were revoked five years later based on a new language law. At the beginning of 2018, the Ukrainian government announced they were preparing to build a military base in Berehove (Beregszász), the settlement of the largest group of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine. Some say Kyiv's act was to intimidate the Hungarian population.⁴

In 2019 when Volodymyr Zelensky defeated the nationalist Petro Poroshenko, many expectations were born in Budapest because the newly elected president made a much more favourable impression to the minorities. Even President of Hungary János Áder travelled to Kyiv to improve bilateral relations. During his visit, he also hoped to take the

case of dual citizenship forward and restore the original rights – education, language usage – of the Hungarian minorities⁵. We now know that all friendly efforts from the Hungarian side have failed.

One year later, heavy floods harmed Ukraine. Hungarian FM Péter Szijjártó immediately offered his help. The Multinational Engineer Battalion Tisa – which consists of Hungarians, Slovaks, Romanians, and Ukrainians – responded and managed to help in rebuilding some essential parts of the infrastructure in Western Ukraine.⁶ Despite the Hungarian attempts to amend the bilateral relationship, Kyiv continued suppressing the minority groups. Even the leader of the local Hungarian cultural association (Kárpátaljai Magyar Kulturális Szövetség), László Brenzovics, had to leave the country due to trumped-up charges.⁷ During the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic, cross-border commuting became almost impossible because Kyiv decided to classify Hungary as a red zone. This political step did not help the bilateral partnership.⁸ It didn't avail either that a few months before the Hungarian parliamentary elections, aiming to secure gas import and thus cheap energy prices, Budapest signed a long-term contract with Gazprom that covered the purchase of 4.5 billion cubic meters of gas annually. It was part of the deal that Gazprom would deliver this amount to Hungary via two routes: 3.5 billion cubic meters from the South via the Serbian-Hungarian interconnector and 1 billion cubic meters from Austria.⁹ This means that shipment routes will avoid Ukraine altogether. Budapest communicated this arrangement as a self-protective geopolitical move, but Kyiv saw it as an insult. From their perspective, Budapest colluded with Moscow. In recent years, this is not the first pact when two capitals decided to bypass Ukraine. The most spectacular agreement was actually signed between Berlin and Moscow. It resulted in the birth of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines, which were officially not built to decrease Ukraine's influence but to diversify the routes to promote the security of supply.¹⁰ After the Hungarian Gazprom deal, FM Dmytro Kuleba summoned the Hungarian ambassador. The Hungarian PM emphasised that Hungary's sovereignty allows Budapest to trade with whomever it wants, and the agreement with Gazprom is none of Ukraine's business.¹¹

On 24 February 2022, Russia began a “special military operation” in Ukraine, which rapidly escalated into a conventional war. Most European countries – including Hungary and Ukraine – believed neither the American nor the Polish intelligence services about the upcoming Russian invasion. Like almost every European state, Hungary condemned Moscow's unprovoked aggression. The European Union immediately adopted economic and political sanctions against Russia and Russian individuals. However, while many states declared the necessity to punish Moscow for its illegal activities, the Hungarian premier stood up for peace, emphasising that he would neither send weapons nor support any sanctions on Russian oil, gas, or nuclear technology. Despite benefiting from the transit fees, Ukrainians saw this policy as pro-Russian and blamed Budapest for acting in the favour of Moscow.

The truth is, however, more complex. Hungary voted for all the sanctions packages in the European Council.¹² In addition, it carried out the most extensive humanitarian aid in its history.¹³ On top of that, Hungary has helped Ukraine in many different ways. Around 2, 719, 596 individuals have crossed the Ukrainian-Hungarian border. At least 36 313 persons were registered for temporary protection.¹⁴ Yet not just the government helped the refugees; the Hungarian civil society did too.¹⁵ Humanitarian donations were sent, primarily to the Transcarpathian region. The governor of Zakarpattia Oblast, Viktor Mikita, was grateful, highlighting the importance of Hungarian support.¹⁶

