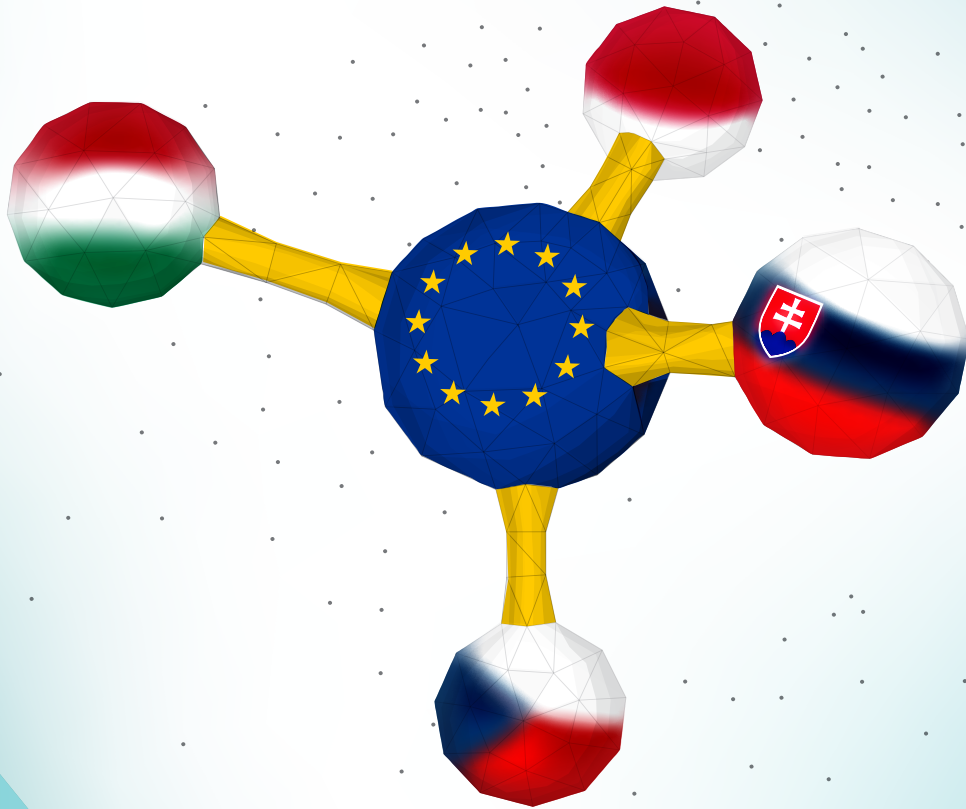


GLOBAL
EUROPE



Valency and the V4

The Changing Political Dynamics of the Visegrád Four Group

By Alexander Conway | July 2022

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Introduction

Alliance building in the EU is characterised by a kinetic dynamic, whereby Member States are attracted towards or repulsed by one another, and combine or divide themselves in order to achieve influence, enhance their bargaining power, and reduce the complexity of negotiations. Those countries with the strongest connections tend to be smaller Member States which are consistently active in forging new coalitions, particularly in the post-Brexit environment such as the New Hanseatic League which included Ireland and the Netherlands among others and emerged from policy alignments around economic policy. As the geopolitical map of the EU continues to evolve and change, a significant policy challenge is to look beyond established or traditional alliances, and the old coalitions of the EU's original six Member States, which have lost some of their traction or are no longer as influential as they were before the enlargement of the Union.

Negotiations between the 27 Member States are often highly complex multi-level discussions where political leanings, geographical proximity, cultural affinities, historical legacies, and policy preferences often influence how Member States interact with one another. This paper focuses on one particular grouping within the European Union, the “Visegrád 4”(V4), which comprises Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The formation of alliances such as the V4 demonstrates how coalitions can enhance the relative bargaining power of Member States by pooling their resources and influence.

The first section of this paper outlines the origins and initial purpose of the coalition, and assesses the relative coherence, regularity, and intensity of the cooperation between the Visegrád Four, and the key positions held by members of the alliance. The second section evaluates the internal political dynamics within the Visegrád Four, since its establishment in 1991 up until the present, identifying three key turning points: (i) EU and NATO accession circa 2004; (ii) the 2015 Migration Crisis; and (iii) the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The third and final section assesses the potential future of the Visegrád Four, its relations with regional partners, and possible alternative political coalitions which are now emerging.

The Visegrád Four

“*Visegrád*” means ‘the upper castle’ and refers to a historical venue of a meeting between Bohemian (Czech), Hungarian and Polish kings in the mid-14th century. The Visegrád Group was officially formed on 15 February 1991 at the Castle of Visegrád in Hungary. The Visegrád Group (V4) was first formed as an informal grouping with a core objective to support the application and integration of its four member states, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia into the EU and, later, into NATO. Since achieving this goal the V4 has proven its viability by taking on new challenges in the further enlargement of the EU by cooperating with countries currently outside the Union as well by pursuing energy security in the Visegrád region. The V4 share a very strong common position towards EU enlargement, and particularly favour the accession of Ukraine and the countries in the Western Balkans.

V4 Organisational Structure

The Visegrád Four (V4) is a political and cultural alliance between Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic who cooperate in a coordinated and informal manner to achieve commonly determined policy objectives within the EU and NATO. If a calculation were made of the V4 as a single Member State, the V4 would account for 14.2% of the EU's population and would be in-between

France (15.1%) and Italy (13.4%) in terms of its weighted vote under qualified majority voting within the Council of the European Union.

Although it is a treaty-based coalition, the V4 does not have a formal secretariat and the only dedicated institution is the “[International Visegrad \[sic\] Fund](#)”, established in 2000 and based in Bratislava which is focused on providing grants and scholarships for regional development within the V4, and between the V4 countries and those in the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. Despite this, the V4 has been [relatively formalised since 2003, with regular inter-parliamentary cooperation](#) between national speakers and relevant parliamentary committees, under a rotating presidency, and has held regular Prime Ministerial meetings, and heads of state and government meetings before European Council meetings in order to coordinate their positions.¹ This political cooperation is mirrored in the preparatory working groups and diplomatic fora which feed into the European Council, where V4 members share knowledge and pool their collective technical and procedural expertise to coordinate their positions and advocate for their agreed upon goals at the European Council level.

