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How to restart regional cooperation in Central Europe? V4 and Beyond

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1. The genealogy of the crisis

Regional cooperation in the V4 format has gradually declined over the last decade.

- Firstly, after 2015, it was negatively affected by **the ideological differences and disparate expectations** of the Polish and Hungarian conservative governments (who expected to strengthen cooperation) and the Czechs and Slovaks (who were reluctant due to concerns that Budapest and Warsaw might use the format to gain leverage in their disputes with Brussels). During this period, Prague and Bratislava experimented with the Slavkov Triangle format (with Austria) as an alternative to the V4.
- The second phase of the crisis was caused by **disagreement over the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine**, with Hungary adopting an opposing position to the rest of the group (and Slovakia joining it in its scepticism towards supporting Ukraine after the 2023 elections).
- **Polish–Hungarian relations** had been deteriorating since February 2022, but they turned into an explicit diplomatic conflict after Donald Tusk's new centre-left government was formed. The new Polish government's self-perception as the herald of a liberal counter-revolution against 'populists' was bound to clash with Orbán's self-presentation as a leader of the European illiberal movement. This was further exacerbated by Orbán granting asylum to a Polish politician from the previous Morawiecki government who was accused of misusing public funds, as well as by the 'Twitter wars' between the Polish and Hungarian prime ministers and foreign ministers, primarily concerning the Russian-Ukrainian war.
  - **In the Czech Republic**, it has recently become commonplace to equate the Visegrad Group with 'Orbán and Fico', thus associating the V4 with a 'threat to the country's Western geopolitical orientation'. This has led to widespread criticism of the V4 format in most mainstream media outlets, with many outlets portraying the format as a threat to the country's 'Western geopolitical orientation'. This has influenced the centre-right government of Petr Fiala (and President Petr Pavel) to gradually downplay the importance of the Group. Deep disagreements with Robert Fico's new government in Slovakia have created the most serious crisis in the 'special relations' between the two successor states of the former Czechoslovakia. This has weakened another working relationship within the group, albeit on a much smaller scale compared to the Polish–Hungarian tension.

2. Current situation: rays of hope and persistent obstacles

Current developments in the region have raised hopes that regional cooperation could be restarted. These developments include:

- **Czech parliamentary elections** (October 2025): In the discourse of Andrej Babiš and his coalition partners, their forerunners were held responsible for 'ruining the V4'. The new coalition emphasised the reactivation of the Visegrad Group as a foreign policy priority. The future prime minister explicitly mentioned his hopes for a common V4 position on certain European policies, particularly ETS 1 and ETS 2, as well as the Migration Pact.
- **New Polish President Karol Nawrocki** declared in October that cooperation within the V4 had been neglected by incumbent President Donald Tusk's government and required 'intensification'. He announced that he would be visiting Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary in November and December.
- - At the end of October, Robert Fico declared that the V4 should form a **'coalition against ETS2**'. Although there was no official follow-up to this statement, on 5 November the four Visegrad countries voted together against the EU's 2040 climate goals at the EU Council.

At the same time, the Group continues to struggle with diametrically opposed perspectives on the Russo-Ukrainian War. Despite President Nawrocki's willingness to renew contacts with Budapest, notwithstanding the ongoing conflict between Tusk and Orbán, he was ultimately compelled to cancel the meeting with Viktor Orbán due to the Hungarian Prime Minister's ostentatious visit to Moscow just a few days prior to the scheduled meeting.

These Polish-Hungarian tensions also influenced the **V4 Presidential Summit in Esztergom** on 3 December, which focused on uncontroversial topics such as 'competitiveness' and 'AI regulations'. During the press conference following the summit, the presidents declared their intention to continue cooperating, with the Czech president, Pavel, stating that 'there is more that unites us than divides us'. However, the results of the meeting confirmed the persistent nature of the obstacles blocking the reactivation of the format.

3. Internal political factors conditioning the attitude towards the V4 format

- **Czech Republic:**

  (a) The attitude towards V4 has become part of the 'ideological packages' that divide the two sides of the Czech political spectrum ('liberals' versus 'populists'). Therefore, support for the format remains dependent on political representation in power. Babiš's comfortable majority provides a stable basis for a new approach to regional politics.

  (b) On the other hand, Babiš will be handicapped from the beginning by his public image in much of the European media, where he is presented as a 'natural partner' to Fico and Orbán. This may negatively affect his reception in Poland. Tusk's government's potential unwillingness to cooperate with 'populists' from Prague could lead to the intensification of a 'Danube Alliance' with more overtly anti-Ukrainian undertones, further distancing Warsaw from the rest of the region.

