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Content

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A historical test

In a few weeks, it will be thirty-five years since Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa, and József Antall signed the Visegrad Declaration. It is worth recalling that in February 1991 the Soviet Union still existed and its troops were still stationed in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The effort to definitively break free from Moscow's influence and turn toward the West was one of the main motivations behind the creation of the Visegrad Group. Even the collapse of the Soviet Union did not dispel concerns about Russia among Central European leaders of the time. The Visegrad states sought a security guarantee in the form of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Given the circumstances surrounding the formation of the Visegrad Group described above, it is in some ways paradoxical that today it is falling apart at the highest political level due to differing attitudes toward Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The seemingly incomprehensible indifference to the fate of the attacked country among parts of the Central European political elite has its causes. The aim of the project *Reflections of the War in Ukraine in Visegrad Countries* was therefore to examine how the war next door is affecting politics, the economy, and society in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

Sixteen articles were produced within the project and can be found in this special issue. Reading them reveals both similarities and differences among the countries of the Visegrad Group. However, one should be cautious about drawing definitive conclusions, as the image of these states changes continuously based on election results. While under Prime Minister Eduard Heger Slovakia was inclined to support Ukraine, after Robert Fico's return to power statements applauded in Moscow have begun to come from his mouth. A similar shift occurred at the end of this year in the Czech Republic, where the pro-Ukrainian cabinet of Petr Fiala was replaced by a government led by Andrej Babiš, which consists of parties that have so far been cautious or openly opposed to providing assistance to Ukraine.

Governments and presidents have also changed over the past two years in Poland, where there nevertheless remains broad consensus across the political spectrum that Ukraine must be supported militarily because of dangerous Russian imperialism. After all, several Russian drones violated Polish airspace this September, and acts of sabotage attributed to the Kremlin regularly occur on its territory. At the same time, however, anti-Ukrainian sentiment has been growing in the country, also in light of mutual historical grievances. As Olena Babakova wrote after the election of Karol Nawrocki as President of Poland: "Today, elections are won by those who promise to push Ukrainian refugees out of line and assure voters that Kyiv will never join NATO."

War fatigue is evident across all Visegrad societies, and not only there. The war undoubtedly has unpleasant economic and social consequences for them, but these are negligible compared to the wartime suffering endured by the people of Ukraine. Moreover, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees—who form a significant part of the workforce in the Czech Republic and Poland—brings more benefits than drawbacks to host countries.

Politicians often play a key role in fueling anti-Ukrainian sentiment. Robert Fico is betting on the relatively strong Russophilia within Slovak society. Like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, he downplays Russia's responsibility for starting the war and does not hesitate to meet with the Kremlin's ruler, Vladimir Putin. Orbán's pro-Russian stance has recently led to sharp verbal exchanges with Polish government officials, further diminishing the prospect of a renewed Visegrad bond.

At the same time, it does not appear that the war in Ukraine will end in the foreseeable future. The issue will therefore continue to divide the Visegrad Group. Moreover, after all four countries joined the EU and NATO, the group lost a strong shared positive agenda. The Visegrad states have become normal EU members, sharing some interests while differing on others. In fact, this represents the realization of the Visegrad dream of the early 1990s: the four Central European countries are part of the West.

To prevent this dream from beginning to fade, it is necessary to learn from history. One of the fathers of the Visegrad Group, Václav Havel, stated in the summer of 2008 after the Russian invasion of Georgia: "I think that there has been a kind of Russian problem for many centuries – that Russia doesn't exactly know where it begins and where it ends."

Poland's political leadership does not need to be persuaded of this danger, not least because of the acts of sabotage mentioned above. It is, in a way, striking that those Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak politicians who now speak most loudly about the "revival of the V4" generally do not share the Polish view of Russia. Yet without Poland, there is no Visegrad. Warsaw, for its part, should also recognize that Ukraine, at a time when it is defending itself against a numerically stronger enemy, does not have the full capacity to deal with the exhumation of Polish victims of the 1943 Volhynia massacre. Visegrad leaders thus still have many homework assignments ahead of them. If they complete them, the oft-invoked V4 may yet pass the current historical test.

Tomáš Fošum

The Czechs are afraid of someone getting something for free

If asked the question, who is at fault for the war in Ukraine, most Czechs have a clear answer. Two thirds of them consider Russia as the main culprit. Nonetheless there is far less consensus on the issue of just how much we should support Ukraine. Plus, the aid given so far was and is surrounded by distorted information. "We know from one survey, that the average Czech thought that the equivalent of forty percent of what is spent on old-age pensions was being spent on humanitarian benefits for Ukrainian refugees. While the reality was approximately one per cent" says sociologist Jaromír Mazák from the STEM agency.

How has the perception of the war in Ukraine changed during these past three years? Can we say that support for the country that is facing Russian aggression is declining?

It is not that simple. There have been interesting developments over time. The first half year after the commencement of the Russian invasion into Ukraine in February 2022 was marked by unprecedented support for Ukraine. It was manifested not only by the level of interest in the given topic, but for many experts, by an unexpected willingness to accept Ukrainian refugees. Nonetheless in the second half of 2022 the refugee situation started to be normalised. Interest in the subject fell from its highest peak, but most importantly, anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian narratives started to appear on social media. That was then combined with a difficult economic situation, where energy prices dramatically rose and inflation was generally high. The question of aid became more polarising.

On the other hand, we can't talk about a constant decline in support for Ukraine. For example, support for Ukrainian refugees stabilised already somewhere around the end of 2022, at around 55 percent. The majority of the public remains in favour of allowing them to remain. These numbers basically do not change. In January 2025 it was 54 percent. What is changing is support for the war effort. In the last six months alone, the share of people who say that the Czech Republic's military aid is too much has risen from 43 percent to 47 percent.

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Photo: Monika Hánová

We can also see a decline in those who think that the Czech Republic should support Ukraine until it recaptures all its lost territory. Today, only 28 percent of respondents say that. And the other 72 percent are inclined to believe that the Czech Republic should strive to end the war as soon as possible, even if that meant that Ukraine would lose parts of its eastern territory.

Are Czechs not afraid that Russia will continue further west?

Some truly have this concern. Almost 50 percent consider it very or somewhat likely, that in the event of a complete surrender of Ukraine, Russia would invade a European Union country within the next ten years. On the other hand, war weariness is starting to take hold, and Czechs are feeling that it's economically burdensome. There is also a belief that it would be best for both sides, if it ended as soon as possible, without considering the painful implications for Ukraine and its territorial integrity.

Does your research show who Czechs blame for starting the war? According to them, who is the main culprit, Russia? Or is it the west, which did not respect Russian worries about further enlargement of NATO?

Even though I mentioned war weariness and climbing preferences for an early end, this definitely does not mean that the Czech public doesn't see Russia as the main culprit. Roughly two thirds view it as such. A larger part of the last third divides the blame equally between Russia on one side and NATO and Ukraine on the other. Only about ten to fifteen percent of Czechs outright adopt the pro-Russian narrative and say that Russia is the victim and had to react

to NATO or Ukrainian provocations with a military operation.

A comparison with some of the neighbouring countries can be made here, for example Slovakia.

We ask in the surveys, if the public prefers being part of the western block, or being a kind of neutral bridge between East and West. Alternatively we ask if we should lean towards the East. The neutral position prevails, with around 55 percent of people saying that they would rather be the above-mentioned bridge. Slightly over 40 percent want to be part of the West, and only a small percentage would prefer eastern orientation and would want to return to the Russian sphere of influence. In Slovakia 18 percent of the population prefers this last option, based on the survey by the DEKK institute. So, there is quite a substantial difference.