The core of the V4 is characterised by a long-standing internal coherence, where its members were most likely to contact others within the alliance first to coordinate common European policy positions before going to countries outside the group.² The sense of a shared “Visegrád” identity was underpinned by extensive regular regional cooperation through inter-ministerial and official contacts both within EU structures and bilaterally, a clearly defined group membership,³ and its relative isolation within the EU due to the group’s strong negative identification with illiberal political positions.⁴ This shared political identity may also be a contributing factor to the comparative strength of illiberal populist parties in the V4 members who share a common opposition position to the perceived liberal values of the EU.⁵ This is partially tied to the shared legacy of communist control, but it has been perhaps also partially attenuated by the events in Ukraine.

Joint group statements enhance the profile and influence of the alliance within and beyond the EU, and the seemingly unitary nature is reinforced when cooperation with non-members are labelled as “V4+” activities.⁶ A [clear recent example](#) of this is the heads of government summit of the V4 with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in March 2022 to discuss defence and security cooperation in the context of the war in Ukraine.

This coherence is however dependent on policy alignment on certain files, such as transatlantic cooperation with the US and NATO, cohesion funding, relations with the Eastern Partnership countries and road haulage transport. While the alliance has been remarkably cohesive on the issue of migration management and reform since 2015, significant divisions towards relations with Russia⁷ have exposed

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- 1 Novotná, T. & Stuchlíková, Z. “Czechia: From a V4-Enthusiast to a V4-Sceptic and Back Again”, (2017), p.8.
 - 2 European Council on Foreign Relations (Oct 2018) “EU Coalition Explorer Results of the EU28 Survey 2018 on coalition building in the European Union” ECFR London. p.35.
 - 3 Braun, M. “Postfunctionalism, Identity and the Visegrad Group” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, (2019) p.2, 4.
 - 4 Kazharski, A. “The End of ‘Central Europe’? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four”, *Geopolitics*, 23:4, (2018), pp. 754-780.
 - 5 Krastev, I. & Holmes, S. “*The Light That Failed: A Reckoning*” Allen Lane, London, (2019), p.34.
 - 6 Kořan, M. ‘*The Visegrad Cooperation, Poland, Slovakia, and Austria in the Czech Foreign Policy*’, (2010) pp. 115–47.
 - 7 Dangerfield, M. “Visegrad Co-operation and Russia” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 50(6), (2012), p.959.

deep fissures within the group. The defeat of populist illiberal candidates in elections in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and a potentially fragile government coalition in Poland also pose challenges for the future effectiveness of the V4 in 2022 and beyond.

The relative importance and influence of the Visegrád countries is well demonstrated by three important leadership positions which its members assumed in 2022, namely:

- the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU (1 July 2022- 31 December 2022)
- the Polish Chairmanship of the OSCE (1 January 2022- 31 December 2022)
- the Slovakian Presidency of the Visegrád Group (1 July 2022-30 June 2023).

Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU

The V4 are set to play an enhanced role on the broader EU stage as the Czech Republic assumes the Presidency of the Council of the EU on 1 July 2022 until 31 December 2022, as part of the trio presidency programme initiated by France, and which will conclude with Sweden. This will be the second Czech EU Presidency overall. Its first Presidency in 2009, also fell in a trio with France and Sweden. The Czech Government have identified [five priority areas for its Presidency Programme](#) in order to secure the EU's strategic security, reinforce its democratic and economic resilience and strengthen military and infrastructural capabilities.

- I. Reaching a clear consensus on future EU membership for Ukraine, support for the long-term reconstruction of the country and support for Member States' hosting refugees;
- II. Improving the EU's energy security through diversification of supply and greater efficiency;
- III. Strengthening EU military and cybersecurity capabilities with a focus on closer transatlantic relationships between the EU, the United States and NATO;
- IV. Developing human-rights centric global standards for digital markets to shore up the economic resilience of the Single Market;
- V. Emphasising the importance of law and media independence with a renewed focus on the human rights legacy of former Czechoslovak president Václav Havel by implementing the European Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.

Polish Chairmanship of the OSCE

Poland assumed the Chairmanship of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna in January for 2022 and identified the need to reinvigorate debates about European security architecture as a priority, - a theme with renewed importance in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Polish Foreign Minister and OSCE Chair, Zbigniew Rau, stressed that Poland's approach would be predicated upon [respect for the priorities and principles of the United Nations and the Helsinki Accords](#). A key aspect of this is Poland's firm commitment to ensuring countries

are able to freely choose their [futures free from the logics of imperialism or power politics](#). Whether the OSCE proves to be a useful forum for negotiation or diplomatic engagement with Russia remains to be seen, but the Polish Chair firmly places Poland and, by-extension, the Visegrád countries at the [centre](#) of conflict -prevention, resolution, rehabilitation and settlement negotiations within the OSCE membership. Foreign Minister Rau underlined the importance of paying special attention to improving the security situation in the OSCE area, particularly by contributing to finding peaceful solutions to regional and protracted conflicts. Another priority for Poland as Chair is the focus on economic co-operation, as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability and fragility of states' economies, and responding to this challenge through effective multilateralism.

Slovakian Presidency of the Visegrád Four 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2023

Slovakian assumed its Sixth Presidency of the Visegrád Group on 1 July 2022 and has emphasised a need to return to the roots of Visegrád cooperation, namely a firm commitment to human rights, freedom, democracy, European integration and transatlantic cooperation.⁸ These priorities are grouped under four strategic headings: interconnections, economy, sustainability, and people.

