

Cooperation vs
Confrontation: the V4 in the
Shadow of the War

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The Visegrad Group is going through difficult times due to the growing geopolitical tensions and the increasing pressure from Moscow, Brussels and Washington. The regional alliance of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia faces internal and external challenges. Until recently, the V4 has been important to all of its members; however, finding the delicate balance between cooperation and confrontation is becoming increasingly difficult. The uneven outcome of recent elections in Poland and Slovakia will presumably heighten tensions. While the result in Bratislava will intensify collaboration, a Tusk government in Warsaw will probably aim to stultify it. The Russian-Ukrainian war fundamentally changed the perception of cooperation in the region. Will divergent positions on the conflict undermine the V4? How does the political ideology of each country's government affect the formation of a collective consensus? The issues are becoming more and more complex. At the same time, to maintain its regional position, finding common ground for the alliance is crucial.

Keywords: *V4, alliance, trust, collaboration, war in Ukraine, dependence, sanctions, non-involvement, peace*

Divergences threaten to break the unity that the V4 built up over decades in a complex international context. In order to maintain their status, the four states must focus on cooperation, mutual interests, and issues on which they agree. It is time they realised no solution to the Russian-Ukrainian war will unite them. However, this issue has led the Group into serious dissonance. Although the V4 needs an informed discussion and a restart in some fields, as long as there is the political will to continue, hope will be present to maintain cooperation. Without the V4, it is impossible to articulate the CE region's needs in Brussels effectively.

1. Antecedents

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a special military operation in Ukraine, which rapidly escalated into the most extensive military conflict in Europe since WW2. Although tensions had been in the air since the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, expectations of an outbreak of a war on such a scale were marginal. Although on paper, the struggle is between two warring sides, in reality—directly or indirectly—many nations are involved. Because of their close physical proximity, the war has significantly affected the politics of the Central European region, shaken Visegrad Four cooperation and will contribute to its change.

Even though Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are bound together not only by political, economic and regional interests but also by a shared past, culture, religion and a specific identity, the escalation of the war has triggered significant divisions among them.¹ Practical cooperation has recently become increasingly complicated as their internal unity has faltered. Due to their pro-Ukraine policy, Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia have taken a strong stance against the Russian Federation in foreign policy rhetoric—similar to that of the EU and the US.² On the other hand, Hungary has not been so critical. Unlike the other Visegrad countries, Budapest provides mostly humanitarian aid to Kyiv and is the only European Union member to maintain good working relations with Moscow. These differences created difficulties between Budapest and its allies. The current disagreements in the Visegrád Cooperation have been further exacerbated by the anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the European Union, especially the oil and natural gas embargo.³ In addition, there has been a political change in Poland, as a result of which one of the biggest opponents and critics of Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán, Donald Tusk has become the leader of the country. In light of these circumstances, the Visegrad Group faces the biggest challenge in its history. Would a conflict tear the grouping? What are the factors that may accelerate or even reverse this prospect?

2. Stormclouds gathering

The escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war has directly impacted the Central European region and the Visegrad Cooperation. Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are situated on its border, thus constituting a potential theatre in the event of further escalation. In this light, not only has war provoked a flood of refugees but also a

widespread fear of the possibility of getting drawn into the conflict. At the same time, the V4 is not united politically. While all members of the alliance have condemned the Russian aggression, it has become clear that there is no agreement on such critical issues as the role and goals of the Visegrad Group concerning the conflict. Palpable differences of opinion are to be observed. It is also important not to forget that this is not the first time the relationship among the V4 members has been troubled. From the beginning, there have been contradictions and disagreements in the cooperation. Looking at it in the longer term, it can be said that it is a fundamental problem that V4 has not built an organisational structure or institutional system. Their only multilateral body is the Bratislava-based International Visegrad Fund (IVF). Additionally, effective cooperation is often determined by the shared values and relations between politicians, whether they come from the same European party or not.⁴

2.1 The Hungarian position

While Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia were on the side of Ukraine in every aspect, offering complete, including military assistance to Kyiv and strongly condemning Russian aggression in every possible forum, Hungary took a more restrained position. Not long before the beginning of the military operation, PM Viktor Orbán had travelled to Moscow and called for a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the issue. He even referred to his route as a “peace mission”. It was precisely why the outbreak of the war affected him—who was preparing for the upcoming parliamentary elections—severely.

