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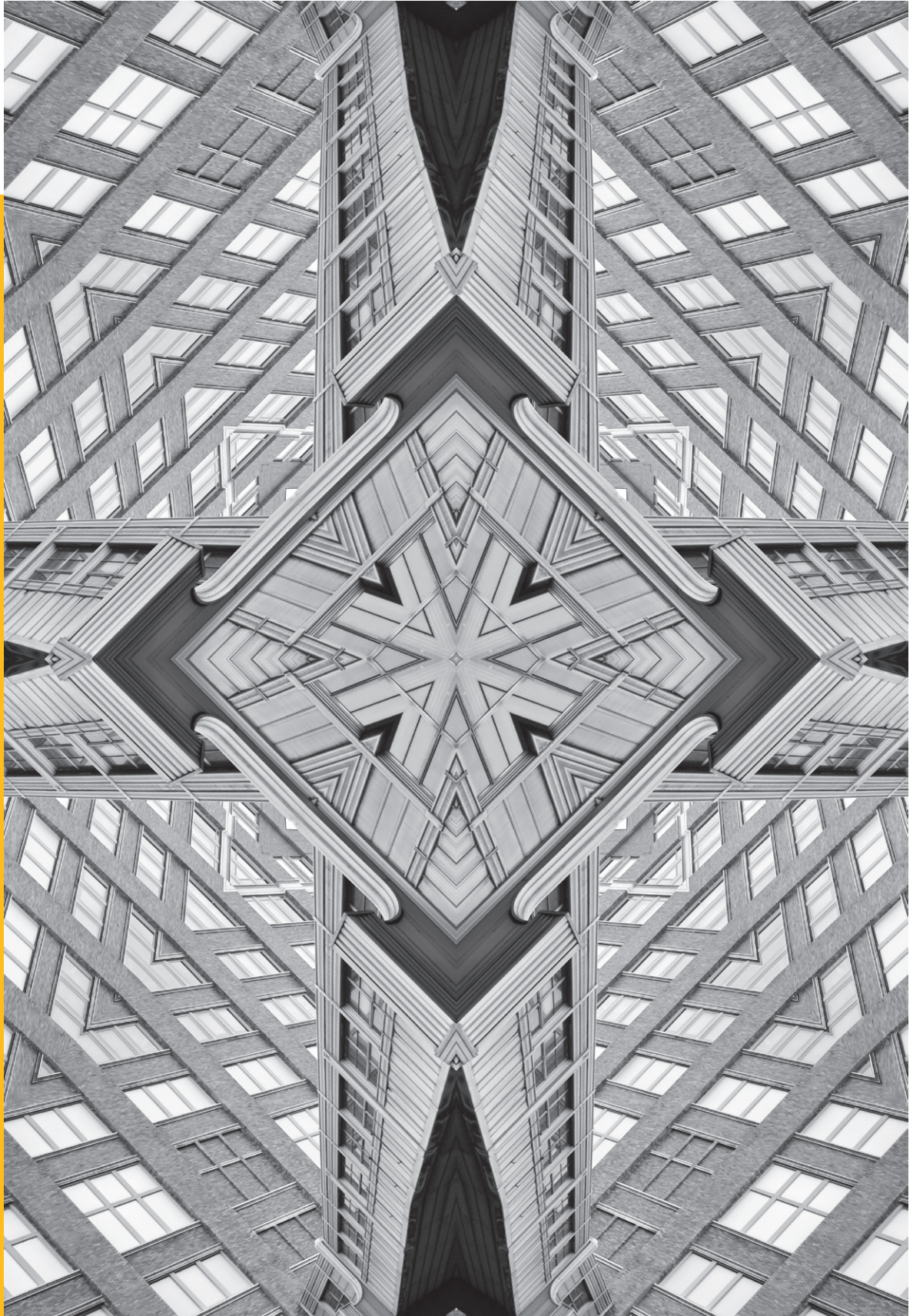
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A Divided ‘Visegrad Four’ Navigates Relations with the European Union

Ankita Dutta

Abstract

The Visegrad Four (V4) countries—Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary—are examples of communist states that have transitioned to liberal and democratic governance systems. In recent years, their visibility in the European Union (EU) has surged due to their contrarian positions on certain critical issues facing the Union, such as mass migration and, since 2022, the conflict in Ukraine. This paper analyses the impact of these trends on the relations between the V4 and EU and the dynamics within the V4, especially concerning the crisis in Ukraine. The paper ponders two key questions: Have the V4 countries become significant actors within the EU, able to influence the Union towards their respective policy outlooks? And has the V4 been able to sustain their cooperation amidst the changes these countries and the EU have gone through in the recent past?