I. Interconnections

The Slovak Presidency plans to support the immediate phase-out of the use of Russian hydrocarbons, taking into consideration Member States' individual circumstances, and supports the further development of low-carbon and nuclear energy to shore up European energy security, underscored by the prospect of an energy shortage and sharp increases in energy prices in winter 2022. Further investment in regional transport links is also important, particularly to facilitate alternative logistics routes for Ukrainian freight cargoes given the blockages in the Black Sea. The final component of strengthening interconnections is pursuing closer relations within NATO for defence and security relations, with a focus on those countries in NATO's Eastern Flank, particularly Romania, and also with Ukraine.

II. Economy

Slovakia will advocate for a socially equitable economic growth model for the EU and underscore the importance of reinforcing the Union's economic resilience in the face of disruptions like those caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Removing barriers to cross-border service provision across the Single Market and supporting investment into new digital technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) will also be policy goals for the Slovakian Presidency.

III. Sustainability

Slovakia is keen to foster greater sustainable development in Central Europe, and will underscore the need for a socially just ecological transition in the context of the Fit for 55 policy package discussions. An emphasis on how to manage geological resources in the region in the context of the European Commission's Critical Raw Materials policies will also be important for Slovakia to balance

8 [4777_v4-program-angl-ok.pdf \(mosr.sk\)](#)

environmental protection with strategic autonomy ambitions. A common approach towards migration management which is sustainable, and the reform of the Schengen Area is also a priority for the Slovakian Presidency.

IV. People

Furthering the Visegrád Four as a cultural space in Europe is a critical objective for the Slovakian Presidency, which it will pursue through youth and educational exchange programmes within and beyond the region, as well as the development of joint regional cultural programmes. Shoring up the rule of law in the EU in order to reinforce its effectiveness and credibility as a multilateral actor is another priority for the Slovak presidency, particularly with reference to human rights promotion, (as noted in [Slovakia's 2021 foreign and European policy](#)). This strong emphasis is particularly marked in Slovakia's relations with Russia and China, and other non-democratic regimes.

Slovakia recognises the importance of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the Slovak Foreign Ministry favours further increasing the representation of Slovak citizens in the EU institutions, as well as the representation of fellow V4 members. Another priority is ensuring that the V4 retain a strong voice within the EU and other international institutions, for example the appointment of former Slovakian Foreign, Miroslav Lajčák, as EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and Western Balkans and has also served as President of the UN General Assembly.

Slovakia's Presidential priorities for relations with third countries are oriented along four axes.

(i) The first is with those countries in the Eastern Partnership (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) and fostering closer trade, economic, political, and increasingly defence ties in the context of Russian regional aggression. The inclusion of these strategically located countries into V4+ meetings may provide a vector for greater engagement, as well as other fora such as the Three Seas Initiative or NATO partnerships.

(ii) The second axis is the Western Balkans region, and the Visegrád Group are strong proponents of EU enlargement, although Slovakia's non-recognition of Kosovo as independent may affect efforts on this front.

(iii) A third critical relationship is with Germany, Slovakia's largest single trading partner, and the Slovakian V4 Presidency will likely prioritise building closer relations with the Scholz Government and alignment on Ukraine.

(iv) The final axis is the critical transatlantic dimension, and which will build on the joint defence cooperation agreement signed in February 2022 between Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok, Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad and US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken.

Variable Visegrád Valencies (V4, V2+2, V3+1)

In chemistry, the valency of an individual element determines how different atoms will combine with one another and why they tend to react in the way that they do when exposed to sufficient amounts of energy, released either internally or applied externally. The combination of electrons in the orbit

around atoms, *each of equal weight* helps to determine whether ultimately fission or fusion may occur. This concept can be used as a metaphor for the dynamics within the Visegrád Group in terms of the variable geometries between the four countries of approximately equal weight, the relative strength of the bonds between them and their stance on different policies, and the impact of exogenous and endogenous forces upon these bonds.

Origins (1991-2004) – Return to the West

The Visegrád Group (V4) was [originally established in 1991](#) by the leaders of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary who shared a common desire to “[return to the West](#)”, in order to: overcome their respective communist heritages, surmount historical animosities between themselves, and to enhance regional security and economic stability in the context of a perceived security vacuum following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. This group of three countries, later four following the “velvet divorce” of Czechoslovakia, quickly morphed into a pre-accession coalition for EU and NATO membership and has since retained a relatively robust regional identity.⁹

This cooperation has been driven by both common security and economic policies, shared cultural values and (recent) historical experiences, which are all highly conducive factors for coalition formation and coherence.¹⁰ In comparison to the Benelux Union (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) or the Nordic Council (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, as well as non-EU members Norway, Iceland, and their respective territories), the V4 is a much looser, less formally coordinated or institutionalised coalition. The group’s objectives since NATO accession in 1999 (which Slovakia joined in 2004) and EU accession in 2004, have however arguably lost some of their initial coherence given the absence of a clear policy or political objective to replace EU and NATO membership, save the vague promise of regional cooperation.

Backstage (V4)

[2004-2015 – Consolidating a Pro-European Alliance](#)

The Visegrád Four’s accession to the EU and NATO by 2004 marked a reevaluation of the purpose of the grouping, which was outlined in the 2004 [Kroměříž Declaration](#) which reaffirmed their commitment to greater regional cooperation and further integration into European and transatlantic bodies, as well as offering the V4 as a model for other aspiring EU or NATO members. The institution of regularised V4 meetings ahead of European Councils in 2009 helped to develop the V4 as a coherent political grouping around which to build consensus with other Member States, notably through the Friends of Cohesion grouping which lobbied for maintaining cohesion spending for underdeveloped regions of the EU in the 2013-2020 MFF. The V4 were also strong proponents of greater Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) expenditures in order to reduce the perceived productivity gap with more developed EU agricultural producers.

