

## The Visegrad Group: an overview of the V4

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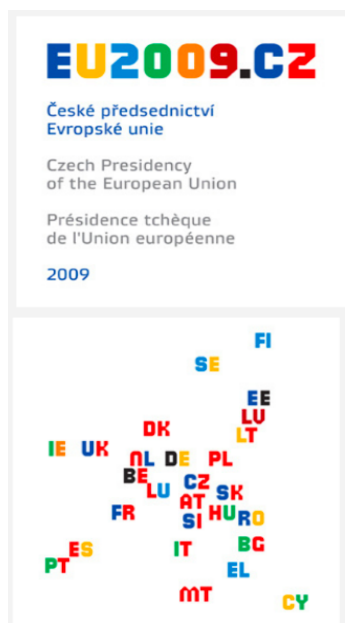
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### Origins and purpose

With the incumbent **Czech Presidency** of the **Council of the European Union (EU)**, the gravitational centre of policy discourse has reoriented to Prague and Central Europe. From **1<sup>st</sup> July to 31<sup>st</sup> December** this year, the Czech Republic is steering the political direction of the EU, operating under the slogan, '**Europe as a task: rethink, rebuild, repower**,' inspired by the words of the first Czech President **Václav Havel**.

In succeeding the French and preceding the Swedish presidencies, respectively, this is the **2<sup>nd</sup> time** the Czech Republic has assumed the role since its **first term in 2009**.

**Figure 1:**  
Logos of first-ever Czech Presidency  
of the Council of the EU in 2009<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 2:**  
Logo of Czech Presidency  
of the Council of the EU in 2022<sup>1</sup>



Therefore, within this context, it is appropriate to take a deeper look at the politics in this region, the 'allied geography,' socio-political inclinations and major transnational groupings.

<sup>1</sup> <https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/presidency/logo-and-motto/>

The **Visegrad Group** is one such example, a **regional alliance of four Central European countries**. Commonly referred to as the **Visegrad Four**, or **V4**, the grouping brings together the **Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia**.

The name derives from the 'Hungarian town of Visegrád, where summit meetings of the Hungarian, Polish and Bohemian [Czech] kings took place in 1335' to 'settle disputes' and allow for 'economic and political cooperation'.<sup>2</sup>

**Founded in 1991**, the V4's original aim was to provide its members with a cooperative platform and vehicle for the transition from communism to democracy, as well as the countries' integration into the **North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)** and the **EU**.

## Socio-economic and political facts and figures

Since joining NATO and the EU, which was achieved by 2004, the aim of the V4 [see Figure 3] has been to continue **fostering closer interrelationships and deepen multi-sectoral cooperation** between the member countries across political, cultural, military, economic and energy spheres, amongst other areas of joint action.

This has served as a catalyst for the four countries' further integration into the EU, consolidating a total market of around **64 million people** marked by '[economic] growth, fiscal discipline [and] low unemployment'.<sup>2</sup>

Three of the V4 member states use their own currencies and one, Slovakia, the euro. Poland has the highest GDP, followed by the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, respectively [see Figure 4].

The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, are **1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup>** in terms of the **lowest unemployment rates in the EU**, respectively, whilst Slovakia is at the EU average.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 3:**  
Logo of the Visegrad Group<sup>2</sup>






The Visegrad Group account for approximately **14% of the EU's population** and are represented by a total of 108 MEPs in the European Parliament.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://v4.mfa.gov.hu/page/visegrad-cooperation>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268830/unemployment-rate-in-eu-countries/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.30yearsofv4.com/v4-in-the-european-structures/>

**Figure 4:** Visegrad Group – key facts and figures

	<b>Czech Republic</b> 	<b>Hungary</b> 	<b>Poland</b> 	<b>Slovakia</b> 
Capital	Prague	Budapest	Warsaw	Bratislava
Official language	Czech	Hungarian	Polish	Slovak
Currency	Czech koruna	Hungarian forint	Polish złoty	Euro
Population of capital city (2021)	1.32 million <sup>5</sup>	1.77 million <sup>6</sup>	1.79 million <sup>7</sup>	439 thousand <sup>8</sup>
Total population (2021) <sup>9</sup>	10.7 million	9.7 million	37.7 million	5.4 million
Total area (square km) <sup>10</sup>	78,867	93,028	312,685	49,035
Gross domestic product (GDP, 2021 estimate) <sup>11</sup>	238 billion EUR <sup>12</sup>	154 billion EUR <sup>13</sup>	570 billion EUR <sup>14</sup>	96 billion EUR <sup>15</sup>
President	Miloš Zeman (since 2013)	Katalin Novák (since 2022)	Andrzej Duda (since 2015)	Zuzana Čaputová (since 2019)
Prime Minister	Petr Fiala (since 2021)	Viktor Orbán (since 2010)	Mateusz Morawiecki (since 2017)	Eduard Heger (since 2021)