At the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia came together to bind their future with the Euro-Atlantic structures. Establishing the Visegrad 3 in 1991,^a they aimed to promote regional integration to address their socio-economic challenges after independence and work together to become members of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). With the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993 into Czech Republic and Slovakia, the platform expanded to Visegrad 4 (V4). These countries became members of NATO in 1999, and of the EU in 2004. They tried to balance their national and regional agendas with that of Europe through sustained coordination of their outlooks and policy orientations using the V4 platform.

Once considered to be pro-EU members, over the past decade, the V4 countries appear to have taken on the role of naysayers in many critical issues facing the EU, such as migration. They question the idea of supranationalism and advocate that the role of the EU institutions^b is to support the member states, the first step to which would be to respect their sovereignty. The Ukraine crisis that began in early 2022 has led to debates around the shifting of power within the EU from the West (i.e., France and Germany) to the East (Poland, Slovakia, Czech). This is primarily because the V4 countries, especially Poland, spearheaded the EU's response in terms of military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and pushing for sanctions on Russia.¹ At the same time, the dynamics within the V4 have also changed, with the countries taking different positions on issues related to Ukraine, Russia, and on the Article 7 proceedings initiated by the EU on Poland and Hungary.^c

This paper analyses the impact of these trends on the relations between the V4 and EU, as well as the dynamics within the V4, especially with reference to the Ukraine crisis. It will address two key questions: Have the V4 countries become significant actors within the EU and have they been able to influence the EU regarding the V4's policy outlooks? Moreover, have the V4 countries been able to sustain their cooperation?

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- a The selection of Visegrad, a city in Hungary, as the meeting place was a reference to the 1335 Congress of Visegrad where John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, Charles I of Anjou (Charles Robert), King of Hungary, and Casimir III, King of Poland met to intensify mutual cooperation and friendship among the three Central European states. See: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/congress-of-visegrad/gyorgy-racz-the-congress>
- b EU institutions include: the European Parliament, European Council, Council of the European Union, European Commission, Court of Justice of the European Union, European Central Bank, and European Court of Auditors.
- c Article 7 of the Treaty of the EU empowers the EU to act preventively in a situation where there is a clear risk of a serious breach of their avowed values.

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Early Years (1991–2004)

In 1991, the presidents of Hungary (József Antall), Czechoslovakia (Václav Havel), and Poland (Lech Wałęsa) came together to integrate the futures of their countries with that of Europe, in response to the altered conditions in Central Europe. The Visegrad 3 (V3) emerged from the Congress of Visegrad² in 1335 between the kings of Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary, which discussed a mechanism for settlement of disputes among the countries and an alliance to strengthen their roles in European affairs. These principles found resonance in 1991, when the three countries signed the Visegrad Declaration and established the V3. The declaration aimed to promote two parallel processes—regional integration to address the socio-economic challenges faced by these countries after their independence, and their integration within the European institution as part of their ‘return to Europe’.³

The Visegrad Declaration emphasised: “In unified Europe, to which the three countries wish to actively contribute, it is possible to maintain culture and national character while fully realizing the universal system of human values.”⁴ The establishment of the V3 was influenced by the domestic transition that these countries underwent in their political, economic, and social rehabilitation towards democracy and the free-market regime which, in turn, was influenced by their interest in becoming a part of both the EU and NATO.

In 1993, with the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia into Czech Republic and Slovakia, the V3 became V4. However, the government of Slovakia under then Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar chose to balance its foreign policy between that of Europe and Russia. This positioning was driven by the country’s economic dependence on Russia and growing tensions with representatives of the EU and NATO over its perceived failure to meet their political criteria for accession.⁵ The remaining three countries adopted a pro-European stand, with an emphasis on accession to the EU—this difference led to a downturn in cooperation among the V4 member states, with each focusing on its respective accession processes for the EU and NATO. This further led to a slowdown in Slovakia’s accession process to NATO as well as in the working of the V4.⁶ With a change of government in 1998, Slovakia under the leadership of Mikuláš Dzurinda chose to prioritise Europeanisation and the Visegrad agenda, placing the country on a similar trajectory as the other three countries. Therefore, only Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were granted membership to NATO in 1999, and Slovakia joined in 2004.

A rationale for the establishment of the V4 was to achieve integration among themselves and strengthen their voices within Europe. Key achievements

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during this period include the implementation of the Central European Free Trade Agreement in 1993, the withdrawal of the Soviet army from the region, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Comecon, and the beginning of the accession process of the countries to the EU and NATO. This period also saw the emergence of divergences among the member states, including the focus on domestic transitions during 1993–1998 for their respective accessions into NATO and the EU and the 2002 proposal by the Hungarian government to launch investigations into the Benes Decrees,^d which was considered to be in contravention of EU laws.⁷

Nevertheless, both the positive and negative developments highlight the underlying historical differences between the countries and reflect the attempts by leadership to overcome these differences to forge a consensus towards regional integration.