The narrative of V4 as a model for other aspiring NATO or EU members to emulate has been undermined by concerns due to backsliding over the rule of law or corruption in members of the V4 and the economic difficulties which several of them faced after the 2008 global financial crisis. Despite these challenges

9 Braun, M. “Postfunctionalism, Identity and the Visegrad Group” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, (2019),

10 Kaeding, M. & Selck, T.J. “Mapping out Political Europe: Coalition Patterns in EU Decision-Making” *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique*, Vol.26, No.3, (2005), p.282.

and political differences between the political leaders of the V4 whether conservative, liberal or social democratic, the regularised consultations led to low-level but consistent internal cooperation and coalition-building efforts, particularly with [Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Bulgaria and Romania](#), focused on critical shared policy interests like [energy, enlargement and the Eastern Partnership](#).

Centre-Stage (V2+2)

2015-2021 – Euroscepticism and Emerging Internal Division

The critical development for the definition of the political character and prominence of the V4 emerged during the zenith of the 2015 migration and refugee crisis, where the alliance was resolute in their opposition to mandatory relocations, or quotas proposed by the European Commission. This stance combined both a shared view that it was the responsibility of Member States, not the Commission to manage the EU's borders and to process asylum-seekers, refugees, or economic migrants, and that the European institutions were overstepping their boundaries and infringing on Member State competencies.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Visegrád Four was arguably best characterised by being more of a “V2+2” format¹¹ with Poland and Hungary as one pole, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia as another within the V4 group. In this context, Hungary and Poland perceived the Visegrád coalition as a counterweight to Western European Member-States which could be leveraged to both retain past gains, such as cohesion funding, while opposing further integration which might impinge on national sovereignty.¹²

In contrast, Slovakia was, and remains, the Visegrád member most positively disposed towards greater EU integration, and the only member of the group which is in the Eurozone, which it encourages the others to join.¹³ The Czech Republic under Prime Minister Babiš (2017-2021), and further underscored by the current incumbent, Prime Minister Fiala, (2021-), has gradually presented as a more neutral constructive face of the V4 towards other Member States.¹⁴

These divergent positions were however partially reconciled by the migration crisis through joint statements on the importance of protecting the Schengen Area^{15 16} and through successful joint efforts to block EU reforms on refugee policies. In spite of the apparent

internal divisions, the V4 retained its overall coherence as a political coalition within the EU by deliberately coordinating common positions and voting positions within the European Council and the Council of the EU, particularly on migration and defence portfolios.¹⁷ The V4's institutional resilience is also due to the group's strong sub-regional identity,¹⁸ which has made it more stable than more ephemeral single-issue groupings in the EU, such as the “New Hanseatic League”.

11 Skrzypek, A. “Diverging Visions for Europe: EU and Visegrad Group at the Midterm of Legislative Period 2014–2019”, (2017), p.37.

12 Tamás, B. “Hungary and the Visegrad Four”, (2017), p.16

13 Łada, A. “Poland's European Policy – Drifting Away From the Mainstream”, (2017), pp.18-22.

14 (ibid.) Łada, A. “Poland's European Policy – Drifting Away From the Mainstream”, (2017), pp.18-22.

15 Visegrad Group “Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Countries”, (2015)

16 Visegrad Group “Joint Statement on Migration”, (2016).

17 Geist, R. “Slovakia: Squaring the Visegrad Circle”, (2017), p.26.

18 Braun (2019).

Off-Stage (V3+1)

2021-Present – A New Era for Visegrád?

The dynamic of the V4 was [increasingly characterised by a V2+2 division](#), between Hungary and Poland and their conflicts with the European Commission and other Member States, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia whose recently elected governments have made concerted efforts to align more closely with Member States like France and Germany. Emblematic of this shift is the election and appointment of the governments of Eduard Heger in Slovakia and Petr Fiala in the Czech Republic, both of whom have pledged to break from the populist policies of their predecessors and who have a more explicitly liberal or pro-EU stance. The Russian invasion has now pushed the dynamic more towards a V3+1 where Hungary is increasingly isolated as Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic cohere around a very strong anti-Russian stance while Hungary maintains close ties with Russia.

Despite cooperation between V4 to jointly oppose policy files such as the EU Mobility Package which could [negatively](#) impact relatively lower-cost Central European logistics firms, or concerted [Czech](#) and [Polish](#) opposition to reforming the EU's Emissions Trading Schemes (ETS), increasing [divisions](#) are emerging within Visegrád. Foreign policy is a particular concern, given the perceived closeness of Hungary to Russia and China while the Czech Government investigates Russian intelligence activities within its borders. In turn, the contentious Turów coal mine on the Polish-Czech border is the subject of a legal dispute before the European Court of Justice. The Czech Government has been particularly public in its disapproval of Hungarian policy, [cancelling meetings](#) of V4 Defence Ministers due to perceived close links with Moscow.

Fission

The V4 has been a powerful medium for enhancing the political and diplomatic heft of its members, and the diminished internal cooperation since the recent Czech parliamentary elections and [Russian invasion of Ukraine have split the grouping](#) which have reduced its influence along two main axes. This is particularly apparent for Hungary, and to a lesser extent Poland, who are increasingly isolated within the EU as V4 support from Slovakia and the Czech Republic dwindle.

The next section explores these axes of division within Visegrád; the first fission within the V4 which is due to rule of law, which has split the V4 into a V2+2, and the second which concerns the interconnected issue of relations with Russia and energy security.

Rule of Law

The first divide within the V4 on the issue of rule of law, derives from Poland and Hungary's leaning towards illiberal democracy. Allegations of their undermining of judicial independence is pulling them further away from the new Czech and Slovakian governments whose mandates include upholding and reinforcing the rule of law in the face of populist measures.