In the V4, Hungary is the only country which has not delivered any weapons to Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian invasion. PM Viktor Orbán underlined the need for a cease-fire and the importance of diplomacy from the beginning of the conflict. FM Péter Sziijártó added that providing weapons to one side could escalate the conflict.¹⁷ Although Hungary is not delivering weapons to Ukraine directly, it allows other countries to use its domestic infrastructure to do so.¹⁸ The Hungarian oil company MOL also sends diesel oil to Ukraine. Kyiv can use this material at its discretion.¹⁹ The Hungarian government is trying to prevent any potential Russian attack in Transcarpathia, which has proven successful until recently. Defending the Hungarian minorities wherever in the World has always been fundamental for Budapest. At the same time, Orbán also claims that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is a fratricidal war with which Hungary has nothing to do.

In November, the President of Hungary, Katalin Novák, alongside the Polish, Belgian and Lithuanian prime ministers, travelled to Kyiv by train via Poland to meet Zelensky. The President of Ukraine stated the need to export more Ukrainian grain to the third world.²⁰ In addition, they agreed to organise a summit between Viktor Orbán and Volodymyr Zelensky. However, this meeting has not taken place.

During the war in Ukraine, the bilateral relationship became increasingly difficult. When Putin decided to acknowledge the separatist states, the Hungarian Minister of Defence Tibor Benkő ordered some of the Hungarian forces to ensure its borders with Ukraine.²¹ Some Ukrainian politicians like Irina Verescsuk thought that Budapest intended to occupy Transcarpathia.²² The mutual distrust became more robust than ever. In March, a drone flew over Hungary and later crashed in the streets of Zagreb.²³ The new Hungarian chief of staff, Gábor Böröndi, stated that it was a Ukrainian drone, and the Hungarian air defence did nothing against it.²⁴

In 2023 the situation escalated further. According to leaked documents, Zelensky had a meeting with his advisors where he proposed to blow up the Friendship pipeline to destroy the Hungarian economy.²⁵ This sabotage, however, did not happen. Moreover, we see that both the Russian and Ukrainian sides are paying attention to ensure that the pipeline is functional. It is essential to mention that not just Hungary imports oil using the Friendship pipeline, but so also do Slovakia and Czechia. Damaging this infrastructure

would harm not just the Hungarian but also the Slovakian and Czech economies. These V4 countries, by contrast, are among the most faithful supporters of Kyiv.

However, some CEE measures inevitably go against Kyiv's interests. In April, Budapest, Bratislava, and Warsaw needed to act firmly to protect their agriculture and farmers against Ukrainian grain dumping.²⁶ Due to the Russian sea blockade, Ukrainian grain left the country via Central Eastern Europe. However, much of the crop remained in the Visegrád countries, which depressed prices and caused severe quality problems. Since Ukraine is not a member of the European Union, a significant part of its agricultural products does not meet the strict quality requirements of the community. Dumping such grain disrupts the market even in the short term, making it impossible for local producers. In response to this challenge, there was no option but to block most of the imported agricultural goods from Ukraine.

Overall, both Kyiv and Budapest have interests in fruitful cooperation. Hungary will not give up its minority-protection policy; at the same time, Ukraine wishes to join the EU and NATO. The Ukrainian plan to join the EU is also a Hungarian interest. Without making compromises, neither party's goals seem achievable today. This contrasts =, as we shall show, with the stance taken by other V4 countries, especially Poland which we shall next discuss.

Poland – A Geopolitical Approach

Poland is an emerging regional actor with approximately 40 million inhabitants and rising military capabilities. Thanks to these characteristics, their government's potential to actively shape the CEE region is significant. At this moment, it seems that the Polish-Ukrainian partnership is unbreakable; however, it is essential to note that before the conflict, there had been disagreements between the parties. Since the beginning of the war, Poland's commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity has been unquestionable. The country not only constitutes a geopolitically crucial bastion against Moscow's aspirations, but stopping the „Russian steamroller” has become a national principle in Warsaw. Without their help, Kyiv would be in a much weaker position in diplomacy and on the battlefield. Polish assistance consists of many elements, such as sharing military intelligence, sending weapons (both Soviet-era and NATO-compatible), ammunition, and providing financial aid and shelter for the refugees. When the decision was made in the West to assist Kyiv with weapons, Poland immediately contributed valuable pieces of its own military infrastructure.