Realising the ‘European Dream’ (2004–2014)

In the two decades since the accession of the V4 into the EU and NATO, the V4 has emerged as an active voice within the EU, while also challenging the EU. A closer look at the declarations and documents adopted in the late 1990s and the early 2000s highlights that the V4 had begun discussing issues that would emerge from their integration with the EU and their need to maintain a unique identity based on their divergence from their communist history with the aim of overcoming their historical antagonism to pursue common goals. The Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 1999⁸ adopted at Bratislava and the 2002 Annex to Contents of Visegrad Cooperation⁹ adopted at Esztergom, Hungary, point to enhancing cooperation in additional areas, including border protection and illegal migration, economic relations, and science and technology. Accordingly, consultations and issuing of joint statements on issues of common interest were emphasised.

^d In 2002, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán made a statement in the European Parliament regarding the repeal of the Benes Decrees. The decrees declared that Germans, Hungarians, traitors, and collaborators living in Czech lands and Slovakia would have to relinquish their Czechoslovak citizenship and property without compensation. Furthermore, approximately three million ethnic Germans and Hungarians were expelled from the country from 1945 to 1947 (<https://www.private-prague-guide.com/article/the-benes-decrees/>).

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The year 2004 was a turning point for the V4 countries as well as the entire EU. The so-called ‘big bang’ enlargement resulted in the accession of ten central and eastern European countries^e to the EU and the culmination of the foreign policy priorities that the V4 states had defined at the end of the Cold War. Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia had been integrated into the European institutions and were now accorded a say in shaping the future European agenda. These developments led to serious questions regarding the significance of the V4 platform.

Emphasising the importance of the V4, the leaders of the four countries based their future cooperation on the Kroměříž Declaration¹⁰ (2004), reiterating their commitment to the future enlargement of the EU and establishing a set of guidelines¹¹ that defined areas of cooperation, including culture, education, and defence. The declaration also delineated their cooperation with NATO, EU, and other partners and organisations. The critical aspect of these guidelines was the attempt to provide a structure to the cooperation. As part of these mechanisms, a rotational one-year presidency was established along with a yearly prime minister-level summit, informal meetings of high-level leaders before any international event, and increased communications between national coordinators. The presidency as well as the yearly programme allowed for better coordination among the V4 countries on key priorities.

As part of the EU, these countries started advocating for a stronger policy in the EU’s extended neighbourhood. These conversations were already part of the V4 dialogues and had been mentioned in the 2002 guidelines. The Orange Revolution (2004–2005) in Ukraine resulted in the EU taking note of building a neighbourhood policy, thus creating an area where the interests of the V4 overlapped with those of the EU.

Emphasising “cultural closeness and common historic experience”, the V4 called on consideration of the “effective use of the instruments of regional co-operation to provide our Eastern neighbours stronger support in the implementation of their reforms and bringing them closer to the EU.”¹² The Polish–Swedish recommendation for the European Neighbourhood Policy was the first step in this direction. The negotiations for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) began in 2008, with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine and culminated in 2009,¹³ which led to political and economic cooperation among the EU and these countries. For the V4 countries, the implementation of the EaP resulted in twofold outcomes—first,

e The 2004 EU enlargement enabled the accession of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

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the V4 was able to manifest its influence in the region as the prime movers of the EaP, and second, it was able to achieve closer cooperation with these countries. The V4 also extended its cooperation with these countries under their International Visegrad Fund, through which they provided scholarships and cultural exchanges to students from the region.

The countries' work with the EU can also be analysed through their presidencies in the EU. Their EU presidency has allowed them to drive their respective national interests while providing them with the opportunity to present these regional interests as being collectively championed by the V4 countries. The six-month EU presidency provides member states with an opportunity to set an agenda for the EU Council and create an impact on areas such as foreign policy and trade. The priorities set by the member states also allow a greater understanding of the goals and aspirations of an individual member as well as how it views and aligns with the goals set by the EU. Between 2004 and 2014, three of the four members held the presidencies—the Czech Republic in the first half of 2009; and Poland and Hungary in 2011.