- **Poland:**

  (a) The major challenge remains the internal polarisation and its effects on both the functioning of the state and its foreign policy. Tusk's government has shown reluctance towards, or even hostility towards, the formats of regional cooperation pursued by its conservative predecessors, particularly the 3 Seas Initiative, but also the V4. The uneasy

cohabitation between President Nawrocki and Prime Minister Tusk, which will continue until 2027, could significantly impact Warsaw's capacity to implement a consistent regional policy.
b) Poland's current regional political priorities are dictated by security concerns, leading to a rapid intensification of collaboration in the Baltic Sea region. This has largely replaced the V4 and 3SI as the main regional forum since 2023. This prioritisation of the Baltic Sea region, introduced by Tusk's government, is also supported by President Nawrocki, who has already met with his Baltic counterparts twice before his 'V4 Tour' in late autumn.

- **Slovakia:**
  a) The instability of the current Fico coalition government, together with the country's considerable economic problems, suggests that Slovakia, even as a rhetorical supporter of cooperation, will not seek to play an active role.
  (b) Despite his rhetorical affinity with Viktor Orbán, Robert Fico has been reluctant to adopt Hungary's position entirely, instead manoeuvring between his southern neighbour's explicit anti-Brussels stance and the European mainstream.
  c) In the event of escalating tensions between Slovakia and the EC, for example over the issue of 'cultural sovereignty' (the amendment to the Constitution of the Slovak Republic passed in September this year), it could be expected that Bratislava would seek wider V4 support for its position.

- **Hungary:**
  Elections scheduled for April 2026 will remain a key focus for any political activity of Orbán's government in the coming months. As Hungary will preside over V4 cooperation from July 2025 to June 2026, the Hungarian parliamentary election campaign may negatively impact the willingness of other member states to invest in the cooperation. This is due to fears that the government party may instrumentalise the V4, as well as the explicit support that Tusk's government has given to the opposition Tisza party.
- The Hungarian government's explicit anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, as demonstrated by Balázs Orbán's recent statement expressing hope for the formation of an 'anti-war bloc' with Prague and Bratislava, threatens to jeopardise any prospects for V4 cooperation.

4. Key issue: diversification of energy resources

- The dependency of Hungary and Slovakia on Russian fossil fuels remains a crucial factor in Central European politics. Budapest and Bratislava's unwillingness to take steps to diversify their energy sources, cloaked in the rhetoric of protecting national sovereignty but driven by internal political and economic considerations, poses a significant obstacle to restarting deeper V4 cooperation.
- It is the discourse of 'providing citizens with cheap, reliable energy' that drives Orbán and Fico's pressure for the 'normalisation of Russia–EU relations'. This was also a major topic during Orbán's recent visit to Moscow.
- Energy diversification was a key subject during Orbán's visit to Washington at the beginning of November, when President Trump pushed for a more significant US presence in the Hungarian energy sector, which could effectively reduce its dependence on Russia.
- - When visiting Bratislava in November, President Karol Nawrocki addressed the issue by promoting the concept of Poland as a developing energy hub with privileged access to US LNG via the terminals in Świnoujście and Gdańsk (due to be operational by 2027). Due to the

completion of the Polish-Slovak gas interconnector in Strachocin–Veľké Kapušany in 2022, this will soon provide Slovakia with the necessary instrument for diversification.

- - During the Presidential Summit in Esztergom, Nawrocki reiterated this argument, highlighting that the 'geographical excuse' frequently cited by landlocked Budapest and Bratislava is no longer valid in light of recent investments (the Polish-Slovak interconnector, Hungary's connection to the Omišalj terminal in Croatia, and the Adria pipeline).
- - A successful example of a landlocked country diversifying was provided by another V4 member, the Czech Republic, under the previous Petr Fiala government.

5. **Potential for cooperation:**

Economy and infrastructure

- Together, the V4 countries form one of the **largest and most dynamic markets in Europe**. German export to the V4 countries is higher than to France, China or the U.S.
- At the same time, due to historical reasons, **the level of interconnectedness** of these countries along the north-south axis remains very low. This poses a serious obstacle to mutual trade and people-to-people contact. Removing these obstacles could stimulate further growth.
- All four economies share **a peripheral position in the European economic system**, acting as subcontractors to the German industry. Given the crisis of the German economic model and the dramatic increase in direct state support for the private sector in both Germany and France, intensifying regional cooperation provides an opportunity to boost the competitiveness of regional economies.
- The **restructuring of the region's economic model** is a task that exceeds the capabilities of individual countries as it is significantly influenced by decisions taken at EU level. Given the similarity of development challenges, regional cooperation seems crucial. Apart from the development of transport infrastructure, Central Europe's similar goals can be seen in industrial policies (resistance to de-industrialization), strengthening the single market (limiting the scope of public support for individual sectors), reducing the social and economic costs of climate policies and negotiating the next EU's multiannual financial framework (cohesion funds).
- As mentioned above, increased interconnectedness in energy infrastructure could solve the issue of diversifying Slovakia's and Hungary's energy resources.
- The regional interconnectedness also has an important security dimension, with the potential for dual-use infrastructural investments and defence industry cooperation.