It is notable that on Wednesday 27 April 2022, after Prime Minister Viktor Orbán won a fourth consecutive term at Hungarian parliamentary elections, the European Commission finally triggered the [rule of law budget mechanism](#) probe against the Hungarian Government's management and

auditing of EU funds, which would block EU funding, due to systemic rule of law concerns over public procurement practices and the spending of EU funds. COVID-19 pandemic Recovery Funds have been withheld from Hungary since 2021. The same mechanism was, however, not launched against Poland as it is reported that officials considered that there was a stronger case of corruption against Hungary than Poland. This could signal a further split between Poland and Hungary and the increased isolation of Hungary, or ultimately, the possible formal censure of Hungary by all 26 other Member States which would suspend Hungary's voting rights in the EU. It may also reflect Poland's strong leadership approach to responding to the Ukraine crisis, its membership of the Weimar Triangle group with France and Germany in coordinating foreign and security policy responses towards Russia, and the considerable number of refugees who have sought shelter in Poland.

Russia

The second fissure is on attitudes towards Russia which have [driven a wedge between Hungary and the rest of the V4 countries](#). The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland have been at the [forefront of heavy arms deliveries, support for energy sanctions](#), and accommodating Ukrainian refugees. In contrast, Hungary opposes any NATO transfer of weapons to Ukraine through its territory and has [consistently](#) blocked or undermined sanctions.

Hungary is further isolated as the Hungarian government openly supported the re-election of the former Czech Prime Minister Babiš in the Czech legislative election, which has reduced Hungary's influence in Prague, and is further underscored by the Czech Republic's focus on strengthening ties with Slovakia and Poland, as well as Austria and Germany in comparison with the outgoing government of Prime Minister Babiš.

The mutual support between the Polish and Hungarian governments for one another in their clashes with the European Commission and European Parliament over illiberalism and democratic backsliding has also been further eroded by the Ukrainian crisis and Polish Deputy Prime Minister Kaczyński stated that [Poland can no longer cooperate with Hungary if they continue](#) their present course of action.

Energy Security

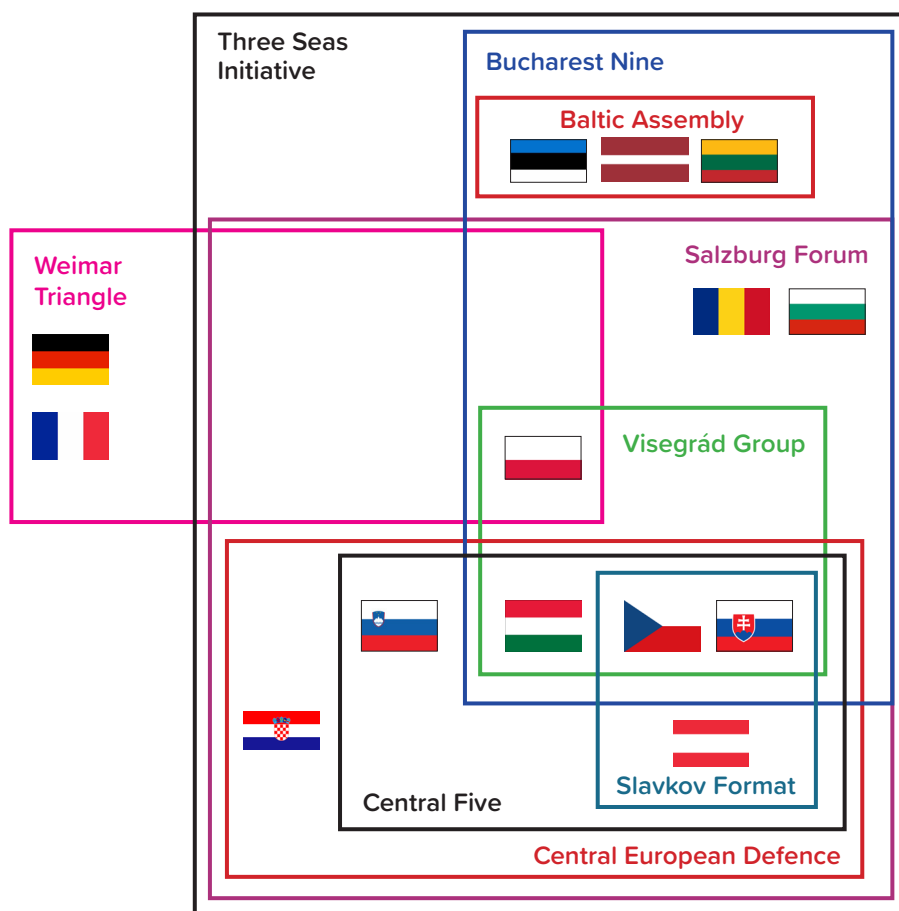
The most recent Polish and Czech presidencies of the V4 have consistently endeavoured to regularise V4 discussion on coordinating regional energy policies and energy security. The natural gas supply crisis in 2009, when Ukrainian gas supplies were cut, highlighted this intra-V4 cooperation when the V4 partners supported Slovakia in tackling its gas shortages. This has been followed up on by further interconnected natural gas and energy infrastructures, such as those for the critical Druzhba natural gas pipeline.

Nuclear energy is also a point of coordination, as all the V4 countries, bar Poland, rely on nuclear electricity generation, and they [all strongly favoured the inclusion of nuclear energy as part of the EU's Green Taxonomy legislation](#). The coordination of nuclear policy may be undermined in the context of divided opinions over respective V4 countries' reliance on Russian suppliers like Rosatom for uranium and waste disposal. The implications of a shift towards US, UK, or French suppliers by Slovakia and the Czech Republic, while Hungary retains its commercial relationships with Russian

state firms may further divide policy cooperation within the V4. The V4 are aligned on the need for a socially just climate transition, and for adequate compensation to minimise the negative implications of increased energy prices as well as potential social or economic dislocation, were employment in hydrocarbon industries, like coal-mining in Poland, to be wound down.