During the Czech Republic's presidency in 2009, two events occupied the attention of the EU—the economic crisis of 2008 and the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.^f The Czech presidency's central theme was "A Europe without barriers" and its priorities included Eastern partnership, energy security, and free movement of workers.¹⁴ From the perspective of the V4 cooperation, the Czech Republic's agenda overlapped with that of the V4 on the issues of energy and neighbourhood. Energy security had emerged as an important area of discussion among the V4 countries, especially after the Ukraine gas crisis of 2008–2009,¹⁵ when gas supply was halted by Russia for over 13 days. The Czech Republic called for a comprehensive energy policy at the EU level and for the diversification of energy resources away from Russia to ensure energy security.¹⁶ As these four countries are also highly dependent on Russia, energy security has been a central theme of their discussions. These pre-meetings at the V4 level resulted in the formulation of opinions that were presented at the EU level.¹⁷ Thus, this platform was instrumental in promoting the mutual interests of these countries.

^f The ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon was officially completed by all member states of the European Union on 13 November 2009 when the Czech Republic deposited its instrument of ratification with the Italian government.

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Meanwhile, the Hungarian presidency in early 2011 highlighted the differences among the members. While the EaP and the enlargement of the EU remained key priorities,¹⁸ in alignment with the V4 priorities, Budapest deviated from its policy on energy security when its gas company, MOL, and the Russian oil firm Surgutneftegas signed an agreement.¹⁹ Hungary's relations with Russia had differed from those of the other V4 countries, and these differences were exacerbated during the Crimean crisis of 2014, when Prime Minister Orban termed the EU's sanctions on Russia as akin to "shooting oneself in the foot".²⁰

The Polish presidency in the latter half of 2011 had a pro-European agenda, with the following three priorities:²¹ European integration as a source of growth; a secure Europe in terms of food, energy, and defence; and Europe benefitting from openness. This presidency discussed the adoption of the economic governance package, initiated negotiations over the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020, and worked towards the adoption of the Single Market Act.²² Poland emphasised the EaP along the lines of the adoption of a new programme by the V4, the Visegrad 4 Eastern Partnership,²³ to enhance cooperation among the V4 and EaP countries to help the neighbourhood countries deal with the challenges of democratic transition.

The increased representation of the V4 countries in the EU during the 2004–2014 period is reflective of one of the stated goals of the V4: to be active as "policy-shapers in the EU and instead of being passive onlookers."²⁴ The influence of the V4 in coordinating their position was also challenged by French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009, when he said that "if they have to meet regularly before each council, that could raise questions."²⁵ These comments were described as "double standards" by the V4 countries, pointing to the coordination between the French and German governments.²⁶ The idea that the V4 was used to strengthen the central and eastern European region to amplify their voice within the EU was also emphasised.²⁷

V4 goes the Eurosceptic Way (2014–2022)

The first decade of the V4 countries' accession to the EU was marked by their efforts to integrate themselves within the EU institutions. At the national level, these countries were undergoing substantial changes, with the rise of Eurosceptic political parties including Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland. Additionally, the crisis in Ukraine and the Crimean annexation in 2014, followed by the migration crisis in 2015–2016 and Brexit in 2016 led to the V4 countries asking critical questions, including the defence of the V4 and the EU border, policy towards Russia, and the future of the EU in a post-Brexit world.

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The shifting political environment in the V4 countries marked the beginning of the Eurosceptic phase of these countries. Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary since 2010 and the PiS government in Poland since 2015 have emerged as prominent voices within the V4 group to push forward the Eurosceptic agenda. These countries are perceived as naysayers in key policy areas of the EU; for example, the Hungarian president has called his country an "illiberal democracy"²⁸ and accused Brussels of "Hungarophobia".²⁹ Similarly, other leaders of the V4 have accused the EU of interfering in their domestic politics.³⁰ Two arguments have been presented³¹ as to why these countries have emerged as Eurosceptics—the first is the slide towards nationalistic politics, with the idea being that, while these governments may have adopted European benchmarks of democracy, rule of law, and economic policies, they have never internalised them; therefore, there is always a tussle between the supranational and the national policy space. Second is the role played by leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Miloš Zeman, Roberto Fico, and Andrzej Duda, who have fuelled the populist agenda within their countries and pushed a nationalist narrative that presents the EU as antithetical to nationhood.

The following sections examine the evolution of this Euroscepticism and the positions of these countries on critical issues and highlights emerging divisions among the V4 states.

