

# The future of the V4 and the Orbán regime's room for maneuver

*Summary*

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In this paper, we focus on the current situation and prospects of the Visegrad Group, briefly review regional cooperation outside the V4, and discuss how this affects the foreign policy space of the Orbán government.

In June 2021, we looked at the situation and prospects for the Visegrad Group (V4), which includes the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. At that time, in our report<sup>1</sup> "*V4 Strategies in the European Union Rifts within the EU and the Visegrád Group*", we concluded that a more coherent and stronger Central European cooperation at the institutional level could make a significant contribution to the development of the countries of the region. However, this is only possible if the V4 does not function as an alternative to the European Union (EU), but as a complement to and reinforcement of European integration.

The history of the V4 so far confirms this. The members of the group have always been able to influence the EU when their priorities were largely in sync with common European goals. For example, the V4's key foreign policy demands - the Eastern Partnership and the emphasis on European integration of the Western Balkans - have also become EU priorities. Similarly, the V4 countries have been calling for the diversification of the EU's energy sources since 2014, and this has become a priority for the EU and its Member States in the wake of the Ukraine crisis in 2022. Politically, even on the issue of international migration, the V4's position has been able to become decisive, with several key EU Member States, including France and Austria, coming close.

**After a strengthening since the mid-2010s, the Visegrad Group's position and influence in the EU have started to weaken over the last two to three years.** Divisions between the member countries have deepened on a number of important issues (e.g., security policy, relations with Russia and China), with countries going their separate ways or seeking to assert their interests in international cooperations outside the V4.

Since the Russian aggression against Ukraine, effective cooperation seems distant. After the escalation of the war, it was mainly the pro-Kremlin stance of the Orbán government that broke the cohesion of the V4. The formation of the Fico government, which is also more pro-Russian, could further reinforce this division, given the Czech Republic's and Poland's distinctly hardline policies towards Russia. The first visible break in the past two years occurred in March 2022, when the Czech and Polish governments canceled the meeting of defense ministers in Budapest during the Hungarian V4 presidency, undoubtedly because of the pro-Kremlin policies of the Orbán government. Even the Polish government, led by the Law and Justice (PiS), an important ally of Fidesz, could not accept the Hungarian anti-sanctions position, nor could it even persuade the Orbán government to at least quietly express its views on Russia.<sup>2</sup>

**Since 2015, the pro-Kremlin stance of the Hungarian government has already prompted Poland to seek alternatives to the Visegrád Cooperation in the region.** As a middle power and one of the strongest states in the region, Poland is at the center of a number of regional cooperation efforts to provide an alternative to the V4 in supporting Ukraine. These include

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<sup>1</sup> [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES\\_PC\\_V4\\_Summary\\_EN\\_210624.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES_PC_V4_Summary_EN_210624.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://telex.hu/direkt36/2023/05/15/igy-haragitotta-magara-orban-viktor-a-legkozelebbi-baratait>

the Three Seas Initiative, the Lublin Triangle, the Weimar Triangle and the Bucharest Nine. These initiatives focus on strengthening NATO's and the EU's eastern flank against Russia and support for Ukraine, which occupy a prominent place in Polish strategic thinking.

After Slovakia took over the presidency from Hungary in mid-2022, it focused on the least controversial issues of cooperation, such as the diversification of energy sources, the use of nuclear energy, transport, and cooperation on sustainable development. However, tensions persisted over Hungary's policy towards Russia, leading to the cancellation of the V4 parliamentary speaker's meeting in autumn 2022. This meeting was eventually rescheduled to early February 2023 in Bratislava, where László Kövér, Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly, explained that the secret of "success" was to seek cooperation on issues where there was more common ground than division and to try to avoid issues where there were differences of opinion. Similar reasoning was later used by Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, who admitted in an interview that although the V4 was "not in its best period", cooperation was ensured by focusing on what was in everyone's interest.