<sup>5</sup><https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/20887/prague/population#:~:text=The%20metro%20area%20population%20of,a%200.54%25%20increase%20from%202018>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/21138/budapest/population#:~:text=The%20metro%20area%20population%20of,a%200.28%25%20increase%20from%202018>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/22161/warsaw/population#:~:text=The%20metro%20area%20population%20of,a%200.45%25%20increase%20from%202018>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/22448/bratislava/population#:~:text=The%20metro%20area%20population%20of,a%200.7%25%20increase%20from%202018>

<sup>9</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=B8>

<sup>10</sup> <https://statisticstimes.com/geography/european-countries-by-area.php>

<sup>11</sup> All GDP figures converted from USD to EUR using the average exchange rate in 2021 (1 EUR = 1.183 USD).  
[https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/EUR-USD-spot-exchange-rates-history-2021.html#:~:text=This%20is%20the%20Euro%20\(EUR,rate%20in%202021%3A%201.183%20USD](https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/EUR-USD-spot-exchange-rates-history-2021.html#:~:text=This%20is%20the%20Euro%20(EUR,rate%20in%202021%3A%201.183%20USD)

<sup>12</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/czech-republic/gdp>

<sup>13</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/hungary/gdp>

<sup>14</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/poland/gdp>

<sup>15</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/slovakia/gdp>

**Figure 4:** Visegrad Group – key facts and figures (continued)

	<b>Czech Republic</b>	<b>Hungary</b>	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Slovakia</b>
Form of government	Parliamentary republic	Parliamentary republic	Parliamentary republic	Parliamentary republic
Religious affiliation (2017) <sup>16, 17</sup>	Unaffiliated (72%) Roman Catholic (21%) Other Christian (5%)	Roman Catholic (56%) Other Christian (21%) Unaffiliated (21%)	Roman Catholic (87%) Other Christian (4%) Unaffiliated (7%)	Roman Catholic (63%) Unaffiliated (25%)
Year of accession to NATO	1999	1999	1999	2004
Year of accession to the EU	2004	2004	2004	2004

All four countries are parliamentary republics, with Hungary and Slovakia having **unicameral legislatures** – the National Assembly (*Országgyűlés*), and National Council (*Národná rada*), respectively.

The Czech Republic and Poland, meanwhile, have a **bicameral parliamentary system**, composed of an upper and lower house: the Senate (*Senát*) and the Chamber of Deputies (*Poslanecká sněmovna*) in the Czech Republic, and the Senate (*Senat*) and the *Sejm*, respectively, in Poland.

On the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the V4, on **17<sup>th</sup> February 2021**, a joint declaration highlighted the group's ongoing commitment to stronger '**people-to-people cooperation**' across the alliance, and collective action to the '**benefit of [their] citizens, [their] countries as well as the European Union and NATO.**'

Despite 'diverse religious traditions,' the four countries have shared common 'cultural and intellectual values.'<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-affiliation/#:~:text=Orthodoxy%20is%20the%20dominant%20religion.identify%20with%20this%20Christian%20tradition>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/02/once-the-same-nation-the-czech-republic-and-slovakia-look-very-different-religiously/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about>

## Prospects and challenges: A comparative view of the V4

Amongst the successes of the V4 has been the establishment of the **Visegrad Development Fund in 2000**, 'to promote and finance regional transport and energy infrastructure projects, [...] commission analytical studies, prepare individual investment projects, and harness national, EU and private resources.'<sup>19</sup>

The V4 have acted as a bloc in the past on various contentious European issues, such as collectively **opposing the EU's policy of mandatory quotas** and the redistribution of migrants, instead **proposing** ideas such as '**flexible solidarity**' in reforming migrant management and the Dublin Convention.<sup>20</sup>

The countries have also raised concerns and pressured the European Commission over "**two-tiered food**" **issues**; they have claimed that food product brands destined for the V4 region are of lower quality as opposed to their Western European counterparts. Former Slovak PM Roberto Fico argued it was 'unacceptable that consumers [across the EU be] treated differently and in a discriminatory way.'<sup>21</sup>

Despite manifestations of unity and close cooperation between the four regional partners since the end of the Cold War, the structure and future of the Visegrad Four have been challenged by the V4 members' **political differences** and varying foreign policy inclinations over time.