The Crimean Crisis and Policy towards Russia

The V4 countries have been unable to formulate a common position on Russia because of their differing threat perceptions and national interests. These divisions were on display even before the Crimean Crisis of 2014, during the 2008 conflict between Georgia and Russia, with the Slovakian prime minister accusing Georgia of being responsible for the crisis, Hungary of opting for neutrality in the conflict, and Poland of extending support to Georgia.³²

After the annexation of Crimea, the V4 countries called on Russia to respect the 1994 Budapest Memorandum which guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity and stated that Russia's actions violated international law, creating a dangerous situation in Europe.³³ At the EU level, these countries supported sanctions on Russia and lent their support to the internal reforms in Ukraine. At the V4 level, they stressed that this conflict echoed their experiences of military interventions of 1956, 1968, and 1981.³⁴ One of the key outcomes

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was the passing of the proposal for the establishment of a second V4-EU Battlegroup,^g which was achieved in 2019. However, at the national level, there were fundamental differences in their assessments: Poland considered the crisis to be symbolic of the looming Russian threat in the region; Hungary viewed the crisis through its own interests in the treatment of Hungarian minorities; and while the Czech Republic and Slovakia did not share similar concerns as Poland and Hungary, they were also not in favour of either direct engagement in the crisis or of providing monetary assistance to Kiev.³⁵

Moreover, as the crisis unfolded, the Hungarian government consistently called for the lifting of economic and political sanctions against Moscow which were considered to be hindering Budapest's economy.³⁶ The relations between Ukraine and Hungary have also spiraled since 2014, with Budapest blocking Kiev's quest for membership of both NATO and the EU. The key issue is the treatment of Hungarian minorities by the Ukrainian government, especially limitations on the rights of Hungarian minorities to use their native tongue after Ukraine passed a law in 2017³⁷ which restricted the use of minority languages in schools. Even Czech President Milos Zeman questioned the sanctions,³⁸ along with Bratislava.³⁹ Out of the four countries, Poland's position has remained the most consistent in its support for sanctions on Russia as well in its provision of trainings for Ukrainian troops.⁴⁰ This is primarily because Poland has traditionally viewed Russia as an existential threat and a source of instability in NATO's eastern flank owing to Poland's historical experiences with Moscow as well as Russia's actions in Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014). Warsaw's position was reinforced after the Ukraine crisis of 2022.

Thus, aside from the joint statement at the beginning of the conflict and the initial support to the EU in implementing sanctions on Russia, the V4 countries have adopted diverging positions and policy frameworks towards Moscow. These have been largely influenced by their strategic objectives, national interests, and their own domestic challenges.

^g Under the V4 defence cooperation—which aimed to contribute to the EU's rapid response capabilities and to strengthen interoperability and military interaction among the V4 countries—two V4-EU battlegroups have been established—in 2016 and 2019. The third standby period of the V4-EU battlegroup is expected in 2023.

Migration and Asylum Crisis

The migration crisis of 2015–2016 became one of the most politicised issues within the EU, causing dissonance among EU member states as well as within the V4. As the number of migrants arriving at the EU’s shores kept increasing, EU ministers approved a burden-sharing plan under the European Agenda on Migration in 2015, which included shared responsibility and solidarity with member states. Each member state was given a quota, i.e., the number of people that will be relocated depending on a member state’s economic growth, size, and population. This quota system was rejected by the V4 countries, largely due to the ideological narrative that was presented by the countries—a Christian European identity, migration linked with increased crime, and the rejection of multiculturalism. The V4 countries emphasised that national sovereignty should be respected in the areas of asylum and immigration.⁴¹

This was further emphasised at the V4’s Extraordinary Visegrad Group Summit on migration in September 2015, and the declaration highlighted⁴² that each country should have the opportunity to decide on the number of migrants within their respective territories. It pointed out that there was a need for preserving the voluntary nature of the EU’s solidarity; thus, any proposal that led to the introduction of mandatory and permanent quotas for solidarity measures were unacceptable for the V4.

To stem the flow of migrants, these countries announced the deployment of guards along the Bulgarian and Macedonian borders on the Western Balkan route.⁴³ Their confrontational position continued with respect to burden sharing and proposed ‘Flexible Solidarity’ during the Bratislava Summit in 2016—to enable member states “to decide on specific forms of contribution taking into account their experience and potential. Furthermore, any distribution mechanism should be voluntary.”⁴⁴

While unity within the V4 was arrived at on the issue of migration, there was division in the aftermath of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling which dismissed the complaint of Hungary and Slovakia on the quota system in 2017 and upheld Brussels’ right to force member states to take in asylum seekers.⁴⁵ The ECJ, defending the decision of the Council, pointed out that the decision-making process was in line with the EU treaties, and that the EU institutions were on “firm legal ground”⁴⁶ when they adopted measures to

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tackle the migration crisis. In June 2017, the EU launched an infringement procedure against the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland for their failure to implement the quota system. Notably, Slovakia was the only V4 country that implemented the ECJ ruling and opted to take in refugees.