How would that 55 percent of Czechs imagine the bridge between East and West? After WW2 a similar strategy did not work out for our country.

I think that this position stems from a variety of concerns. Among other things it's a loss of confidence in the vision from the nineties, which talked about a return to the West, to be among western democracies. This vision is partly dying out, which could have been caused by the disappointment that economic convergence is not occurring. And, in my opinion, part of it is a cultural value issue. There may be concerns about some of the cultural shifts in the European Union, such as being too liberal on some issues. Additionally, there is the issue of the green transformation, where for a large part of the public, measures brought forward under the Green New Deal relate to the fear of negative economic consequences for Czechia, more than they are seen as opportunity.

So, I would say a mix of these concerns leads to a tilt towards the west that is not as strong as it used to be. On the other hand, it has not been replaced by a shift to the East. Most of the public, around two thirds, view Russia today as an enemy country. It is basically the only country, which the majority views as such. For example, China is seen as an enemy country by roughly one third of the population, the rest see it more as a competitor, even a partner, or they are unable to say, but not exactly as an enemy.

February 24, 2022, is considered a turning point in Russian-Ukrainian relations, but the war has been going on for eleven years. In 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and started the war in Donbas. How did Czechs view the situation back then? Was support for Ukraine similarly high as it was after the Russian invasion in 2022?

Ukrainians of course see the start of the war as 2014 and are trying to frame it as such in the international media. The perception of the Czech public really changed with the invasion in 2022, when the popularity of Russian president Vladimir Putin rapidly declined as did the popularity of Russians as a minority. Conversely, concerns rose about the possibility that Russia could go further and attack a European Union country. Equally the degree of solidarity with Ukraine dramatically rose only after 2022. The annexation of Crimea didn't really resonate with the Czech public. Only the commencement of the full-on invasion and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees signalled to the Czech public the moment when the war truly began. Something unexpected began to happen that turned a lot of our ideas about the world upside down. 2022 also triggered a massive philanthropic wave among Czechs, which was definitely not the case in 2014.

How did the war in Ukraine change voting preferences of the Czech political parties? How big of a role does the topic play for the supporters of the individual subjects?

That is always a difficult thing to assess, because there are so many things that affect voting preferences. But we do know that Ukraine is no longer the number one issue in terms of electoral decision-making. Economic or other domestic issues have prevailed for a long time. On the other hand, the assessment of the government's handling of the war in Ukraine and the arrival of Ukrainian refugees is relatively quite positive when compared to its assessment in other aspects. And this is true mainly among the voters of the ruling parties. If, in fact, voters were turning away from the ruling parties, it would be an important issue, but the issue of the war in Ukraine remains one of the few, where they are able to praise the government. Czechs appreciate the handling of the arrival of refugees and the active diplomatic role that the Czech Republic has taken upon itself on the international stage. Support for Ukraine can thus be a kind of anchor that allows the government to keep some of its support.

Can we say that for the Spolu coalition voters, led by prime minister Petr Fiala, the war in Ukraine is a more important issue than for example, a supporter of the opposition movement ANO, headed by former prime minister Andrej Babiš?

I do not have data for that type of claim, but it is true that supporters of both parties have very different positions towards the war. For voters of Spolu, support of Ukraine is very important. Compared to that, voters of the ANO movement feel war fatigue particularly strongly and would prefer for it to quickly end. They do not consider too much what a quick end to the war would mean for Ukraine in the current situation. On the other hand, it is also true that ANO voters feel strong solidarity with Ukrainian migrants, they also view Russia as the culprit of the war. Unlike some other opposition entities led by the SPD, the ANO movement cannot afford to speak out against Ukraine or refugees. We can see an effort to concentrate on more domestic problems,

domestic politics, or on issues, where the position of ANO voters is more united, like for example, the criticism of the consequences of the Green New Deal or migration from non-EU regions.

How much influence does what politicians say have on voters' attitudes towards Russian aggression?

What politicians say, in my opinion, definitely has a great influence. For example, we had a period, when we heard many voices from the opposition saying that aid for Ukraine and refugees comes at the expense of helping the Czech public. And that's happening at a time, when we ourselves do not have enough resources to deal with our economic crisis. And this framing has taken hold. We know from one survey, that the average Czech thought that the equivalent of forty percent of what is spent on old-age pensions was being spent on humanitarian benefits for Ukrainian refugees. While the reality was approximately one per cent. So, there was a very strong tendency to overestimate the costliness of our aid to refugees and Ukraine. In my opinion, these narratives were put into perspective the moment the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs began to publish information that tax collections from refugee workers had already exceeded the total humanitarian benefit. Even so, from the latest data collected in January 2025 we can see that there is still a strong belief that helping cost us a lot of money and that it was at the expense of the Czech public. For part of the public the issue of what was happening concerning support of refugees and Ukraine has been settled.

Czechia admitted the highest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita. Many Ukrainians worked here before the war. Has the perception of people from Ukraine changed in Czechia?

That is difficult to assess, because several tendencies appeared side by side. On one hand, mainly with the more educated people, the perception after February 2022 started getting better, which probably involved solidarity with the refugees. But on the other hand, part of the public started to become concerned. We started hearing narratives that the ones who came earlier, came for work, but now large numbers of refugees are arriving, and we don't know what to do with them. There were many different concerns. Someone was afraid that refugees would take work from the Czechs, or quite the opposite, that they would abuse the welfare system. Over time, it became clear that many of the greatest fears did not materialize, as there were no dramatic excesses. In contrast a large part of the public perceives the integration of refugees into the labour market positively, when they see working Ukrainians all around them. More people today are satisfied with this work integration than not. The fear that the arrival of refugees will have negative effects on Czech society is decreasing. But it is still true that for a lot of people refugees represent a threat rather than an opportunity. The ratio changes with time, but the perception of Ukrainians as a threat is still stronger.

Why is this happening?

What is manifesting here, is the conservatism and closed-mindedness of Czechs, who simply perceive national and cultural heterogeneity as more of a problem. Earlier I mentioned that most people today perceive the integration of Ukrainians into the job market as successful. But when we look at linguistic and cultural integration, we get a less positive picture. We could simply say that Czechs today are no longer concerned that Ukrainians aren't working and that they are abusing the welfare system. In my opinion, this concern has been largely diffused. But there is still anxiety concerning how they will work with us here culturally and linguistically, and if they might not bring here an element of conflict or something, that will upend the life that we are used to. This rather typical perception sees migration as more of a source of problems rather than a source of something interesting, new impulses.

Could we not compare the success of the integration of Ukrainians into the work force to the Vietnamese success? They have a reputation for being hardworking people here.

The Vietnamese are a very special case, where in the past 10 to15 years there has been a really big shift. Their reputation as hardworking people has existed for a longer time, but additionally there was a decline in perceived rates of criminality connected with the Vietnamese minority. They have a really great reputation nowadays, but they had to work hard for it. Czechs are simply concerned with someone getting something for free. It is almost a pathological worry – that we could help someone more, than is absolutely necessary in that moment. As soon as the person in question gets on his feet, we expect him to work at least as much as the others, or rather even more.

So, Ukrainians are going in the right direction in this regard. Specifically, their integration into the job market is very important and is viewed positively. But it can take some time, till all the fears and negative emotions that were for a part of the public connected with the arrival of Ukrainian refugees to disappear. And that is still quite recent. People still remember information from social media spreading fear of what the arrival of Ukrainians would mean for our welfare system, our mutual coexistence. Thankfully there haven't been any extreme situations, no dramatic criminal acts or the types of things that, when done even by single individuals, can make the situation for hundreds of thousands of their compatriots much worse.