The close ties are represented not only on the battlefield but also in the economy. In 2021 Poland was one of Ukraine's most important commercial partners; Kyiv mainly exported steel and iron products, minerals, grain, and products of animal origin. The Polish export rate tended to grow yearly towards its neighbour.²⁷ Since products made in Poland are

meant for the EU market, they are advanced and can easily compete with their Ukrainian competitors.²⁸ As political relations developed, so did the economic potential. In 2021 Polish foreign direct investment in Ukraine was around 1,2 billion USD. During the war, more and more projects concerning the country's rebuilding were announced in the Recovery Project.²⁹

Politics of Memory and the Traditional Polish Thinking

Despite close cooperation and mutual interests, nevertheless historical memory also overshadows the Polish-Ukrainian bilateral relations. Some say that liaisons are asymmetric, as Warsaw greatly helps Kyiv, but the Ukrainian administration does not return this benevolence. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, all the Polish political entities (Senate, Government, political parties) agreed that helping Ukraine is fundamental. They have proclaimed sanctions against Moscow and supported the Euro-Atlantic integration of Kyiv. By contrast, the Ukrainian parliament took some steps in the politics of memory that are difficult to explain and have caused misunderstanding on the Polish side. In recent years, the paradigm of thinking about history in Ukraine has changed from pro-Soviet to anti-Soviet. In parallel with that, Kyiv started to build up the philosophy that all organisations, parties and military units which had fought for Ukraine in the past must be respected and remembered. In 2016, when Andrzej Duda won the presidential mandate, the Ukraine-friendly foreign policy changed to a more critical one. The Polish national conservative government agreed that the Russian aggression against Ukraine should be stopped and territorial sovereignty respected. However, Warsaw criticized the Ukrainian law, which accepted the legacy of all organisations which fought for Ukrainian independence, including the UPA militias and the fascist legacy of Stepan Bandera.³⁰ In 2010, Viktor Yushchenko, who took over the presidential mandate after the "Orange Revolution" (2004), glorified Bandera so much that he intended to declare him a hero of Ukraine. Fortunately, the Supreme Court stopped this decision.³¹ According to Warsaw, at least 100 000 Polish people were killed during the Nazi occupation by pro-German Ukrainian forces (UPA). Petro Poroshenko tried to placate his Polish critics. However, this was not an easy task. Consequently, Poroshenko emphasised the importance of the mutual Polish and Ukrainian historical background of confronting Russia. In 2017, President Duda and President Poroshenko highlighted that history should not influence political cooperation between the two neighbours and that any debate between them is in the interest of Russia. One year later, before the extraordinary summit of the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, added that reconciliation with Ukraine would take place only if Kyiv took responsibility for the "genocide" of Poles massacred by Ukrainian nationalist units during World War Two.³² In 2019, Zelenskyy defeated Poroshenko in the elections and, as newly elected president, announced a restart in bilateral cooperation, trying to normalise relations on the issue of historical memory.³³ However, even after the war broke out, Kyiv refused to satisfy Poland's demands.³⁴

Poland is, nevertheless, a staunch supporter of the Western integration of Ukraine. Towards the end of 2021, Andrzej Duda and Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda reconfirmed their full support of Ukraine's potential NATO and EU membership.³⁵ The President of Poland proclaimed the importance of creating an independent region free from Russian influence and is trying to decrease the exposure to Russian fossil energy infrastructure, what a legacy is of the cold war.³⁶ Polish geopolitical thinking has a vision of creating an autonomous region. In the 1930s, Józef Piłsudski and Józef Beck dreamed about an area called Intermarium (Międzymorze), which was independent of both Germany and Russian power. Initially, this thinking can be traced back to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. That period when Warsaw ruled all over Eastern Europe but was increasingly competing with the emerging Russian Empire and later Prussian expansion.