However, as the V4 countries see stopping Russian aggression in Ukraine as a fundamental security threat, the relationship to the war is unlikely to be completely sidelined. During a visit to Bratislava after his inauguration in March this year, Czech President Petr Pavel said that he currently perceived the V4 as a consultative forum with no ambition to develop and coordinate a common foreign and security policy. Previously, in his electoral campaign, Pavel was even more critical, deeming the V4 as shallow from a security policy perspective. Later, statements by the Czech government, which has held the Visegrad presidency since July, have also been more encouraging on the V4, as have occasional statements from Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland calling for a revitalization of the V4. Still, Petr Pavel's formulation is accurate given the current situation: the V4 is now no more than a forum for consultation.<sup>3</sup>

**Despite frictions policy coordination is still ongoing in the V4**, and there is also a special pre-summit consultation process, but this group of countries is hardly capable of developing significant common positions that can influence European politics. The V4 calendar shows 16 high-level meetings in 2021 and only 10 in 2022. Some meetings have been canceled or postponed.

**Besides war, the other major issue for the V4 is European migration and asylum policy.** This is probably one of the issues on which the Orbán government would like to see full agreement among the V4 member states, but the previous unity has also broken down in recent years, as not every country opposes the new European migration pact. In October this year, only Hungary and Poland voted against the Council's common position on the regulation of migration crisis response, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia abstained. Even Viktor Orbán said that it would be good if the V4 countries were united on migration, but this is no longer the case.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/v4-praha-summit-cesko-slovensko-polsko-madarsko-pavel-fico-orban.A231115\\_155540\\_domaci\\_svm](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/v4-praha-summit-cesko-slovensko-polsko-madarsko-pavel-fico-orban.A231115_155540_domaci_svm)

<sup>4</sup> <https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/09/29/orban-viktor-miniszterelnok-kossuth-radio-nyilatkozat>

The Visegrad Group's relation to the EU is also changing. Until now, the Euroskeptic rhetoric of the Polish and Hungarian governments was responsible for damaging the „brand”. Prague and Bratislava have, therefore, sought to defend their international prestige in recent years by working with Vienna. But the Polish elections in October 2023 will certainly mark the beginning of a comprehensive change. **The new Polish government is expected to seek a much better relationship with the European institutions**, and the Fico government could take a critical line towards the EU alongside the Orbán government - although the latter, as a member of the eurozone, will have much less political leeway in this respect. At present, the Hungarian prime minister seems to be increasingly alone in his anti-Western views, and his room for maneuvering in foreign policy is shrinking, including within the V4.

**Within the V4, Poland and the Czech Republic will form a much more constructive tandem in the European Council.** Either the V4 alliance will be emptied out, or it will gain new momentum along the Warsaw-Prague axis: the militarily, politically, and economically more powerful, Western-oriented Czech Republic and Poland may become even more dominant in Central and Eastern Europe, while the Orbán regime, which is committed to Russia and other Eastern autocracies, may increasingly find partners only in the Balkans.<sup>5</sup> The Hungarian government can, at most, cooperate on a case-by-case basis with the Slovak government, which is also pro-Kremlin, but this alliance will not make up for the loss of its Polish ally.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of EU-Hungary relations, the realistic scenario is that the status quo will be maintained in the short- and medium-term. Hungary has already lost its ability to effectively influence EU decision-making (barring areas where unanimity is needed). It does not have enough allies to build a blocking minority of 4 states representing at least 35% of the EU population. Due to the animosity between Budapest and other capitals, Hungary's views and interests might not be taken into account sufficiently in the Union's decisions.<sup>7</sup>

To ensure the future of regional cooperation, the V4 needs to rethink the way it works. If this is not done, the V4 could become irrelevant behind the already more important international groupings that have been created as a result of the geopolitical changes triggered by the war in Ukraine. **As there is no alternative to the Visegrád Cooperation for Hungarian foreign policy in the region, further isolation could also weaken Hungary's ability to assert its interests in the EU.** If the Hungarian government is unable or unwilling to change its relations with Ukraine and the EU institutions, it is unlikely that the V4 will be revived in the near future.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=3251](https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3251)

<sup>6</sup> <https://pcblogger.atlatszo.hu/2023/09/30/szlovak-magyar-ke-t-uj-jo-barat-a-szlovak-valasztas-kulpolitikai-kovetkezmenyei/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES-PC\\_Summary\\_EU-HU\\_230926.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES-PC_Summary_EU-HU_230926.pdf)

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Full study in Hungarian: [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES-PC\\_Tanulmany\\_V4\\_231129.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES-PC_Tanulmany_V4_231129.pdf)

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