Do Ukrainian refugees want to stay here? Children who started going to school here three years ago now know Czech well, they've found friends here.

In STEM we do not do surveys of Ukrainians, but what you are saying is true. That in reality not only the work integration is going well, but also the linguistic. Especially for children in schools, who after three years speak Czech very well. Their parents are a bit slower in grasping the language. So, it is very likely that a large part of them will want to stay. The good news is that the Czech public is quite ready for that. Our research shows that just over fifty percent of respondents say we should allow Ukrainians to settle in the long term. When we ask about families, who would work here, learn the language and comply with Czech laws, then over eighty percent of Czechs agree that they should be able to stay here long term. So, it seems that as more and more such integration successes occur, there is no danger of it becoming a big issue.

Tomáš Fošum

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Translated from Czech by Alžbeta Kovárová.

Russia has been written off by Czech businesses, but they can't do without Ukrainians

Russian military aggression against Ukraine constitutes a strain on the Czech economy, but one which it can handle. The impact on our gross domestic product (GDP) is significantly smaller than in the era of covid, when our economy dropped by more than five percent. Nevertheless, it is true, that if the Kremlin hadn't started an invasion into Ukraine in February 2022, the revitalisation of the Czech economy after the covid years of 2020 and 2021 would have been more effective and quicker. Instead in 2022 saw a jump in gas prices and electricity. In addition to the energy sector, the war has had a significant impact on the arms industry. Last but not least, it has also changed the local labour market.

For the energy-intensive industries in the Czech Republic, the 2022 natural gas prices of around 200 euros per megawatt-hour (MWh) were absolutely bankrupting. If they had stayed the same, we would have experienced not only painful inflation but a real crisis. The current 30 euro per megawatt hour is a bearable price tag, given the end of Russian gas supplies.

Cynically we can say, calm was restored to the market after the shock of the destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline in September 2022, after which Gazprom, the Russian gas company lost its ability to influence the price of gas in Europe. Moreover, Russia's dream of freezing the old continent was dashed by two warm winters in a row. This and next year there will be more LNG terminals and capacity added. Coupled with the current global gas surplus, we can expect the price will continue declining in 2026. This assumption does not include the impact of Russian LNG, which continues to be imported into Europe. Despite the efforts of some EU countries, it is unlikely to be completely eliminated from the game. Russia's share of European LNG imports last year was just under 18 per cent.

In the energy sector, the Czech government under the leadership of Prime Minister Petr Fiala has achieved a significant milestone by managing to rid the country of its dependence on Russian oil. Before February 2022, more than half of Czech oil imports came from the Russian concern Rosneft. This included the oil for the Litvinov refinery, which is connected to the Družba pipeline. On the other hand, the second refinery in Kralupy nad Vltavou has been connected to the TAL pipeline from Trieste, Italy, since the 1990s.

The Czech Republic, which has been a five-percent shareholder in the TAL consortium through the state-owned company MERO since 2012, initiated the expansion of the capacity of the Trieste pipeline by four million tonnes, which will cover 100% of the needs of the domestic refineries in Litvínov and Kralupy (7.4 million tonnes in 2023). The Czech government's decision is in line with the strategy of their owner, the Polish petrochemical group Orlen, which has owned the refineries since 2005. The latter does not take Russian oil even for its refineries in Poland and Lithuania. Initially, Orlen had expected to process it in the Czech Republic until June 2025, but due to the impact of US sanctions, supplies were first interrupted at the beginning of March this year.

The approach of Czechia and Orlen is quite different compared to two other central European countries. The Slovnaft refinery in Bratislava, owned by the Hungarian group MOL intends to continue buying oil from the Russian Lukoil group, the same as MOL itself. This is partly due to the different views that the Slovak government of Robert Fico and the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán hold concerning the war in Ukraine, compared to the rest of the EU. But the main difference lies in the fact that Russian oil is cheaper compared to that from the oil tankers. That is facilitated by the simpler logistics connected with delivery by just one "pipe" and also the discount that Russia offered. In 2022 that was a difference of 8 to 10 dollars per barrel (159 litres). Currently the price of a barrel of oil is finally falling due to economic cooling and the OPEC cartel's willingness to produce more. It fell to 60 dollars in early May, hitting its lowest level since 2021.

If any industry in the Czech Republic has been "kick-started" by the war in Ukraine, it is logically the arms industry. The Czechoslovak Group (CSG) ammunition manufacturers and STV GROUP have come into the spotlight as well as the firearms manufacturer Colt CZ or the supplier of jet engines for suicide drones PBS GROUP. In addition, some Ukrainian manufacturers of unmanned aerial vehicles have found refuge in the Czech Republic.

In place of cars, weapons?

According to a study by EY, the defence industry generated revenues of three billion euros, or 75 billion crowns, in 2023 alone. This represents roughly one percent of the Czech GDP. By comparison, the share of automobile companies stands at around nine percent in the long term. However, while the German-linked automotive sector is worried about the future, the opposite is true for armourers. The defence industry in the Czech Republic could thus make up for the current shortfall of German carmakers, which Czech companies supply.

But let's get back to the arms producers. For CSG group, owned by the youngest Czech billionaire Michal Strnad, the war in Ukraine was accompanied by a massive expansion in Europe and the United States. In 2022, CSG acquired Italian small-calibre ammunition manufacturer Fiocchi Munizioni and last year completed the acquisition of US ammunition manufacturer Kinetic. In addition, it has plants producing large-calibre ammunition in Slovakia and Spain. At the same time, Strnad's concern is building a complete supply chain for ammunition production, including its own TNT explosives and powder charges. By 2027, CSG Group will be fully self-sufficient in ammunition production, perhaps even faster than Germany's Rheinmetall, which is following a similar path.

Thanks to increased demand for ammunition not only in Ukraine, CSG's sales last year reached more than four billion euros and the group tripled its net profit to 526 million euros (13 billion crowns). It also made it onto the list of the world's 100 largest arms manufacturers compiled by the Swedish SIPRI institute. However, it is still in the bottom part of the list.

Another major producer of large-calibre ammunition (the only one in the Czech Republic as CSG produces it elsewhere) is STV, a company owned by billionaire Martin Drda. STV is also expanding, last year it had sales of 14 billion crowns, and its net profit rose from 1.5 billion to 5.5 billion crowns.

The Czech Republic put itself in the centre of these activities when President Petr Pavel officially presented the Munitions Initiative at the Munich Security Conference in February 2024. Thanks to the contacts of domestic arms producers, the Czech Republic was able to secure ammunition purchases for the Ukrainian army, which had desperate shortages at the time. The goods initially came mainly from non-European warehouses in Africa and Asia. Nearly two million rounds of artillery ammunition of various calibers have already been purchased with donor money from eighteen countries. As a result, the Ukrainian and Russian armies have become equal, the latter having at one point outnumbered the former ten to one in shells fired. The initiative has already included orders from Europe, where production capacity is gradually being expanded. It also includes ammunition purchases from CSG and STV.

Also involved in the ammunition initiative is arms dealer Omnipol, which, among other things, is the owner of ERA, a leading manufacturer of passive tracking devices. In addition, Colt CZ, another significant producer which makes not only firearms but also small arms ammunition. This is thanks to the acquisition of another Czech company, Sellier & Bellot. The name of the group associated with the legendary American brand Colt pistols is no coincidence. Česká zbrojovka billionaire owner René Holeček's concern acquired the company in 2021, before renaming the company.