Achieving energy diversification is aimed at through the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). However, when Ukrainian membership was on the table in 2019, Polish FM Jacek Czaputowych stated that this organisation only consists of EU members and is about infrastructure-building, not geopolitics.³⁷ Warsaw, at that time, did not support Kyiv's accession. However, this perspective has changed since the Russian-Ukrainian war outbreak. In June 2020, Ukraine became a "participating partner" in the 3SI.³⁸

Warsaw's Reaction to the War

When Putin decided to invade Ukraine, Polish resentment towards Ukraine was immediately put aside.³⁹ Warsaw, without hesitation, joined the group of countries demanding to punish Moscow and help Kyiv in every form. Since then, Poland's geopolitical role has been upscaled, mainly because most weapons shipments enter Ukraine through Poland. Supplying the Ukrainian patriotic war would be much more challenging without their support and infrastructure.⁴⁰ The Polish sent almost everything available that could help Kyiv to defend itself. At least 200 T-72 tanks, 18 Krab self-propelled howitzers, and many Piorun portable surface-to-air missiles were handed over. This effort is estimated to have cost around 1.7 billion USD. The Polish will to stop the Russians is also represented in other factors. Regarding the GDP ratio, Poland was Ukraine's third most significant aid contributor, after the United Kingdom and the United States.⁴¹ However, that does not mean that Poland disarms itself. In April, Warsaw decided to extend its armed forces with 250 Abrams tanks.⁴²

Naturally, the Polish assistance cannot be reduced purely to military supplies; they helped Ukraine in many other ways. Based on a Globsec study⁴³, until the mid of December 2022, the V4 countries hosted at least 2,1 million Ukrainian refugees altogether. From them, 1.5 million registered in Poland for temporary protection. (this rate is equal to 4 per cent of the population of Poland).⁴⁴ According to Globsec, around 85% of Polish respondents see hosting Ukrainian refugees in their country as a positive. The figure that says even more

about the Polish public mood is that more than two-thirds of the population (67,4%) would accept Ukrainian refugees as members of their family.⁴⁵

In mid-November 2022, a Soviet-made rocket hit Poland, costing the lives of two farmers. At that point, many Western leaders were worried about a potential war escalation. Some spoke about activating Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, as they considered the act a direct provocation and attack from the Russian Federation against the NATO community. However, it soon became clear that the rocket was launched from a Soviet-made Ukrainian S-300, trying to defend its airspace from the incoming missiles. The Poles invoked Article 4, bringing the issue to the North Atlantic Council.⁴⁶

Not only the Polish political elite but their military leadership visited Kyiv. General Rajmund Andrzejczak met his Ukrainian counterpart Valerii Zaluzhnyi at the end of 2022, promising additional military supplies and indoctrination for Ukrainian soldiers. Providing military training and medical supplies are vital questions for Ukrainian survival.⁴⁷ President Zelenskyy, during his visit, tried to obtain fighting jets for the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive. Warsaw supported this idea because it had already sent MIG-29s, becoming the first Western state to provide fighter jets to Kyiv. On the other hand, President Duda clarified that Poland could not hand over any of its F-16 fighting jets to Ukraine.⁴⁸ They, however, offered help in training Ukrainian pilots.

Some members of the Polish foreign ministry spoke about a much more aggressive approach towards Russians. Jan Emeryk Rościszewski, an ambassador in Paris, claimed that Poland would enter the ongoing conflict if Ukraine lost its sovereignty. This speech was a little uncomfortable for the French and the Polish foreign offices.⁴⁹ However, that does not mean that everything goes well after the outbreak of the war. There will be an election in Poland in November; therefore, the Polish political parties will be preoccupied with domestic issues. Of course, we do not know the outcome of the elections, but all the Polish parties have one thing in common; helping Kyiv and trying to stop the Russians is fundamental.