Differences were also visible within the V4 with regard to the European Commission's proposal on the European Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2020, with the Czech Republic and Slovakia taking relatively easier positions compared to Hungary and Poland. Even during the endorsement of a negotiating position on Asylum Procedure Regulation and the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management in June 2023, divisions over the voting mechanism used to approve the deal emerged as the contentious point.

The new deal was passed through a qualified majority voting (QMV) instead of unanimous voting; while the Czech Republic chose to abstain from voting, Poland and Hungary rejected the pact over concerns around the type of voting.^h The use of QMV resulted in the inability of Warsaw and Budapest to use their veto, as they have usually done. However, they were able to get their consensus⁴⁷ added to the conclusions on the external dimension of migration, which was released after the EU Summit in June 2023, thus highlighting the need for unanimity in any future discussions.

^h Under the EU treaties, a qualified voting system by the European Council is sufficient for legislation on migration and asylum. However, the Council has rarely followed this process before.

The Future of EU

On the heels of the migration crisis, the Brexit vote of June 2016 renewed the debates regarding the future of EU. Through the launch of the Bratislava Process in 2016, the V4 laid out an expansive view of how it viewed the future of European governance. This was aimed at assessing “the current state of the EU and identify the major priorities for the future”.⁴⁸ The countries laid out a basic structure of what they believed was necessary to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the EU, including, “first, balance between the EU institutions as defined by the Treaties, including the role of the European Council to provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and define the general political directions and priorities and second, strengthen the role of national parliaments underlining respect for the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.”⁴⁹ It further called on the EU to respect the diversity among the member states and keep negotiations open and inclusive to all members.⁵⁰

These guidelines became the structure of the 2018 V4 Statement on the Future of Europe, released under the Hungarian presidency of the V4. This statement highlights the dichotomy of their approach to the issue; while they emphasise that the EU is the best framework to tackle any internal and external challenges, the larger statement highlights their own national aspirations. Three instances in the statement point to this. The first is “respecting the specificities of the member states, with an emphasis on the right of member states to carry out domestic reforms within their competencies. Second, in order to strengthen and empower the national parliaments, the V4 called for the introduction of the ‘red card system’.ⁱ Third, they stated that, on matters related to national interests, member states should be entitled to demand a unanimity-based decision at the European Council.”⁵¹

While convergences among the V4 were highlighted in these statements on matters related to the future of EU, there were emerging divisions within the V4 on several of the positions undertaken by the national governments. The key example of this is the Article 7 proceedings launched by the EU on Poland and Hungary. Poland, under the government of Law and Justice Party (PiS), had introduced far-reaching changes in its domestic policy, including controversial reforms in the constitutional court in 2015, which led to mass protests in the country. This led to the European Commission adopting a Rule

ⁱ This would enhance the sovereignty of national parliaments, enabling them, jointly, to “stop unwanted legislative proposals”. The red card would force the Commission to amend or drop the draft law to accommodate national concerns.

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of Law Recommendation on the situation in Poland,⁵² which was the first time that this framework was used against a member state. However, the Polish government continued to extend its control over the judiciary throughout 2017–2019,^j which led the EU Commission to launch proceedings against Poland for breaching European common values and rule of law under Article 7, which could lead to suspension of voting rights and blocking of EU funds. Hungary, too, under the leadership of President Orbán, was at loggerheads with the EU.

From the 2016 controversial referendum on the mandatory EU quota on refugees to the rule of law crisis in the country, the government has gradually taken control of democratic institutions, engaged in corruption in the spending of EU funds, and curbed civil liberties, which resulted in the EU Commission launching Article 7 proceedings against Budapest in 2018.⁵³ However, as the proceedings under Article 7 require unanimity, pledges by Hungary and Poland to veto such a motion against the other have rendered the article useless. This also raised questions around the credibility of the EU to implement its rules and regulations on the issue.

To bring an effective toolkit to deal with rule of law issues, the EU passed the conditionality mechanism, which entered into force in 2021. This allowed the bloc to freeze funding in cases when “breaches of the rule of law principles affect or seriously risk affecting the EU budget or the EU’s financial interests.”⁵⁴ These instruments have been used against Hungary and Poland, with their cohesion funds being frozen by the EU.⁵⁵ Since 2021, Warsaw has been incurring a daily fine of 1 million euro for not following an EU court order to dissolve a disciplinary chamber for judges.⁵⁶ Concerns over Hungarian rule of law also led the European Parliament in 2022 to declare that the country can no longer be termed a democracy but as a “hybrid regime of electoral autocracy.”⁵⁷

However, the limitations of this instrument were evident in the way both Poland and Hungary have used their veto powers to block some EU measures, including financial aid to Ukraine as well as the agreement on a minimum global corporate tax rate, to gain leverage over the release of funds. The latest European Commission report of July 2023 on the state of the rule of law in member states has highlighted that Poland is the most recalcitrant, closely followed by Hungary.⁵⁸

j In 2017 it passed a law that would lead to the mandatory retirement of all Supreme Court judges apart from those which were granted extension by the Minister of Justice; in 2019 it passed the Polish Supreme Court Disciplinary Chamber law which changed the process through which the Chief Justice is appointed, thereby challenging the independence of the judiciary.