Until recently, all four members of the Visegrad Group were classed as democratic; however, on **15<sup>th</sup> September 2022**, the **European Parliament** passed a motion declaring that **Hungary is 'no longer a democracy**.'<sup>22</sup>

In parallel, on **18<sup>th</sup> September 2022**, the **European Commission** proposed a measure to the European Council under the conditionality regulation to protect the 'budget and the financial interests of the EU against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary.'<sup>23</sup> In practice, this means **cutting 65%** of the financial commitments to Hungary on **three operational cohesion policy programmes**.

In addition to these institutional developments on a European level in the context of what is seen as democratic backsliding and the prevalence of anti-EU politics in Hungary, there have also been instances of **schisms between the four members on key foreign policy issues**, such as **Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine**, and the **European energy and cost-of-living crisis**.

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<sup>19</sup> [https://www.mzv.cz/public/2e/3f/ea/1800883\\_1457421\\_Report\\_of\\_Eminent\\_Personalities.pdf](https://www.mzv.cz/public/2e/3f/ea/1800883_1457421_Report_of_Eminent_Personalities.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20366388/korcok-slovakia-will-submit-alternative-solution-to-migration-crisis.html>

<sup>21</sup> <https://visegradpost.com/en/2017/07/27/the-v4-pressures-the-european-commission-over-low-quality-food/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-rule-of-law-european-parliament-brands-hungary-as-no-longer-a-democracy/>

<sup>23</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_5623](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_5623)

Although divisions had taken the form of a “fifty-fifty” or “two plus two” split in recent years – with Czechia and Slovakia on one side, and Poland’s and Hungary on the other<sup>24</sup> – the war in Ukraine has further recalibrated inter-V4 affinities.

The Speaker of the Czech Parliament, Ms Markéta Pekarová Adamová (TOP 09, EPP), hoped in public remarks in January 2022 that the Hungarians would manage to remove PM Orbán from office.

This was followed by a public rebuke and refusal by Poland and Czechia to attend a V4 defence ministers’ meeting in Hungary in March 2022 over Budapest’s close ties with Moscow.<sup>25</sup>

Further criticism was levelled at the Hungarian government from the Slovak and Polish Prime Ministers Eduard Heger and Mateusz Morawiecki, respectively, in the weeks that followed, for Hungary’s opposition to sanctions against Russia.<sup>26</sup>

All this comes at a time when Hungarian PM Orbán has been speculating that ‘by 2030, the Visegrad Four [countries] could become net contributors to the EU budget,’ something which could cause ‘a rethink of the benefits and drawbacks of continued [Hungarian] membership in the [27-member] bloc’ altogether.<sup>27</sup>

## A way forward

As a consequence, some analysts have suggested it is timely for V4 countries to build wider regional coalitions and work with partners further afield in areas of shared interest. These could include the **Baltic states**<sup>28</sup> and the **EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP)**, considering the EaP itself was initiated by Poland, in cooperation with Sweden, and was launched in Prague in 2009.<sup>29</sup>

The EaP counts Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine amongst its members. The Lukashenko administration in Belarus, meanwhile, suspended the country’s membership in the EaP in June 2021.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/this-is-how-the-visegrad-group-works/a-47402724>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/29/visegrad-defence-ministers-meeting-cancelled-over-hungary-s-stance-on-russia>

<sup>26</sup> <https://dailynewshungary.com/polish-and-slovak-prime-ministers-hungarys-neutrality-is-outrageous/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarys-orban-aims-block-extension-eus-russia-sanctions-report-2022-09-16/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.amo.cz/en/connecting-v4-and-other-regional-expert-networks/connecting-v4-and-other-regional-expert-networks-researching-potential-for-future-eu-coalitions-v4-baltics/>

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en)

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/>

Other experts believe that if the V4 is to survive in the future as a coherent bloc and 'remain an effective instrument of Central European cooperation, it cannot be liberal or illiberal, right-wing or left-wing.'<sup>31</sup>

On **1<sup>st</sup> July** this year, as **Slovakia assumed the rotating and current Presidency of the Visegrad Group**, Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok said the regional grouping ought to 'significantly **mute** [its] **foreign policy** dimension.'<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, as early as September of this year, Polish PM Morawiecki said he believes that 'over time all the other matters, which proved our solidarity, understanding and supportive attitude, would bind us anew,' adding that he 'earnestly wish[ed] for it.'

The future of the V4 remains to be seen and could impact the geopolitics of inner-EU alliances and policy-making decisions in Central Europe for years to come.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/04/slovakia-takes-over-a-divided-v4-after-hungarys-troubled-presidency/>

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/slovakia-to-mute-visegrad-4-foreign-policy-dimension/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/slovakia-to-mute-visegrad-4-foreign-policy-dimension/)