Czechia – Changing Perspectives

Even though Czechia is the only Visegrad country with no direct border with Ukraine, it still significantly impacts the Central European country's economy. Not as much as Budapest or Bratislava, but Prague also depends on Russian fossil energy imports. Since the outbreak of the war, the new government led by Petr Fiala has accomplished pro-Ukrainian foreign policy. So does the freshly elected president, Petr Pavel, a former military general. However, this was not always the case.

The attitude of the former prime minister Andrej Babiš, against whom Pavel triumphed in the presidential elections, was different, as he aimed to maintain a more balanced foreign policy. His idea was not far from the Hungarian approach, as he tried to balance between

the East and the West. Being a billionaire, Babiš was nicknamed the “Czech Donald Trump” and accused of a pro-Russian policy. However, during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic, he was against procuring the Russian-made Sputnik vaccines.⁵⁰ Moreover, Babiš, just like every other V4 leader, condemned Russian activities in Ukraine. The turning point in Czech-Russian relations was the year 2021, when information was leaked out accusing Moscow of executing the arms depot blast in Vrbětice in 2014.⁵¹ The violent event turned Czech public opinion away from the Russian Federation. At that time, Babiš even drew parallels between the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the deadly explosions of 2014, suggesting that Moscow had violated Czechia’s sovereignty.⁵²

A controversial but successful figure in Czech politics was president (and former PM) Miloš Zeman, who, in 2014, when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea proposed that NATO should send troops to help Kyiv if Russia went beyond the borders of the peninsula, trying to occupy other Eastern territories of Ukraine.⁵³ This attitude shows that Zeman was not keen on changing the status quo. However, he criticised Kyiv due to the lack of Rusyn’s autonomy. The bitter feedback from the Ukrainian ambassador came fast. Yevhen Perebyinis stated that the conception of Rusyn autonomy is financed by Moscow, which aims to destabilise Kyiv.⁵⁴

At the end of 2021, the political winds in Prague changed. A coalition by the liberal conservatives (ODS) and the alliance of Pirates and Mayors resulted in a transformation of foreign policy. Petr Fiala adopted a much more pro-European approach. Of course, this had a price, but FM Jan Lipavský’s office aimed to reduce cooperation with both the Russians and the Chinese.⁵⁵ According to PM Fiala and FM Lipavský, the Visegrad Cooperation can also be sacrificed for better relations with the EU instead of cooperating with more conservative Budapest and Warsaw.

At that time, Miloš Zeman was still in office. However, his perspective changed after the outbreak of the war in an increasingly anti-Russian way. The year 2022 brought many changes in Czech politics. The impact of the war, increasing prices, and COVID challenged the actions of the political elites. During the presidential election, Miloš Zeman, who completed his second term, could not remain in office. Andrej Babiš, who lost the parliamentary elections, tried to challenge Petr Pavel for the presidency. Babiš lost, so in 2022, in both the prime minister and the President were pro-European liberal politicians emphasising their duty in helping Kyiv.

In March, the Czechs decided to adopt a more aggressive stance. During the siege of Kyiv, both Petr Fiala and Mateusz Morawiecki travelled there to meet Ukrainian President Zelenskyy. It was a symbolic gesture but was followed by more sanctions against Moscow and aid to Ukraine. From that moment onwards, it was clear that Poland and Czechia allied to help Kyiv.⁵⁶ The Slovakian PM Eduard Heger was also invited to the Ukrainian capital but decided not to go.