Hungary, just like its partners, condemned Russian aggression and expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty but also continued to advocate a diplomatic solution.⁵ Budapest also accepted the EU and NATO statements condemning the events and assured the President of the European Council that Hungary would be part of the joint EU action and support sanctions against the Russian Federation.⁶ Unlike its partners, Budapest has not wished to help Kyiv with arms and has refused to allow the EU to supply arms through its territory.⁷ At the same time, Hungary did not turn its back on its neighbour, as it executed the most significant humanitarian rescue operation of its history.⁸

In order to understand Budapest's pro-peace stance, it should not be forgotten that Hungary has faced armed conflict with Russia numerous times in the past two

centuries and lost in every single case. All these clashes had severe and long-term negative consequences on every level of statedom. Presumably, Orbán learned the historical lesson and did not want to open a front in a war that was not his nation's. Nor can Hungary be expected to take an armed stand on the side of Kyiv, where ethnic minorities—including Hungarians—suffered more legal disadvantages in the last decade than in Soviet times. Hungary has wanted to stay out of this conflict, but the world has not allowed it to do so without getting stigmatised.

2.2 Polish determination

Because of its particular experience of Russia, Poland has taken the most radical anti-Russian stance not just in the Visegrad Four but even in the European Union. Russia's unlawful invasion has divided Warsaw and Budapest's policy responses, a disagreement that has significantly impacted their future political cooperation.⁹ At the outbreak of the war, Poland described Hungary's policy as a tactical alliance with a view to the parliamentary elections, which were only a few weeks away. Despite Hungary's condemnation of Russian aggression and its humanitarian support for Ukraine, its portrayal of itself as a neutral third-party actor and its focus on the need for "restoring peace" through negotiations alienated Warsaw. According to them, Budapest's position goes against the interests of Poland, the V4, NATO, and the EU.¹⁰ The extent to which Polish-Hungarian friendship could be maintained in the face of such an opposed strategy had raised essential questions even before the Polish elections of 15 October 2023. Additionally, the election result is unfavourable both for the Visegrád partnership and Hungarian-Polish relations in particular. Donald Tusk is considered one of Viktor Orbán's most prominent opponents in the Visegrád Group and among European leaders. If Warsaw turns against Budapest, it could further erode Hungary's authority in international relations and pave the way for the withdrawal of its voting rights within the European Council.¹¹

2.3 The Czech position

The Czech leadership has also taken a negative standpoint on the Russian Federation. On the one hand, Prague strongly condemned Moscow's clear violation of international law; on the other hand, after it became certain in April 2021 that the Russians had been involved in the explosion of the Vrbetice ammunition depot in 2014, severe anti-Russian measures were taken. The deputy chairman of the Russian Upper House of

Parliament's foreign affairs committee called for proportionate countermeasures. At the same time, the United States expressed its support and appreciation for the actions of its ally.¹² Czechia's active engagement with Ukraine at the outbreak of the war was partly due to the proximity of the Czech presidency to the European Union (second half of 2022), which, even without the war, had been expected to increase the country's focus on deepening relations with Western Europe and moving closer to the European political mainstream.¹³ However, it is now certain that they will not support the Visegrád Four's shift away from the EU mainstream nor Hungary's policy of continued ties with Russia.

2.4 Slovak standpoint

Until the Slovak parliamentary elections in September 2023, a strong parallel could have been drawn between the positions of Czechia and Slovakia on the conflict. Given the solid Western orientation of the former Slovak government, there was no question which side it would take. However, the extent of the Slovak involvement is surprising. Despite the relative weakness of its armed forces, Slovakia donated a significant part of its military equipment, including its entire MiG-29 fleet, S-300 air defence battery, and part of the KUB missile system to Ukraine. The tone of the Slovak government's diplomacy towards the Russian Federation also significantly hardened. At the same time, it is also important to note that most of the Slovak population did not stand behind its government's total support for Ukraine. A significant number of citizens blamed NATO for the escalation of the conflict and considered the sanctions imposed on Russia excessive or counter-productive.¹⁴ Furthermore, the increasingly unpopular government faced the challenge of an economic downturn, highly polarised domestic public opinion, and serious efforts to become independent from Russian raw material supplies. If Bratislava's stance towards Kiyv and Moscow had been maintained, Slovakia's political position probably would have been strengthened in Brussels.¹⁵ However, the pro-Ukrainian government lost elections in September 2023. A national reversal occurred, and a new Slovak government was formed, which, like Hungary, urged the end of the conflict through cease-fire and negotiations. Fourth-time elected prime minister Robert Fico called for peace in Brussels one day after his inauguration and announced that no further Slovak armament shipments would be sent to Ukraine.