The latest example of how the war in Ukraine has helped the Czech arms industry is the jet engine manufacturer PBS Group. That is, the engines that power suicide drones (in addition, the company produces auxiliary units for

The influence of Russian aggression on three big Czech companies

Škoda Auto

For the largest Czech carmaker and a member of the Volkswagen Group, Russia was still the second largest market after Germany in 2021. The company also had two production plants in the country. Now its official sales in Russia are zero. Škoda Auto has written off 700 million euros because of the war.

PPF

PPF, the largest Czech financial group, profited from Russian privatisation in the 1990s. For a time, it held a percentage of the Gazprom gas concern. Russia has long been one of the places where it owned a number of assets. After 2022, PPF divested its remaining real estate and the Russian division of consumer lender Home Credit. It wrote off more than €300 million

Škoda Jaderné strojírenství

ČEZ, the 70% state-owned energy company, bought back Škoda JS, a company focused on manufacturing components for nuclear power plants, from Russia's Gazprombank-linked OMZ in 2022. It is important for the operation of nuclear power plants in Dukovany and Temelin. The company had been on the US sanctions list for eight years.

helicopters). This top company competes in its sector with the biggest players such as Rolls-Royce, GE or Safran. For jet engines, its production grew 300 percent year-on-year in 2024, and this year PBS expects to grow 200 percent. From dozens of engines, the company has moved on to producing hundreds of units a year and will probably produce thousands of them in the future. In addition, PBS has a partnership with Ukrainian engine manufacturer Ivchenko-Progress and opened a new manufacturing facility in Roswell, USA, in early May.

Indispensable

Russia's aggression against its neighbouring country has also had an impact on the Czech labour market. According to the Ministry of the Interior, there are currently about 560 000 Ukrainians living in the Czech Republic, almost six percent of the population. Even before the war, they helped alleviate labour shortages in the domestic economy, mainly in construction and industry. However, the war changed the demographics of Ukrainians in the Czech Republic, as women with children began to prevail after February 2022. They were soon able to find work, albeit often less skilled and lower paid. This is clearly visible in the service sector, where service in shops and restaurants has become considerably "Ukrainianised". Similarly, Ukrainians are saving social services. Their presence in administrative professions is also important and increasingly in manufacturing. In the case of the Ukrainians, however, we must consider the other side of the coin. For many Czechs, their benefits are less visible, or they do not want to see them. Or they feel threatened by them. As in other countries where Ukrainians have gone, their stay is being politicised. But if the companies themselves were to decide, everything would be clear: 65% of corporate HR professionals see the possible return of Ukrainians to their home country as a significant risk. The state budget would also bear the brunt. According to statistics from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ukrainian refugees will have paid 55 billion crowns in taxes by the end of 2024.

But even more important is a factor that is not mentioned so much. If Ukrainian women and their children remain in the Czech Republic, this will have a significant demographic impact. According to various estimates, up to 70 percent of the refugees could end up staying. This will rejuvenate society in the Czech Republic. Only three percent of Ukrainians who have settled in our country are of retirement age, and one fifth of them are children under 15. Women make up 58 percent of the refugees and many of them may still have more children. While Ukrainians will not solve the ageing of the population in the long term, without their contribution the pension system in the Czech Republic would face an existential crisis in this decade.

Petr Zenkner

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Translated from Czech by Alžbeta Kovárová.

Yellow and blue have gone out of fashion in Czechia

The response to Russia's war in Ukraine has become one of the main dividing lines on the Czech political scene. While the then-ruling coalition led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS) supported the attacked country after February 2022, the opposition was initially divided on this issue, gradually reacting to events in Ukraine with a mixture of pragmatism, indifference, and sometimes even outright pro-Russian positions. After the October parliamentary elections, the opposition became the ruling coalition, with the yellow-and-blue Ukrainian flag representing a symbolic target for it.

Four years ago, when Petr Fiala's government took power, it consisted of five different parties with differing interests, united mainly by their opposition to the policies personified by the previous Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and the then President Miloš Zeman. Moreover, it was clearly unprepared for governing. And although it took a number of important steps, dissatisfaction among its voters grew for various reasons.

The exception was the government's foreign policy, or rather its rejection of Russian aggression, which the voters of the five-party coalition generally appreciated. Despite the tragic nature of the situation, the government was given the opportunity to give its existence a higher meaning. Did it stand up to the challenges posed by the war in Ukraine? Within the limits of its possibilities, it certainly did not disappoint. Not only did it manage the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, but it also shined in the field of diplomacy. This included, for example, the courageous trip by Central European politicians to besieged Kyiv in March 2022, which Prime Minister Fiala did not hesitate to take part in.

Fiala's cabinet also joined with President Petr Pavel in sponsoring the so-called Czech ammunition initiative, at a time when Ukraine was running out of ammunition on

the front lines. Thus, it was a truly pivotal project, which was backed both by our allies in the European Union and NATO, but above all else, by Ukraine, which appreciated the effort very much.

Elections on the horizon

Czechia did not spend too much of its own money on the initiative, but it was the only country that was able to organise it at that moment. However, when we mention the money spent, we come to the weak point of the pro-Ukrainian policy of Petr Fiala's cabinet. Even many government supporters, such as national security advisor Tomáš Pojar, Ukraine envoy Tomáš Kopecký or the coordinator of strategic communication Otakar Foltýn, made no secret in interviews with the media that aid to Ukraine from the state coffers should be greater.

They were not the only ones to point out that Czechia is profiting from the war, and not only in the case of the ammunition initiative. Our Western allies compensated us for the military equipment donated to the Ukrainians. The country also benefited from Ukrainian refugee workers, who contribute significantly more money to the state budget in taxes and contributions than they received in aid.

But in July this year, when Czechia was supposed to participate in a NATO program to purchase American weapons for Ukraine, Prime Minister Petr Fiala refused. The Czech Republic will supposedly focus on other projects through which it can help finance the attacked country. Yet in February 2025 it was Fiala himself who, after talks between world leaders about Ukraine, declared that it was necessary to put the money and weapons on the table.

It's hard to say whether Fiala's government would have been more generous if there weren't upcoming October elections into the Chamber of Deputies. As surveys by the STEM analytical institute show, for example, the majority of the Czech population is not in favour of military aid to Ukraine, just as it rejects increasing support for Ukrainian refugees.

Although helping Ukraine played an important role in the ruling parties' election campaign, the specific form of aid and the aforementioned benefits for the Czech Republic were not emphasized. Instead, the Spolu coalition led by Fiala bet on a negative campaign targeting the ANO movement and its potential partners, the Enough Already! and SPD movements.

The main theme of the campaign was the danger that the ANO parties would play into Russian President Vladimir Putin's hands after coming to power and would drag the country to the east. It was simple to make these arguments, as the SPD and Enough Already! movements are unambiguously pro-Russian, and the leader of ANO, Andrej Babiš, did not hide his willingness to form a government with them.

But some of the pre-election statements directed at Babiš were overblown. For example, when Petr Fiala said that he would succumb to a tempting offer from Russia: "Putin will call and he will succumb. He is not a politician who can protect us in hard times." Hints that Andrej Babiš is pro-Russian were heard from various politicians quite often.

Nevertheless, it is more complicated with Andrej Babiš. He cannot be suspected of being a fan of Putin's regime. His businesses deal in central and western Europe, the owner of Agrofert was never interested in Russia. Plus, as the Prime minister in spring 2021 he had eighteen Russian diplomats expelled after it was found out that Russian military intelligence, the GRU, was behind the explosions in the Vrbětice warehouses.