Regarding weapon delivery and military support, it is essential to note that the Czechs also shipped Soviet-made weapon systems to Ukraine. The prime minister stated that Prague had already decided to send weapons to Kyiv even before the outbreak of the war. According to the government, this shipment cost Prague at least 420 million Euros.⁵⁷ Based on the database of Oryx, at least 170 tanks (T-72m1), 106 IFVs (BVP-1s), some Czechoslovakian-made self-propelled artillery pieces (Dana m2s) and rocket launchers were sent to the front to help the Ukrainians. It was acceptable for Prague to lose Soviet-made weapons because they expected more modern Western systems in return.⁵⁸

Czechia helped Kyiv in military and humanitarian ways. However, as the war continues, people are getting less satisfied with this high level of aid due to its economic price. Demonstrations occurred in Prague with the support of the opposition. The most significant challenges are the declining economy, increasing costs, and lack of medical supplies. Jindrich Rajchl, one of the organisers of this demonstration, called for the halt of the pro-Ukrainian foreign policy.⁵⁹

To sum up, it can be said that Czech unity has some problems—however, no drastic change towards the recent policies is on the agenda. Political stability is given, and public opinion can be ignored since elections are far off. Because of this, no additional Czech power input into the Visegrad cooperation can be expected.

Slovakia - Changing Narratives

Although Slovakia is the smallest state in Central Europe, its advocacy capabilities are out of proportion. As a European Union and NATO member, its leaders are part of the club where the most critical decisions are made in the Old Continent. Slovakia is one of the successors of the Czechoslovak federal state, which disintegrated 30 years ago. Recently, its geopolitical importance manifested mainly in connection with other V4 countries. In 2015, without Slovak assistance in the V4, the aim of setting compulsory migration quotas in Brussels couldn't have been stopped.

Like Czechia, Slovakia also commutes between East and West in relationship-building. Former prime minister Robert Fico, who has led the country for 12 years and now has an enormous chance to regain the prime ministership in the upcoming elections, takes a more critical approach to the West and has always been seen a partner in Moscow. However, in 2020, a new political era started in Bratislava, which turned the country away from the East, making the Slovakian foreign policy pro-Western. This mainly manifested in the bilateral relations with Ukraine. Currently, Bratislava is one of the most devoted supporters of Kyiv in the Central and Eastern European region. Partly, because of this, the pro-Western government failed in December 2022. The country is currently run by technocrats in office without approval or support from the parliament. Early elections will

be held in September. There is a big chance that the direction of Slovak foreign policy is about to change soon.

The leader of the SMER party, former PM Robert Fico, is often accused of pro-Russian sympathies. In 2016 Robert Fico stated that Ukraine did less than Russia to prevent the escalation of the conflict and had failed to maintain the status quo established at Minsk 2. Like the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán, Fico also criticised the Western community's sanctions on Moscow, saying that these hurt the V4 more than the Russians. However, it also cannot be said that Fico would be against Ukraine's territorial integrity. On the contrary, Fico has repeatedly stated that the only chance for small countries to survive is international law, which must be respected. In light of this, becoming prime minister, he immediately pulled the soldiers of the Slovak army out of Iraq in 2007, saying the war was unjust and wrong.⁶⁰

Before the Russian-Ukrainian war, an essential interest of Bratislava and Kyiv was maintaining the functionality of the oil and gas pipeline systems crossing both countries. In the nineties, there were several moments when Kyiv tried to use the energy flow on its territory as blackmail towards both East and West. Berlin, aiming to maximise its energy security, agreed to construct the Nord Stream pipeline system, which bypasses Ukraine. This new infrastructure meant a significant threat to both Kyiv and Bratislava, as they get huge revenues from transit fees.⁶¹ During the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Nord Stream pipelines were heavily damaged. It is unlikely that they will be restored any time soon.

Despite the decisions of the political elite, the Slovak public is not anti-Russian. According to VSQUARE, many in the Slovakian army are against pro-Western approaches.⁶² They believe that NATO is just an economic ploy on the part of the United States: this is how they find buyers for their military equipment. In 2018, Bratislava decided to purchase F-16 fighter jets—the announcement of getting weapons from the Americans with 1,7 billion € upset many pro-Russian Slovaks. Chief of Staff of the Slovak Armed Forces Daniel Zmeko announced upon taking office that it is vital to maintain good relations with Moscow.⁶³ Some commentators argue that his statement resulted from a political decision rather than a professional approach. The SNS party's demand to appoint Zmeko as chief of staff made a deep contrast between the pro-Western and pro-Eastern bureaucrats and military staff. Some generals, like Pavel Macko, retired from the army due to political intervention.⁶⁴