5. Faulty lines

The war in Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped the international arena. Moscow's actions seriously violate the basic principles of international law, which require Russia to settle its dispute with Ukraine peacefully, to respect its territorial integrity and sovereignty and to prohibit genocide.¹⁶ Their actions are all the more shocking given that the Russian Federation is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Whatever Moscow's original plan was, they had to modify it. To the surprise of many, the Western community reacted decisively and stood next to Kyiv not only in words but also in deeds. EU Member States immediately began cooperating to aid Kyiv. Although they eventually unanimously condemned the Russian aggression and voted in favour of the EU sanctions package, in the beginning, they were divided over the military and humanitarian assistance to be provided, which not only created new tensions in Brussels but also in the countries bordering the conflict zone. Russia, however, underestimated the Western World and made another mistake in its calculations. Along with the international community, they were almost sure that even if Kyiv tried to resist and fight back, it would only be capable of doing so for a few days. But that is not what happened. Ukraine has stood up and continues to fight, primarily using military equipment that Western countries have donated. The effectiveness of these measures varies, but their sacrifice is heroic. At the same time, the resistance entailed such a loss of manpower and material destruction, the consequences of which are drastic for the sustainability of the Ukrainian nation and statehood.

In practical terms, as soon as the invasion began, the Visegrád Group were suddenly inundated by a flood of refugees.¹⁷ Although they did not have the logistics and infrastructure to cope with such a large human influx, they could mobilise resources and provide assistance quickly. Their rapid response was of enormous importance, as Europe had previously perceived the V4 as countries pursuing a robust anti-migrant policy. During the migrant crisis of 2015-2016, all V4 countries had challenged the introduction of refugee quotas by the European institutions. Hungary, to protect its territory, even built a physical fence along the border. The positive attitude of the V4 countries towards the Ukrainian refugees reflected what the V4 countries had declared countless times before, that there is an evident difference between refugees and migrants, and not supporting migration does not mean refusing help to those in trouble.

With their aggression in Ukraine, opposition to Russia and sympathy for the refugees amongst the Visegrad group became more evident. There are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, Russia's actions in Ukraine provoked almost universal sympathy towards the Ukrainian people. On the other hand, the fact that there had already been a Ukrainian diaspora in the V4 countries before the invasion helped, because the locals had already had experiences with them, so they were more readily accepted. In this way, the Visegrád Four were united not only at the governmental but also at the social level.¹⁸ However, this solidarity seems to be decreasing in recent months, primarily due to the competitive advantages provided by the EU for Ukrainians over the domestic population.

5. Negative effects of the war on V4 cooperation

The most significant criticism towards Hungary from other Visegrad Countries has been because of its posture towards the Russian Federation. While Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw assisted Kyiv with substantial military equipment such as light weapons and ammunition, tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft guns and even aircraft, as well as Soviet-made helicopters still in active service in some V4 armies, Budapest's contribution was primarily limited to humanitarian aid and diesel fuel¹⁹. From the beginning of the invasion, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán has been reluctant to support Ukraine militarily.²⁰ He did not allow its Allies to use Hungarian territory to transfer weapons to Ukraine. Despite his support for EU sanctions, the prime minister and members of his government have regularly criticised these measures aimed at punishing Russia.²¹ On the one hand, Orbán obviously does not want to confront the country with which he has close economic ties. On the other hand, this attitude has been the most effective way to provide protection to the hundred thousand ethnic Hungarian community living in Western Ukraine. Orbán has argued from the start of the conflict that European sanctions would be ineffective and counter-productive and would punish the Union more than the Russian Federation.

In some forums, Poland, Slovakia and Czechia have also joined the mainstream opinion on Hungary, condemning Viktor Orbán as "Putin's henchman" for not helping the Ukrainians militarily. None of them thought that Hungary was a peace-loving NATO member state and, therefore, did not want to get involved in conflicts with third countries such as Russia or Ukraine.²² The latter sentiment was, moreover, reinforced

by the fact that evoking the collective security mechanism in NATO would threaten a global war if a member state were to engage in hostilities with a third-party actor. Viktor Orbán's government has not been willing to risk that outcome.

6. Dynamics in the CE Region

As months have passed, it has become increasingly clear that the war in Ukraine is reshaping the political dynamics of Central and Eastern Europe. Months after the Russian offensive, little has changed. Budapest's close ties with Moscow had already been a thorn in the Allies' side long before the invasion. They knew that Moscow had been giving natural gas to Hungary at a discount price, and they also learned about the loans the Russians provided to finance the expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant. There have been critical voices about the operation of the Russian International Investment Bank in Budapest, which left Hungary shortly after the outbreak of the war. They argued that such favours are not given for free.²³ At the same time, the Hungarian government operates with unprecedented electoral authority, and its decisions are accountable to the Hungarian citizens.