These developments all suggest a weakened sense of V4 cooperation, [although it is important to note that the alliance is not disbanded, merely dormant](#). The [most recent sixth round of sanctions against most Russia oil imports was inconclusive](#) after the Hungarian Government insisted they needed more time to consider it, despite a temporary exemption carved out to enable Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic time to end their dependency on Russian hydrocarbons given their landlocked status. The apparent unwillingness of Hungary to agree to a ban to sell-on Russian pipeline products like crude or refined oil may further exacerbate tensions within the EU and Polish-Hungarian relations, as supply of Russian oil is below that of global prices, giving Hungarian refineries exporters a competitive advantage and undermines the coherence of the single market. It also exposes a growing gulf in future energy policies, as Hungary is slower to diversify its energy supplies.

Regional Groups in The European Union

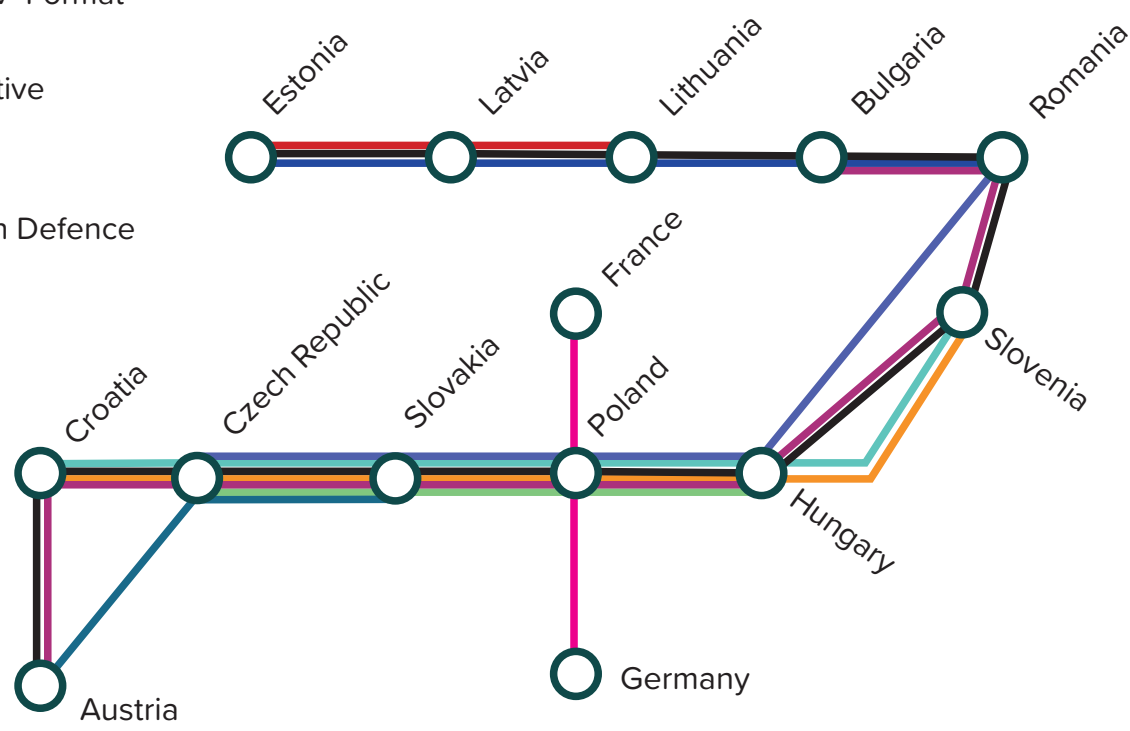


Adapted from - Ian Cooper and Fredrico Fabbrini "Regional Groups in the European Union: Mapping an Unexplored Form of Differentiation".

Table 1: Bottom-Up Regional Groups (BURGs) within the EU¹⁹

BURG	Est.	Participating Countries	Purpose	Institutional Features
Benelux	1944	Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands	Politico-economic union	Customs Union (1944); Parliamentary Assembly (1955); Economic Union (1958); Benelux Court of Justice (1965); Benelux Union (2008)
Franco-German Cooperation	1963	France, Germany	Political cooperation	Elysée Treaty (1963); Aachen Treaty (2019); Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly
Iberian Summit	1983	Portugal, Spain	Political dialogue	Bilateral summit of prime ministers
Visegrád Group	1991	Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia	Political cooperation	Ministerial meetings and summits of leaders; Visegrad Fund (2000); Interparliamentary cooperation (2003)
Baltic Assembly	1991	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	Political cooperation	Baltic Assembly (1991), Baltic Council of Ministers (1994)
Weimar Triangle	1991	France, Germany, Poland	Political dialogue	Meetings of foreign ministers, occasional summits of leaders
Salzburg Forum	2000	Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia	Home affairs cooperation	Meetings of interior ministers (2x/yr.); Meetings of police chiefs; meetings on margins of EU
Nordic-Baltic Six	2004	Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden	Policy coordination	Ministerial meetings in proximity to EU meetings
Central European Defence Cooperation	2010	Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia (Poland: observer)	Military collaboration, migration control	Meetings of defence ministers
EuroMed 9	2013	Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain	Political cooperation; economic policy coordination	Ministerial meetings; South EU Summit of national leaders (2016)
Slavkov (Austerlitz) Format	2015	Austria, Czechia, Slovakia	Political cooperation	Summits of leaders
Bucharest Nine	2015	Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia	Political cooperation of Eastern flank NATO+EU states	Meetings of leaders, foreign ministers, defence ministers
Three Seas Initiative	2016	Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia	N-S infrastructure, energy, economics, transport, business	Annual summits of national presidents; business forums
New Hanseatic League	2018	Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Sweden	Economic policy coordination	Meetings of finance ministers
Central Five	2020	Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia	Pandemic policy coordination; political cooperation	Meetings of foreign ministers
Franco-Italian Cooperation	2021	France, Italy	Political cooperation	Quirinale Treaty (2021)

- Visegrád Four
- Austerlitz/Slavkov Format
- Central Five
- Three Seas Initiative
- Baltic Assembly
- Bucharest Nine
- Central European Defence
- Weimar Triangle
- Salzburg Forum



¹⁹ [BURG_Table.png \(2200x1700\) \(dcubrexitinstitute.eu\)](#)

Regional Cooperation - the Eastern Partnership, Germany, and Austria

The pivotal location of the V4 in the geographic heart of the European Union reinforces its relevance and importance for other Member States and alliance groupings within the Union. However, [the V4 is very unlikely to formally expand its membership](#) in the near future, but rather continue with its “V4+” formats of selective policy-specific coordination efforts with like-minded countries.