In 2018, a young investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak and his fiancée were murdered in Slovakia. Demonstrations began nationwide, forcing the interior minister and prime minister to step down. Fico was followed in office by his comrade Peter Pellegrini, who, despite his rapidly growing popularity, lost the 2020 elections and, soon after, Fico's trust. Along with Fico, today, Pellegrini can be considered the primary candidate for the post of prime minister at the elections in September.

In 2019, Zuzana Čaputová became the president. According to the Western media, her victory halted right-wing nationalism in Slovakia.⁶⁵ The OĽaNO party won the elections a year later, and Igor Matovič became the prime minister. After one year in office, he was replaced by Eduard Heger. He was the Prime Minister who did not go to Warsaw when other prime ministers of the region (like Mateusz Morawiecki and Janez Janša) visited Zelenskyy. Later he travelled to Kyiv in the company of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. In 2023, Zuzana Čaputová and Petr Pavel visited Zelenskyy, supporting Ukraine's membership of the EU and NATO.⁶⁶

Regarding military capabilities, Slovakia is not a well-equipped V4 member. Nonetheless, the political leadership sent some strategic equipment to help the Ukrainians. Slovakia intended to show their commitment to the EU and NATO and set an example that small countries can make a difference. As a result of this policy, Slovakia handed over its MIG-29 fighter jet fleet. Furthermore, Bratislava sent its S-300s batteries to Ukraine, thereby strongly reducing its own defence capabilities.⁶⁷ Due to losing its air defence capabilities, Slovakia asked for protection. The V4 countries offered to safeguard the Slovakian air space.⁶⁸

The military output of the Slovak industry is also worth mentioning. Jaroslav Naď, the former Slovakian minister of defence, said they would increase ammunition production fivefold. This can significantly help Kyiv because it is mostly the factories in Slovakia that produce ammunition for Soviet-made weapons, which the Ukrainians still use.⁶⁹

There is a contrast between the government's attitude and public opinion about Ukraine. Among the V4 countries, the Slovakian view is the most negative about the Ukrainian refugees.⁷⁰ If Robert Fico manages to establish a government after the elections, he may turn the current Slovakian foreign policy in a different direction. Some say it could be similar to the Hungarian view that tries to make peace as soon as possible.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Russian invasion has changed the perspective of the Visegrad countries towards Kyiv and Moscow. Poland, Czechia and Slovakia put aside their differences and gave significant military aid to Ukraine. Hungary has sent neither weapons nor ammunition, but it conducted the largest humanitarian operation in its history. Budapest maintains its opinion on defending the rights of minorities, and Warsaw hopes for some change in the Ukrainian politics of memory. In the early stages of the war, Czech and Polish donations sometimes overtook Western aid. In relative numbers, this applied to Slovakia as well. The war has changed the perception of Kyiv everywhere. Until recently, the Central European countries have not truly understood how Euromaidan influenced Ukrainian nationalism. Nowadays, it seems that Kyiv's geopolitical interests override everything. In Warsaw, maintaining an anti-Russian Ukraine is a geopolitical must. A

certain degree of asymmetry can also be perceived here since, despite the significant humanitarian actions of the V4 countries, accepting sanctions against Moscow, and the handing over of military equipment (with the notable exception of Hungary), Kyiv has not changed the minority law, its memory policy, nor did it make any gestures in these directions. In the future, however, it might be necessary because Ukraine's aspirations of becoming part of the EU or NATO are through the willingness of V4 countries. The perception of the war and the level of aid also affects domestic politics and collaboration not just within the V4 but in the whole Western World. The costs that appear during the war can derail present domestic policies. From this point of view, upcoming elections in Poland and Slovakia may bring about significant changes in V4 perspectives on the ongoing conflict.



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