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Both Prague and Bratislava have preferred to remove themselves from the rule of law issues with the EU. This is because both states recognise that the membership of the V4 comes at the price of being overshadowed by their two bigger neighbours. As the differences between the members of the V4 are more in line with their strategic outlook, both Prague and Bratislava are less nationalist as well as sovereigntist in their respective outlooks than Warsaw and Budapest, and they see themselves to be politically and economically anchored in the EU.⁵⁹ Thus, both governments appeared to have reached an understanding of not sharing Poland's or Hungary's concerns over a lack of cohesion within the EU and on doubling down their support for the integration process of the EU.

This was also highlighted in the Czech Presidency Programme of 2022, where Prague emphasised building closer links with the mainstream members of the bloc, thereby counterbalancing ties with its traditional regional partners that are in conflict with Brussels. Similarly, through its foreign and European policies, Slovakia has been making efforts to integrate with the EU as well as focusing on the V4 platform. While recognising the importance of the V4 platform, Bratislava highlighted that it needs to continue its efforts “to build a positive perception of the V4 brand” and that “Membership in the EU and NATO multiplies the possibilities for promoting and defending the interests of the Slovak Republic.”⁶⁰ Thus, it will continue to actively involve itself in reinforcing the stability and security of the region.

During the 2014–2022 period, while there were continued efforts by the V4 countries to strengthen their overall positions and outlooks towards issues of mutual concern towards the EU, there were subtle differences in their approaches related to their outlooks towards Russia, migration, and the future of Europe.

The V4 Since the Ukraine Crisis

The trajectory of the V4 countries took a turn in 2022. The conflict in Ukraine and the emerging stand-off between the EU, Poland, and Hungary on issues related to migration and democratic backsliding has led to concerns around the divisions within the V4. Two simultaneous processes have been observed within the power dynamics of the V4—the V3+1 (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia; and Hungary) and the V2+V2 (the Czech Republic and Slovakia; and Poland and Hungary).

The response of the V4 states towards Ukraine and the positions taken by Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia effectively turned the V4 into V3+1. Poland has emerged as the most active V4 and EU member to provide support to Kiev as well as a key logistic hub for military and humanitarian aid. It also houses a large number of Ukrainian refugees and has led efforts to impose harsh sanctions on Russia. Similarly, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have sent military aid to Ukraine along with air defence systems. However, the response of Hungary has been lukewarm; while it supported initial rounds of sanctions, it has stalled discussions and used its veto to either dilute some of the sanctions (particularly related to energy) or to extract concessions from the EU.^k Budapest also refused to either supply Ukraine with military aid or allow its territory to be used to deliver arms to Ukraine from a third country.⁶¹

The first fissure within the V4 was the cancellation of the Defence Ministers Meeting in March 2022 in Budapest during Hungary’s V4 presidency, following the declaration by the governments of the Czech Republic and Poland that they will not participate due to Hungary’s relations with Russia.⁶² Polish Deputy Head of the Ministry of National Defence Wojciech Skurkiewicz pointed towards the pessimism within the V4 platform, stating that “what is happening today around the Visegrad Group does not inspire optimism for the coming months.”⁶³ Slovakia, taking on the presidency from Hungary, focused on areas of practical cooperation and played down the differences. Bratislava’s programme emphasised the least contentious issues, including diversifying energy sources, the use of nuclear energy, transportation, sustainable development in Central Europe, and close cooperation on the V4’s approach towards defence and hybrid threats.⁶⁴

k Budapest blocked the EU’s financial aid package for Ukraine worth €18 billion in 2022 so as to receive covid-recovery funds, which were blocked by the EU due to lack of adequate reforms in Hungary. (<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/12/06/eu-ministers-delay-key-votes-on-tax-deal-and-ukraine-aid-over-hungary-impasse#:~:text=Hungary%20has%20blocked%20the%20approval,the%20backdrop%20of%20Russia’s%20invasion.>)

The V4 Since the Ukraine Crisis

However, divisions over Hungary's policy towards Russia persisted, leading to the cancellation of the V4 meeting of Speakers of the Parliaments.⁶⁵ However, the leaders met in November 2022 for the V4 Summit, where Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger stressed that "all countries within the group acknowledged the importance of V4 format given how connected the countries are"⁶⁶ and stressed on finding common grounds on issues related to Ukraine and migration.