Eastern Partnership

Energy policy coordination features as a significant component of V4 engagement with countries in the Eastern Partnership, a policy which was inaugurated in Prague in May 2009. The main aim of the partnership is to improve the political and economic trade relations of six neighbouring states of “strategic importance”, namely: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia—with the European Union. Ensuring respect for international law and stabilizing the security situation in the Eastern Partnership region, particularly in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is therefore an urgent priority.

Austria

Austria is unlikely to become a formal member of the alliance, although it is arguably the closest non-member to the V4. While there are some policy alignments, such as on energy infrastructure integration and regional cooperation, [the major fissure between Austria and the V4 is Austria’s avowed military non-alignment and neutrality across the political spectrum](#), while the V4 are firmly committed to NATO and even more so in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There are also significant differences on economic policy, notably that Austria is a net contributor to the EU budget, while the V4 are all net recipients, and Austria followed the German lead in welcoming migrants in 2016, while the V4 did not. Despite these differences, the [close relations between Austria and Slovakia and the Czech Republic in particular through the Austerlitz/Slavkov Format](#), and Austrian membership of the Central Five grouping, underscore the close ties to the Czech/Slovak half of the V2+2 dynamo. These relations are examined in the next section which explores alternative formats to the V4.

Germany

Germany is a particularly important Member State for the Visegrád countries, as the largest trading partner for each of them, as well as the largest and most economically powerful in the EU. There are [deep historic and commercial ties between Germany and the V4 countries](#), such as [the significant investment](#) in Hungary and previously close ties between Fidesz and the CDU/CSU party. Tensions between Germany and the V4 have been exacerbated since 2015 when they took diametrically opposed positions on the migration crisis. In 2015 Germany took in over a million refugees while the V4 explicitly refused to accommodate refugees and relations with Germany have been further strained due to concerns over growing illiberalism and the influence of non-EU actors like Russia and China in the region.

In 1991, the French, German, and Polish Foreign Ministers established the Weimar Triangle, based on the concept that the three countries shared a common vision of the future of Europe and that the

reconciliation of their societies would enable concerted European action. The Triangle was initially a critical forum for facilitating German-Polish reconciliation, inspired by the Franco-German post-war experience. After Poland's EU accession in 2004, the Weimar format developed into a more coordinated forum for ministerial meetings ahead of European Union negotiations and European Council summits, with a particular focus on coordinating foreign and defence policies.

Fusion – Alternatives to Visegrád

In matters of fission and fusion, chemistry finds that when sufficient energy is applied to an element (or a structure like the Visegrád Four) it may be split or divided into new arrangements of its existing components or, to seek out new elements beyond with which to form stable relationships and bonds. This section will explore four alternative permutations which may increase in prominence and relevance for the Visegrád members, if the group continues to be subject to pressures which cause it to divide. These groupings are: the Slavkov/Austerlitz Format, the Three Seas Initiative, the Central Five and the Bucharest Nine.

Austerlitz Format/Slavkov Trilateral (S3)

(Austria, Slovakia, Czech Republic)

The Austerlitz format or Slavkov trilateral was [established as a loose form of cooperation](#) on 29 January, 2015 in Slavkov (also known as Austerlitz), in the Czech Republic, at the initiative of the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka with his then Slovak and Austrian counterparts, Robert Fico and Werner Faymann. This trilateral format aimed to foster greater regional cooperation, economic growth, and employment with annual meetings of heads of government to define thematic focus areas.

Its initial establishment aimed to reconcile Austria and the Czech Republic, strained due to concerns about Czech nuclear power installations and differences over enlargement, as well as closer policy alignment between the three ahead of European Council meetings. The initial cooperation was predicated on the shared centre-left social democratic governments by the three countries, but this cooperation has [continued](#) since despite political differences between them. The [three were also aligned on opposing additional sanctions against Russia at the time in 2015](#), which the three countries shared with Hungary. This alignment was due to close energy and economic links which sprang from V4+ cooperation efforts, but the imposition of sanctions was opposed by Poland.

The formal absence of Hungary is in part due to perceived clashes between Budapest and Vienna for leadership of Central Europe in the EU, as well as the strong symbolism of the Visegrád Four's foundation which echoes the 1335 meeting between kings Charles I Robert of Hungary, John of Bohemia and Casimir III of Poland, who agreed to set-up a trade route which explicitly bypassed Vienna. Hungary's reluctance to include Austria and Slovenia in the V4 proved to be an obstacle to any formal extension of the V4.

The Slavkov/Austerlitz Format initially [served as a semi-formalised ad hoc extension of the V4+ format on a policy sector-by-sector basis](#), notably in regional transport and energy infrastructure.

The recent revitalisation since 2020 of the format may suggest that the [Czech Republic](#) and [Slovakia](#) have reasoned that the illiberal democratic label associated with Visegrád, which was dominated by the presence of the PiS party in Poland and the Fidesz party in Hungary, had negative reputational impacts for their influence and credibility in the

EU. Instead, they chose to move closer towards greater cooperation with Austria to expand their cooperation with like-minded Member States in Central Europe and to lessen the negative associations of Visegrád. This is well demonstrated by the ministerial visits to [Moldova](#) and [Ukraine](#) in the Slavkov/Austerlitz formats. Given the domestic political difficulties of the Polish government and the isolation of the Hungarian government, the Slavkov/Austerlitz Format may present an alternative forum for coordinating policy and forming policy coalitions within and beyond Central Europe.