On the fence

If we take a look at Babiš's behaviour towards Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February 2022, as the de

Today former Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala during talks with his then Ukrainian counterpart Denys Shmyhal.
Photo: Vlada.gov.cz

facto leader of the opposition he definitively stated his support. In addition to this his ANO movement repeatedly voted for the so-called Lex Ukraine, which is a collective name for laws meant to help Ukrainian refugees over the next few years.

However, Babiš also started to play the anti-Ukrainian card in 2022. He accused Fiala's government of not supporting "our people" enough. This came to a climax with Babiš's in the end unsuccessful campaign in the presidential elections in January 2023, in which he lost to general Petr Pavel.

Two moments from his "peace" campaign are particularly etched in the public memory. The first one was Babiš's billboard with the inscription: "I will not drag Czechia into a war. I am a diplomat. Not a soldier.", the second curious moment came during a televised debate with Petr Pavel. To the moderator's question, of whether in the instance of an invasion of Poland or the Baltic countries, he would send Czech soldiers to aid allies from NATO he answered negatively: "No, definitely no. I want peace, I don't want war."

He has distanced himself from this statement many times in the past two years, saying that he would help allies. Nevertheless, this situation speaks volumes about Babiš. He is not pro-Russian, but he is pragmatic and not anchored in terms of values. His electorate is divided when it comes to the issue of the war in Ukraine. One side wants to help the attacked country; the other does not. It can't be surprising then, that Babiš has been playing both sides recently.

He did label Russia as the aggressor, but at the same time he distanced himself from helping the victims. He sarcastically called Petr Fiala the Ukrainian Prime minister, but sometimes he looked down at refugees. This year in June, for example, he chastised the government for wanting to support Ukrainian mothers instead of Czech parents. Some infamy was also garnered by a video, in which Andrej Babiš appeared with the rooster Silver. The rooster supposedly dislikes Ukrainian grain because it is contaminated.

From the view of the current, pro-western and pro-Ukrainian Czech foreign policy, there is also the worrying turn from Babiš last year in European politics, when together with the Hungarian Prime minister Viktor Orbán and other pro-Russian and Eurosceptic politicians, they founded a new faction called Patriots for Europe in the European Parliament.

For Ukraine itself, the biggest risk came from Babiš's attacks on the Czech ammunition initiative, which he promised in the case of his victory to abolish. He justified this, among other things, by saying that the ammunition supplied is "mouldy". Then he added the argument that the initiative is untransparent, while arms manufacturers are making profit at the expense of Ukraine. Here he mainly had Michal Strnad, the owner of the industrial holding Czechoslovak group, in mind, who has in recent years started to climb the rankings of the richest Czechs, where he overtook even Babiš himself.

After the October elections, in which Babiš's movement won with under 35 percent of the votes and quickly arranged a coalition with SPD and the Motoristé sobě (Motorists for Themselves) party, the relationship with Ukraine is headed towards a moment of reckoning, not only for Babiš's emerging government, but also for the opposition, President Petr Pavel and the pro-Ukrainian members of Czech society. However, Ukraine's supporters were somewhat relieved that the strongly pro-Russian Stačilo! (Enough Already!) movement did not make it into the Chamber of Deputies, the composition of the new government coalition is still no cause for great optimism.

A sad view

That was proved very quickly when the leader of SPD, Tomio Okamura, had the Ukrainian flag removed from the chamber of deputies the very next day after being elected as its speaker, where it had hung to show support for the country. It was a sad sight to see the reportedly pro-western politicians of the ANO movement, headed by Karel Havlíček, defending this step. Additionally, Havlíček declared that if he again becomes the minister for industry and business, he will have the Ukrainian flag taken off that building as well.

Uncertainty also surrounds the Motoristé sobě party. Although their leader Petr Macinka did start to take a pro-Ukrainian stance before the elections, their most famous "motorist" Filip Turek, repeatedly declined to support resolutions in favour of Ukraine during his recent stint in the European parliament.

We don't know what the real policy of Babiš's cabinet towards Ukraine will be for the time being. Most likely it will not be as antagonistic as the aforementioned actions and statements would lead us to believe. But it will definitely be less friendly, when even symbolic actions, like taking down the yellow and blue flags, fail to have a significant impact on society.

Those who are keeping their fingers crossed for Ukraine in this unequal fight with the Russian aggressor, are now most likely counting on President Petr Pavel, who during the after-election negotiations openly called on Andrej Babiš to not cancel the ammunition initiative. Although the representatives of ANO are still criticising it, they are less categorical about its abolishment.

However, Czechs are not solely reliant on politicians in their efforts to help Ukraine. They are already raising significant amounts of money for Ukraine through private fundraising campaigns. According to Otakar Foltýn, the country is among the leaders in this regard. Given the current balance of power at the top levels of Czech politics, it will certainly not hurt Ukraine, which is undergoing severe trials, if private donors redouble their efforts.

Tomáš Fošum

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Translated from Czech by Alžbeta Kovárová.

Between the Trump tornado and the Eastern wind: smooth sailing for Viktor Orbán?

Russia's war against Ukraine has served as a mutual legitimation platform for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Russian President Vladimir Putin and has fed ammunition to Orbán's illiberal machine. His "peace mission" has destroyed the hopes of a united EU front against Russia while hammering into public discourse a narrative most favourable to the aggressor. But is the peace mission conducive to the survival of Orbán´s regime?

As soon as Orbán began his second term as Prime Minister in 2010, he announced the Fidesz-KDNP government's intention to strengthen ties with Putin's Russia. Orbán felt "an Eastern wind blowing in the world economy" and saw in his mind's eye the coming of a new world order. State visits to Russia picked up, Hungary signed consequential bilateral deals, such as the expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant with a Russian loan, increasing the country's energy and financial dependence on Russia.

In Orbán's diagnosis, there was a realignment taking place on the world stage, "the West" was in economic as well as in civilisational decline, and to "stop the sinking", building economic ties with "the East" was a necessity. What he also suggested was that success in the new world would be a question of a country's ability to build an illiberal order within its reach. It thus became clear that Orbán found with Vladimir Putin a common enemy in the form of the normative agenda of the European Union, an enemy that has united them ever since.

A few months before the 2022 national election, Fidesz was not performing spectacularly in the polls, but at last, capitalising on the anxieties induced by a war next door, the propaganda machine revamped the winning formula of masquerading as the saviour of the Hungarian people. This time from a war that Fidesz's united opposition, backed by Brussels (backed by Soros), was "trying to drag the country into". Orbán became the face of peace and warned that "Brussels" sought to destroy the country's economy and energy supply with its sanctions against Russia. Fidesz turned the election into a question of life and death and won.

The resounding election victory did not soften Orbán's rhetoric. Orbán began to threaten a veto on EU sanction packages, dashing any hopes of a swift and united European response to the war. But with a €50 billion financial aid package for Ukraine and the extension of the 15th sanctions package against Russia, all agreed to by Hungary, it seems that Orbán falls in line in the end. But he does buy time for Putin as he wheedles out sometimes absurd concessions from the EU, such as the removal from the sanctions list of Patriarch Kirill, who has been driving home the message that Russia's aggression is a "holy war" against "Western satanism".

Most importantly, however, with the whole of Europe watching Orbán's every move on the Ukraine question, he has been able to introduce into public discourse the narrative of the war that is most favourable to the aggressor: support for Ukraine means support for the war.