Additionally, the changing political leadership in the Czech Republic, with Petr Fiala's Democratic Party coming to power, has bolstered its determination to cement its relations with western Europe. Prague and Bratislava have been trying to distance themselves from Warsaw and Budapest on issues related to rule of law, judiciary reforms, and press freedom. While the governments of both countries have stated that they are keen to cooperate with Poland and Hungary on issues of mutual interests, underlying divergences remain.

Still, it does not point towards a dissolution of the Visegrad, as these countries have been able to cover similar grounds on certain issues, such as the Czech Republic and Poland blocking the EU's bid to reform the Emissions Trading System⁶⁷ and the Czech Republic and Poland resolving issues related to the Turow coalmine in 2022.⁶⁸

The V4 cooperation has served as an important foreign policy tool to push the interests and concerns of Warsaw and Budapest, especially as they have been somewhat isolated within the EU. The Ukraine conflict has strained relations between the two countries, as Hungary has adopted a different position from the rest of the partners. Even as Poland and Hungary rely on each other against efforts by the EU to penalise them for democratic backsliding, their policies towards Russia differ, with Poland viewing Russia as a threat and Hungary expanding its relations with Moscow, even during the course of the current conflict.

Thus, the crisis in Ukraine has been instrumental in recalibrating the V4 dynamics, with Poland being the most active in calling for and providing support to Ukraine as well as in condemning Russia's actions. Warsaw has been supported by the EU as well Prague and Bratislava in this regard, whereas Budapest has helped soften and block sanctions implemented on Russia to extract gains from the EU.

In May 2024, the V4 countries will commemorate 20 years of their accession to the EU. While the V4 was created to fill the vacuum that emerged after the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has since transformed into a vehicle for these countries to discuss and highlight their regional aspirations and goals. While it has had its share of upheavals, starting with the breakdown of Czechoslovakia in 1993, followed by Slovakia taking a different path towards the EU accession, the continued existence of the V4 has made it an important regional platform for these countries.

This paper has attempted to answer two related questions: Have the V4 countries become significant actors within the EU, and have they been able to influence the EU regarding the V4's policy outlooks?

The V4 countries have been somewhat successful in influencing the EU in select policy areas. While some of their positions might be contrary to the EU agenda, many of their priorities are largely in sync with those of the EU. The V4's most important policy outlooks—Eastern Partnership and an emphasis on the integration of Western Balkans into the EU—are also priorities for the EU. Similarly, these countries have been advocating for the diversification of the EU's energy resources away from Russia since 2014, and this has become a priority for the EU and its member states after the Ukraine crisis of 2022. Even on the issue of migration, while the EU's hardline position might have made headlines, many of the member states, including France and Austria, adopted cautious approaches to the issue.


The second question is whether V4 countries have been able to sustain their cooperation through the changes that these countries and the EU have gone through in the past few years.

On the policy consensus among the four countries, the goal is to remain united over the key issues. However, their unity has wavered over their differing approaches. Currently, new dynamics of V3+1 and V2+V2 are evident, which is the result of their specific policy outlooks. While Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia remain steadfast in their commitments to Ukraine, Hungary is an outlier; similarly, the rule of law proceeding against Poland and Hungary has resulted in Prague and Bratislava distancing themselves from their regional partners and doubling down on their European outlook.

Therefore, V4 unity is currently being tested. A lot will also depend on the outcome of the Ukraine crisis, which has resulted in a breakdown of the European security architecture established at the end of the Second World War and reinforced after the Cold War. There are renewed debates over the need to overhaul these structures as well as to fast-track decision-making

Conclusion

processes. While eastern European members have been proactive in pushing the Ukraine policy within the EU, the trajectory of the conflict will impact the work of the V4 as well as how far these countries can push other EU members. Another important factor is the October 2023 elections in Poland; if the present government continues, Poland's standoff with the EU is also likely to continue, along with their coordination with Hungary, which would create further rifts in the V4. However, a change in the government could lead to the stabilisation of relations with Brussels and a possible freezing with Hungary.

While the lack of a common political drive within the V4 is evident, it is too soon to draw any conclusions on its future trajectory. This is primarily because the V4 is not a coherently structured platform and its dynamics are influenced by multiple factors, including the peculiarities of each member state, their current policy priorities, and their relations with the EU. While the Ukraine crisis might have emphasised the inconsistency in the positions of the V4 member states, it is too early to write off the grouping. 

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