Hungary's closest ally, Poland, has been sharply critical of Orbán and his government. Jarosław Kaczyński, Poland's former deputy PM, scolded Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán for his refusal to condemn Russia for the mass killing of civilians in Buczacz, Ukraine.²⁴ Polish President Andrzej Duda has also publicly criticised the Hungarian Prime Minister.²⁵ Of the V4, it is not only the Poles who consider Orbán's attitude to the war in Ukraine to be seriously flawed. Influential politicians from both Slovakia and Czechia have repeatedly blamed the Orbán government with the result that at the end of March 2022, the defence ministers of Czechia and Poland refused to attend a V4 meeting in Hungary.²⁶ Cooperation then shifted to an even slower track.

After the Wagner mercenary rebellion in the summer of 2023, many believed the incident could reverse Hungary's position. However, at the V4 summit in Bratislava following the attack, Viktor Orbán said there was no reason for his country to change its foreign policy or approach to the Russia-Ukraine war. A positive of the meeting was that the V4 countries continued to agree on refugee policy.²⁷

7. How to Continue

Whatever the tensions, there are still plenty of reasons for the Visegrad Four to cooperate. In Czech political discourse, both Hungarian and pro-Russian narratives are regularly reflected. For example, some pro-Russian politicians in Czechia (such as Tomio Okamura, leader of the far-right opposition SPD) try to convince the Czechs that the country should follow Hungary's example and negotiate with the Kremlin on natural gas supplies as the loss of Russian sources raises significant energy security issues.²⁸

Although Jarosław Kaczyński, former President of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland, criticised Hungary's position on the war, he later said in an interview that Viktor Orbán had never let down his Polish partners at the EU level so Poland would not break off relations with Hungary and has intentions to continue the cooperation.²⁹ Former Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki has also tried to find common ground with Hungary.³⁰ The European Commission's crackdown on Poland's alleged disregard for the rule of law and its infringement proceedings against the country, just as it did against Hungary, could play a significant role here. At the same time, it is also important to note that the new Polish PM, Donald Tusk can expect an utterly different reception in Brussels than Morawiecki. As a former president of the European Council, he is expected to pursue a policy that is thoroughly acceptable to European progressives and will distance Warsaw from Bratislava and Budapest. Until now, neither Czechia nor Slovakia has had any significant problems with the European Commission, so there is no need for them to be in a hurry to renew the V4 cooperation.³¹ In Slovakia, however, a national turn occurred in the September 2023 elections, which is frowned upon in Brussels. It is, therefore, possible that the Budapest-Warsaw connection will be restructured as a Budapest-Bratislava one shortly.

The Visegrad Four, currently in hibernation, will be hard to renew until the issues Ukraine has raised are resolved. Petr Pavel, the new Czech head of state who took office on 9 March 2023, added that there is no point in reorganising the V4 from the ground up. It is much easier to wait for a change of government in Hungary.³² Looking at the state of the Hungarian opposition, there is almost no chance of that in the short term. Orbán's victory in the 2022 elections has been the biggest in Hungary since the fall of the Iron Curtain.

At the same time, on the V4 level, we cannot say that an action would not follow those cases in which the policy is unified. A good example is the recent joint step against the unlimited import of Ukrainian agricultural products. Unrestricted dumping of products seriously harms all four countries, so a common position was born and articulated.³³

8. Conclusion

The Visegrad Group has reached a tipping point in the face of growing geopolitical and security challenges. The external and internal dynamics of the regional alliance of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia have encountered obstacles where the need for unity clashes with competing views, aims and pressures. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has significantly changed the course of cooperation. The ideological convictions of new and old governments in the member states make it even more difficult to find common ground and increasingly challenging to find the way back to practical cooperation.

In the face of this growing complexity, the V4 faces a challenging task: to reconcile differences and present a united front. In other words, to find the least common multiple and use it as a basis for negotiation. The survival of the Visegrad Group depends on putting the collective good above individual interests. Only by finding common ground and strengthening the mutual goals that bind nations together can the V4 navigate the complexities ahead and enhance its regional relevance. However, this requires recognising that the members have common interests in many more areas than they do not. They should not focus on the issues on which they disagree but on those on which they do. As long as there is a willingness amongst the leaders of the four countries, the Visegrad Group will have every chance to continue the collaboration and represent the will of the whole Central European Region.

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