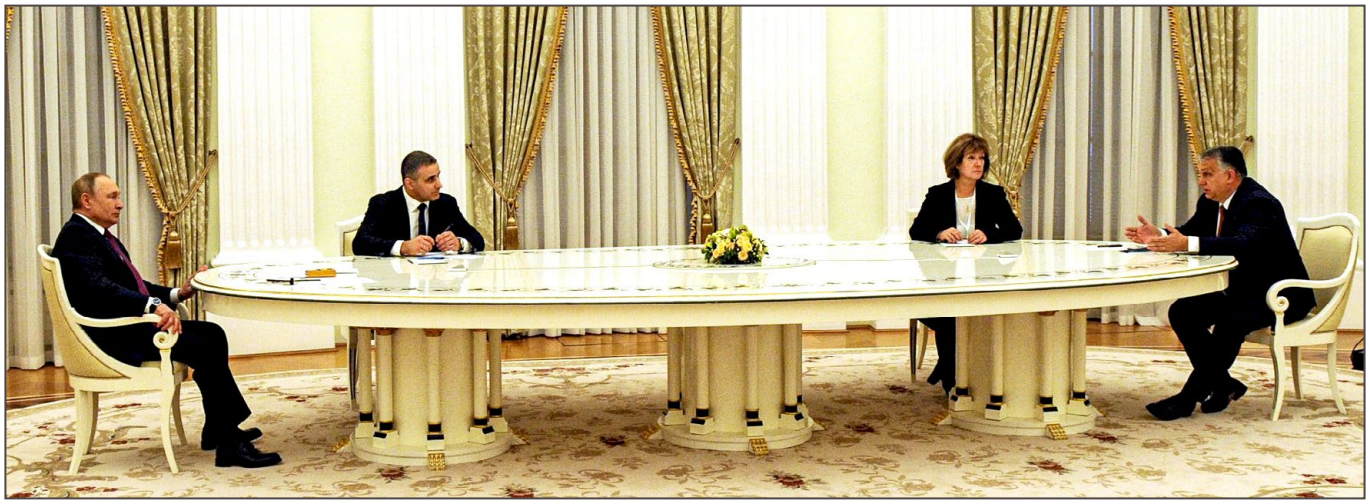
Food for the illiberal machine

Instead of stretching Hungary's "Eastern opening" beyond its limits, Putin's war against Ukraine has served as a mutual legitimation platform for Orbán and Putin and provided ammunition for the illiberal regime. Orbán has been able to turn all of his political opponents into "warmongers" and has derived a newfound legitimacy from the endlessly simplified dichotomy of war and peace. With the renewed "necessity" to ensure the security of Hungarians, Orbán found a new basis for extending the legal "state of danger" which is essentially a state of rule by decree.

The war has also raised the stakes on the European scene, where Putin and Orbán have long shared an interest in undermining the liberal democratic consensus. Orbán's calculation seems to be that his maverick politics in the context of Putin's war allow him more room for illiberal manoeuvre. Orbán's response to the war, when consensus was most needed, has put a further strain on the already uneasy relationship with the EU that has resulted from Orbán's constant testing of the EU framework.

Russian-style attacks on civil society and independent media under the banner of „the protection of sovereignty" have gained new momentum. Last year, the government set up the Sovereignty Protection Office (with access to the secret services), which can investigate individuals and organisations that participate in public life and receive foreign funding, including money from the EU. The Office does not consider it a priority to investigate Russian influence, even in the face of attacks like the hacking of the Foreign Ministry's servers by Russian hackers just before the last elections. In the view of the Office, which echoes the government narrative, it comes as no surprise that Hungary's sovereignty is most at risk from actors critical of the government.

At the same time, the government not only fails to act against Russian disinformation activities, but through the



Viktor Orbán (right) during talks with Vladimir Putin at a time when the Kremlin leader was obsessively afraid of COVID.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Kremlin.ru

media empire it controls, it consistently identifies pro-Ukraine positions as pro-war. Thus, Putin's destabilisation activities and the related information warfare are taking effect within the Union with the active assistance of a member state. In parallel, while the regime has started to show signs of erosion, the same destabilisation has given momentum for further expansion of Orbán's autocratisation back home.

"The name of peace is Trump"

The jury is still out on whether Orbán's reaction to the war in Ukraine has increased the chances of the long-term survival of the regime. Had it not been for Orbán's hand-wringing over Ukraine, for example, it is not clear whether the EU would have found the political will to trigger the conditionality mechanism and put financial pressure on the Hungarian government. Hungary's access to EU cohesion funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility is now tied to the fulfilment of various institutional requirements that would bring the country closer to incorporating the values of the rule of law and democracy enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. With Orbán currently undermining even the trace of judicial independence, for example, will the money be forthcoming?

While Orbán has been able to spin the war to ensure yet another sweeping election victory, and branding his opponents as warmongers has given him some room for manoeuvre, the truth is, Hungary needs the frozen EU funds. The Hungarian economy is not in good shape, and it seems that voters are not entirely buying the government's narrative that the warmongering West is to blame for the country's economic woes. None of this is good news for Orbán in a political environment where, for the first time, he faces a threatening opponent in Péter Magyar, whose meteoric rise has transformed the opposition landscape. With Orbán out of town on a global peace tour, Magyar has managed to raise the relative weight the public ascribes to, among other things, the crumbling Hungarian healthcare system and other worldly things. Orbán has been repeating the slogan that people have had enough of the war. No doubt, he is considering the possibility that it might be true, and it could play out differently than he would have hoped.

The war has given the pretext for Orbán's unwavering support for U.S. president Donald Trump. Orbán has put all his bets on Trump returning to office, and he certainly seems to believe that he now has a friend in the White House. By framing Trump as the pro-peace candidate, Orbán has woven him as an ally into his tale of European decline under the "warmonger Brusselites".

What will come of this friendship remains to be seen. Orbán has already had to explain how his pro-peace candidate's decision to ramp up sanctions against Russia fits into the construction of sanctions as support for war. His conclusion, which will probably go down as one of Orbán's less smooth rhetorical feats, was that Trump wants to achieve peace with sanctions, while Brussels would like to see sanctions instead of peace.

Sanctions notwithstanding, Orbán has made clear what his number one "foreign policy" goal is: to banish the "troops of Soros" who are currently stationed in Brussels. In this, he does have a friend in the White House. Trump's announcement of cutting USAID has already dealt another blow to Hungarian independent media and civil society organisations struggling for survival. With this move, Trump has allowed Orbán to step closer to his dream of eliminating organisations that are "working against Hungarian sovereignty". Orbán's peace candidate and Putin together fuel Orbán's efforts to tighten his grip on the country, and he sincerely hopes, and no doubt will do what he can, to ensure that the patriots of Europe follow his lead.

Júlia Lilian Szabó

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Across the divide? Hungarian responses to a war next door

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is using the war in Ukraine as ammunition for his illiberal political project. By presenting himself as the peacekeeper protecting Europe from collapse, while undermining EU cohesion and promoting pro-Russian rhetoric, Orbán has strategically tried to position himself between Trump and Putin in their blossoming relationship. But how has all this politicking been perceived by Hungarians? Has a raging war next door impacted Hungarian society in any meaningful way? And with a government notorious for its anti-immigrant hate-mongering, how do Ukrainian refugees fare in the country?