European politics and the transatlantic dimension

- Apart from the aforementioned economic issues, the V4 countries hold **a critical stance on two key debates within the EU: migration and climate policies**.
- For various cultural and historical reasons, the V4 countries have remained more immune to the ideologisation of particular policies, such as climate, migration, human rights and freedom of speech, and have consistently adopted a 'common-sense' approach in subsequent ideological struggles within the EU over the last decade. Due to the volatile international situation, as well as the European elites' growing awareness that many policies adopted in the last decade have proven to be unsustainable (e.g. mass migration and climate policies),

explicit and coordinated opposition within the V4 format may be substantially more productive than in previous years.

- - V4 countries share a distrust of centralising tendencies within the EU, such as the abolition of the veto, the proliferation of EU powers into new areas of governance, and the incursions of the ECJ into the constitutional order of member states.
- - V4 countries could help to defuse tension in transatlantic relations thanks to their responsible military spending (Poland), ideological closeness to the Trump administration (Orbán, but also Babiš – via Patriots for Europe fraction), or long tradition of transatlantic policy (Czech Republic). The V4 countries could potentially act as a bridge between 'Old Europe' and the US, attracting American investment, securing a US military presence in the region, and preventing an escalation in EU–US relations.

6. V4 and Beyond?

- V4 is the oldest and most successful regional cooperation format in CEE, and thus remains a template for other initiatives.
- At the same time, as Piotr Bajda recently argued, all regional formats of cooperation in CEE emerged as instruments designed to address a particular challenge and strengthen individual countries' positions vis-à-vis other institutions, primarily the EU and NATO, rather than being 'ends in themselves'.
- This **'reactive' nature of regional cooperation** is reflected in the highly de-institutionalised character of these formats, which, on the one hand, may make their activity less intense and consequential; yet, at the same time, this flexibility helps them survive periods of a worse political climate.
- The challenges posed today by international developments, mainly a) the shifting geopolitical situation in relation to Russian neo-imperial politics and US–EU tensions, b) pressure on the sovereign status of member states from EU bodies, and c) deep crisis of the German economic model, which has been a major force in organising the region's economic ecosystem for the last 35 years, highlight **the importance of creating bilateral and multilateral regional cooperation platforms** and define their main objectives.
- It **remains debatable whether the V4 format is the best way to respond to these challenges this time**. Prioritising security and infrastructure issues suggests that wider formats, such as the **B9 within NATO and the 3 Seas Initiative within the EU**, would be more effective.
- V4 as such **lacks a potential of blocking minority** in the EU Council voting procedures.
- At the same time, **in terms of EU politics, the Visegrad Group seems to demonstrate the necessary balance of assertiveness towards European institutions and ideological autonomy from mainstream European politics**, in order to address the issues arising from the ideologization and centralising tendencies of EU institutions in recent years. It may thus contribute to a positive turn in the search for a new balance in the development of the European project.
- The reactivation of cooperation depends on the four countries' ability to sustain a basic level of trust and to find common ground on security issues (including energy security).
- In this respect, the new Czech government has a considerable role to play: a) developing bilateral ties with Warsaw to prevent Poland from becoming further alienated from the rest of

the Group; and b) acting as a mediator between Poland and Hungary by proposing a positive agenda for regional cooperation.

- The active involvement of Poland, as the region's largest economy and a pillar of regional security, is essential for any kind of regional restart. Due to the Tusk government's reluctance towards southern partners, President Karol Nawrocki may be the main driving force in the near future.
- Any format of regional cooperation in CEE should seek backing from the US, make use of Washington's overall positive attitude towards the region (as expressed in the new NSS) and aim to attract American investment. It should also seek American assistance in solving crucial regional dilemmas such as energy security.

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This policy paper was prepared by PCTR as a follow-up to the discussion 'Central Europe: A New Opening in Regional Politics', held at CEVRO University in Prague on 8 December 2025. The event featured Alexandr Vondra (MEP, ECR), Jozef Majchrák (Postoj.sk), Jan Sechter (Czech Chamber of Commerce), Péter Szitás (Danube Institute), and Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski (University of Łódź).