Central Five (C5)

[\(Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary\)](#)

The Central Five (C5) is a relatively new loose format of informal political cooperation in the EU, established by the Austrian Foreign Minister, Alexander Schallenberg, on 16 June 2020 to coordinate common responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Central Europe. Meetings focused on border crossings and an exchange of views on EU activities to overcome the economic and social crisis caused by the pandemic. Foreign Ministers, Alexander Schallenberg (Austria), Jan Lipavský (Czech Republic), Ivan Korčok (Slovakia), Anže Logar (Slovenia) and Peter Szijjártó (Hungary) were the main actors involved. It has since evolved into regularised coordination between the Directors-General of relevant foreign ministries, as well as a discussion format for policy issues of common interest for Central and Eastern Europe approximately every three to six months, between foreign affairs ministers, particularly focused regional infrastructure, [border management](#), and [foreign policy coordination](#) towards the Western Balkans region. The group received a boost in its profile due to the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2021, and the C5 hosted Ukrainian foreign minister, Dmitro Kuleba, for a briefing on the security situation in Ukraine at the time.

Three Seas Initiative (3SI)

[\(Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Austria, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria\)](#)

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is a forum [established in 2016](#) between 12 EU Member States to improve energy, technology, and transport infrastructure links between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas through a shared [3SI Investment Fund](#). It is also a format for economic policy coordination and political dialogue between its members, as well as those partnering the initiative like the European Commission, Germany, and the United States. The 3SI's [stated goals](#) are to complement those of the EU, to promote regional development and cooperation and to address energy security concerns and improve transport links. There is a strong focus on encouraging commercial development and investment with [annual business summits](#), in order to address the perceived deficit in north-south transport links between the 12 countries.

Some countries, like the Czech Republic, are [wary](#) of the initiative and see it as being a potential vehicle for political influence for the Polish Government in the region, similar to the [Polish *Międzymorze* or *Intermarium* project in the interwar period](#). The 3SI is also alleged to have been [developed to counterbalance the Franco-German alliance within the EU](#) and to ensure that perceived anti-American sentiments in the EU did not undermine NATO relations. This Polish leadership position may be supported by [remarks](#) made by Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki on 6 June 2022 about extending membership of the 3SI to Ukraine to facilitate the country's economic reconstruction as it tied the sovereignty of the Three Seas countries to that of Ukraine.

Bucharest Nine (B9)

[\(Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania\)](#)

The Bucharest Nine (B9) format was founded in 2015 by the Romanian and Polish Presidents in the aftermath of the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea and is a sub-group of central and eastern European NATO member states. The B9 is a forum for deepening regional defence and security cooperation on NATO's "[Eastern Flank](#)". The group is also an important [conduit](#) for representing Ukrainian positions with NATO and the B9 have been a consistent voice calling for an increased NATO presence along the border with Russia. The group's influence is concentrated on security and defence matters, but it does enhance the international standing and authority of its members, particularly Poland and Romania as the nominal leaders, both within the [EU](#) and [NATO](#) in security discussions. The fact that the B9 is explicitly aligned along NATO membership may mean that it could expand its membership to include other NATO members or aspiring members neighbouring the EU, which has likely assumed a greater impetus since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. [Romania](#) in particular sees the B9 as a platform to enhance both the region's voice within NATO and to enhance transatlantic cooperation within the EU, which may offer a counterpoint to the perceived pre-eminence of Poland within regional bodies.

Conclusion

In seeking to analyse the Visegrád Four, the combining capacity of an atom or valency offers an apt metaphor to understand how alliances are formed in the EU. Whether in the context of the V4, the V2+2, or V3+1, the original V4, similar to other elements in the periodic table, originally combined in a manner which led to stability.

Policy-driven alliances like the V4 are particularly salient under the conditions where unanimity is required in negotiations and affects relations between Member States within the EU. These alliances are characterised by their demonstrated commitment to policy positions in order to both clearly signal negotiating red-lines and ideological coherence to both negotiations partners and external audiences in order to enhance their relative bargaining power and to reduce the room for compromise. However, as can be observed with the example of valency, when sufficient energy is applied, the original element undergoes fission and eventually (re)fusion and can result in new alternative possibilities, such as the Slavkov/Austerlitz Format, the Weimar Triangle, the Three Seas Initiative, or the Bucharest Nine. This paper has explored the goals of the different formats and how they reflect the different political and policy agendas which have evolved since the V4 was founded in 1991.

In particular, there had been growing concerns about divisions between the V4 and the German-led consensus their accession to the EU in 2004. In 2015, the migration crisis led to East/West fissures within the EU. The use of qualified majority voting by the EU at that time to push through a controversial refugee quota plan raised political opposition in Hungary and Slovakia. Concerns about rule of law in Poland, corruption and mismanagement of public procurement and EU funds in Hungary have since led to vexatious exchanges between those countries and the European Commission and have affected the chemistry within the V4.

The Brexit referendum, which triggered a re-think of the future of Europe and the alliances within the EU, particularly for Ireland, and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia were catalysts for a further 'reaction' within the V4 both in terms of the positive approach of individual countries to the new wave of migration from Ukraine, and the negative response to Russia's aggression and EU sanctions on Russia. The EU's response has been nuanced, vis-à-vis the V4, as the proliferation of single-issue alliances within the EU could trigger an unwelcome scenario of fracturing within the EU itself along geographic lines. However, the ever-changing political landscape in the EU, due to the emergence of illiberalism and the potentially devastating consequences of lack of respect for the core values of democracy, freedom of speech, human rights and rule of law, challenges countries like Ireland to continually vocalise its support for these core values, as it considers pragmatic alliances with other EU member states in the future.

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