It is May 2025 and the streets across the country are lined with posters depicting Manfred Weber, Ursula von der Leyen and Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the text "Let's not allow them to decide for us". It is the latest in a series of campaigns by the Hungarian government against Ukraine's EU membership and part of a broader narrative that aims to depict Ukrainian pleas for Western integration, military support and ideological cohesion as inherently conflicting with Hungarian national interests. In an environment where the frequency of such narratives makes digesting them an inescapable reality of daily life, surely it has embedded hate against neighbouring Ukraine, while endearing Hungarians to the Russian cause?

Well, yes and no. A survey commissioned by the CEU Democracy Institute in 2022 asked respondents how sympathetic they are to the policies of a number of states and organisations, including the EU, Ukraine and Russia. The EU scored highest, while Russia was deemed least likeable. And Ukraine? Right there before Russia, as the second least liked country by Hungarians. So, while Hungarians express a steady pro-Europeanness, their dislike of Russia and Ukraine seem to be on a par. In addition, a survey by the Pew Research Center in 2023 showed that only one-third of Hungarians perceive Russia to be a major military threat to Hungary – a stark contrast to Poland's 77 % for the same question, as well as broader European opinions deeming Russia as an aggressor. While Hungarian politics is divided along the lines of support for Ukraine, the CEU survey highlights that opposition voters do not necessarily share their parties' pro-Ukraine stance. Simultaneously – and somewhat in contradiction to European trends, the more right-wing a voter, the more likely they are to support Russia. To complicate matters further, a 2024 study by Policy Solutions highlighted that Hungarians now perceive Ukraine (51%) to be an even bigger threat than Russia (46%).

Historical tensions

Hungary's fraught relationship with Russia and Ukraine may partly explain the social incongruence these numbers suggest. The Soviet Union was, after all, both liberator and oppressor in Hungary: in 1945 it drove out the Nazi occupation, in 1956 it violently crushed Hungarian demands for freedom, and then continued to do so until its collapse in 1989. While the Fidesz government at best ignores this history and at worst engages in dangerous historical revisionism, the legacy of Soviet occupation still lives vividly in the Hungarian collective psyche – limiting the extent to which pro-Russian sentiments can proliferate.

Simultaneously, tension between Ukraine and Hungary over diminishing minority rights of the nearly 150.000 ethnic Hungarians living in Transcarpathia dominated neighbourhood diplomacy in the 2010s. Orbán's move to extend dual citizenship (and therefore voting rights) to ethnic Hungarians living in formerly Hungarian territories in 2010 generated widespread support at home and has been an important cornerstone of Fidesz' electoral victories ever since. Ukraine perceived Hungary's passport distribution as a threat to its sovereignty and national integrity, and in turn implemented an educational law in 2017 mandating that Ukrainian become the primary language taught in schools. Hungarians both at home and in Ukraine decried the law as violating minority rights guaranteed by international treaties and such tensions also spilled into contemporary wartimes: Hungarian minorities were conscripted as part of Ukraine's widespread mandatory mobilisation and the dominant general narrative in Hungary perceived ethnic Hungarians as fighting a war they should not be involved in.

So while Hungarian society seems mostly unphased by a war happening next door, increasing polarisation in a sea of propaganda and historical tensions are key factors in how people perceive the war and its consequences. In such a context, an interesting arena of social division is the country's reception of Ukrainian refugees.

Refugees (un)welcome?

If there is one country in Europe that has gained the reputation of not being a refugee-welcome destination, it surely is Hungary. During the 2015 refugee crisis, Orbán staunchly protested letting asylum seekers into the

"Let's not allow them to decide for us," proclaims a campaign by the Hungarian government. Photo: Júlia Lilian Szabó

Schengen Zone, arguing that it risks not only Hungarian national security and social cohesion, but the Christian identity of the European continent in its entirety. Since then, migration and the "existential risk" of permitting the"Other"within the walls of Fortress Europe has formed a backbone of Fidesz' rhetoric and political communication strategy. From opposing EU resettlement quotas to building a barbed-wire fence along the southern border, and painting Brussels and the global liberal elite as attempting to flood Europe with migrants, the message broadcast by Orbán post-2015 has been clear: refugees, stay away. A 2025 report by ODI Global shows that such sentiments are not restricted to the leading political elite: while immigration itself was found to rank far below other top concerns, public attitudes towards immigration are significantly more negative than in other European countries and Hungarians repeatedly score amongst the lowest on welcoming and openness towards refugees.

Yet, in 2022, such seemingly deep-seated political and social fears seemed to dissipate, as Ukrainian refugees began arriving at the Hungarian border. Top Fidesz officials were eager to showcase that Hungary is implementing the largest humanitarian act in its history. In 2015, Orbán refused to visit any of the refugee camps in the south of Hungary. Now he was posting videos of him personally handing over travel documents to Ukrainian mothers. The obvious hypocrisy notwithstanding (i.e. "we like refugees, as long as they are white"), the Hungarian response has indeed been overwhelmingly positive and supportive, just not necessarily by the Orbán government. The government turned the spotlight inwards by headlining the large amounts of refugees it was letting in: since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia 5.5 million border crossings took place by Ukrainians into Hungary. However, this number includes back-and-forth work-related travel, as well as onward travel to other European countries. In reality, just over 60,000 of these people actually sought asylum in the country. And while the state provided mass accommoda-

tion options for those traveling onwards, Ukrainians who opted to stay have continued to face difficulties gaining access to permanent and independent housing solutions. Many who opted to stay are primarily Transcarphatian or Roma, the latter of whom did not fall under the state's refugee assistance program and faced increased risk of homelessness – having no home to return to in Ukraine either.

In an environment where institutions responsible for healthcare, public housing and aid are completely depleted, it is not the Hungarian government, but the Hungarian people that filled the gap left by a decade of faulty governance. The swift response of civil society (mostly those organised during the 2015 crisis), the magnitude of volunteer turnout, the mobilisation of financial and material donations, and the involvement of various charitable organisations showed that Hungarians were sympathetic to the millions of refugees in need of assistance in 2022. Yet, this positive mobilisation continues to be paralleled with anti-refugee sentiments as well. The 2024 survey by Policy Solutions indicated that only 17 % of respondents would feel okay about having Ukrainian refugees as neighbours, while 49 % stated that they would rather not.

Economic uncertainty

Overall, it seems that Hungary is host to two (or more) parallel realities when it comes to the war raging in Ukraine. There's the reality propagated by Viktor Orbán's ruling regime: one where the government is apparently generously aiding Ukrainian refugees, while arguing that any attempt at Ukraine moving closer to the European Union is detrimental to Hungarians, and in the meantime promoting a war-narrative that is eerily similar to messages coming from the Kremlin. A reality which is steeped in anti-refugee attitudes. In another reality, Hungarians stepped up in actually aiding Ukrainian refugees and went on living with a degree of shared ambivalence towards both Russia and Ukraine.

Yet, Orbán's posters across the country are touching upon a topic that will possibly cause increasing worry amongst Hungarians in the coming months. As the country continues to struggle through inflation, high prices and economic uncertainty, social attitudes might become more tense and polarise further when it comes to Ukraine's accession to the European Union. Already in 2023 and 2024, farmer protests in Germany and Poland inspired similar mobilisation by Hungarian farmers worried about the import of Ukrainian grain and its effects on Hungarian producers. Indeed, a recent survey by the Republikon Institute showed that 46 % of Hungarians do not support Ukraine's EU accession. While this shows that a majority of society does support it, 32% of these people tie their endorsement to the accession taking place in no less than 7-10 years.

The social impacts of the war in Ukraine on Hungary are largely measurable in an increasingly polarised attitude toward Ukrainian refugees, as well as Russia and Ukraine as state actors. A closer look at the economy – and particularly top-down narratives on the economy – in our next article we may shed better light on how Hungarian society will transform its perception of what the war next door means to life in the country.

Péter Bori

First published in June 2025.

Orbán courts Putin while clashing with the EU – and the Hungarian economy bears the costs

Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, has been exploiting the war in neighbouring Ukraine for political purposes since its very beginning. He has positioned himself strategically within the West's divisions over Ukraine and Russia, promoting a peace-first narrative that seeks to woo both Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, and is mostly antithetical to the aspirations of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the EU. While Hungarians welcomed Ukrainian refugees, surveys suggest they dislike both Russia and the EU. But the war has not only impacted Hungarian politics and social environment, it has also brought widespread economic impacts.

The most immediate economic consequence of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was the disruption of European energy markets. With pipe flows threatened and Russia restricting supplies to several EU countries, energy prices skyrocketed, raising production, transport and heating costs. Hungary, among those most dependent on Russian energy in the EU (including gas, oil and nuclear fuel supplies), found itself in a delicate situation, extenuated by the potential political costs implied by higher energy prices for Viktor Orbán, who built his regime in part on the cornerstone of the mantra of utility price reduction (rezsicsökkentés) for households.

Since the war, the EU has doubled down on diversifying energy supply sources and phasing out dependence on

Russian fuels. In line with the REPowerEU Plan, the EU's reliance on Russian energy has significantly declined. Hungary, however, has been reluctant to introduce meaningful measures to ease the country's dependence on Russian energy. It blocked EU packages curbing fuel imports from Russia, arguing that the country's energy infrastructure necessitates the continuation of Russian oil and gas imports.

As a landlocked country, Hungary was eventually exempted from the EU's near-ban, and through its state-owned energy group MVM, began to import significantly more gas from Russia than the 4.5 billion m^3/year secured through its existing long-term contract with Gazprom. Reports estimate an additional 2.1 billion m^3/year – way more than would be required to keep the country's vast storage facilities at adequate capacity. By every indication, the gas imported from Russia above the amount set out in the 2021 long-term contract is cheaper, and likely served trading purposes, allowing MVM and other companies involved in the gas business to pocket a lot of profit, earning the label of war profiteers from critics.

To justify additional purchases, Péter Szijjártó, Hungary's Foreign Minister in charge of sealing energy deals has cited "hard facts of physics" (i.e. where there is a pipe, gas and oil can flow, where there is not, they cannot) and any calls from the EU to decrease energy dependence on Russia are woven into the government's anti-Brussels narrative, claiming that Brussels intends to destroy Hungary's utility price reduction scheme. As analysts point out, however, the cost reduction programme for households is a political product, and while phasing out Russian dependence would raise costs, the surge would be nowhere near as dramatic as the government suggests. If the government cannot find the means to finance it, it raises uncomfortable questions for Orbán about the state of the Hungarian economy.

Skyrocketing prices

The war also triggered one of the worst inflationary periods in Hungary. Inflation surged after Russia's invasion, peaking at around 25% in the first half, and food inflation

Headquarters of the state-owned energy group MVM in Budapest. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Szerkesztő127

hit 48% in late 2022. While high energy costs rippled into general inflation across Europe and global food prices increased, Hungary's inflation surplus was massive compared with other Visegrad countries, with the highest food inflation in the EU for over a year.

Domestic policy choices contributed to the record-breaking spike. In the run-up to the 2022 election, the government made large fiscal transfers to big segments of the population, mostly through tax rebates and introduced caps on the price of basic food items and fuel, and kept household energy prices low. These policies might have left the electorate feeling like they were better off, but the decision to fuel demand increased Hungary's inflationary momentum: the caps masked inflation initially, but once lifted, inflation flew through the roof.

The Hungarian National Bank (MNB) raised interest rates to cool demand, but government caps on mortgage and household loans shielded many from the rising interest rates and thus blunted the effect of MNB's decision. The forint weakened due, in part, to low investor confidence as a result of the government's abrupt policy changes and concerns over Hungary's rule of law disputes, raising import costs and further fuelling inflation.

Another sector in which the war in Ukraine has had a significant impact is agriculture. With maritime route blockages, Ukrainian grain exports shifted overland. As its direct neighbour, Hungary was key for these new grain flows, both as a receiving market and a transition corridor. However, the influx of cheap Ukrainian grain depressed local prices, leading to Hungarian farmers struggling with declining incomes. Both the real and perceived fears of continued grain imports led to several farmers' protests along the Ukrainian border and in Budapest. In response, Hungary joined Poland and Slovakia in banning Ukrainian grain.

At the same time, farm input costs skyrocketed as a result of the war. Fertiliser prices were 2-3.5 times higher in early 2022 than in the year prior, and fuel and other agro-chemical costs also increased significantly, raising overall production costs, driving extreme food inflation and price volatility. The Hungarian government introduced price caps on certain food items and fuels. However, the effectiveness of these interventions failed to significantly alleviate the pressures on the Hungarian food market, and according to some economists, these price controls were easily outmanoeuvred by retailers through increasing the cost of other products.

The war also exacerbated pre-existing agricultural labour shortages. While the beginning of the war caused some expectations that the influx of Ukrainian refugees could alleviate this labour crisis – even prompting the Ministry of Agriculture to advertise seasonal work to people fleeing the war –, in reality, the war's refugee influx did little to fill the gap. Many Ukrainian refugees sought work in less arduous and better-paid sectors, while Ukrainian men were legally prevented from leaving Ukraine to work abroad.

Overall, the war in Ukraine had both very real economic consequences, as well as prompting significant policy responses both at the EU and national levels. Hungary joined its neighbours in urging EU action, resulting in aid packages of more than 150 million euros to assist farmers in affected countries, as well as implementing a general ban on Ukrainian agricultural products. While these expired in 2023 and have not been renewed by the EU, Hungary continued to take unilateral steps by banning at least 24 Ukrainian food products.

A strained relationship with Brussels

Viktor Orbán's ambiguous positioning on Russia and Ukraine also had other (in)direct economic consequences. As highlighted in the first article of the series, after the outbreak of the war, Orbán continued to play both the role of EU-bad boy, complementing it with an increasingly amicable relationship with Putin. Hungary criticised implementing EU sanctions on Russia, arguing for the economic backlash of doing so and has used this positioning to secure certain temporary exemptions, such as that from the EU's ban on Russian crude oil imports.

However, Orbán's confrontational stance did not help with Hungary's already-strained relationship with Brussels, partly fuelled by concerns over basic rights violations and rule of law deficiencies. As a result, the European Commission withheld billions of euros in Cohesion and Recovery funds in 2023. Although some 10.2 billion has been released since, following partial judicial reforms, more than 18 billion remained frozen. This has significantly restricted Hungary's ability to pursue public investment and infrastructure projects, has weakened investor confidence and put a severe strain on the national budget. The government tried to alleviate some of these pressures through windfall taxes, borrowing, tighter fiscal controls and reclaiming smaller funding tranches through EU budget loopholes – alarming other Member States and further widening the gap between the European Union and Hungary.

As always, the economy is inseparable from politics, and in Hungary, the war has made the "invisible hand" of the market quite visible. From government contracts with Russian energy suppliers fuelling war profiteering, to using farmers' grievances for pursuing anti-Brussels narratives, the Hungarian economy has largely been mismanaged since the outbreak of the neighbouring war. Political discontent is rising, reflected in the growing support for rival candidate Péter Magyar. At the same time, Hungary drifts further from its European allies – also raising questions for the future of the Visegrad Four (V4).

Júlia Lilian Szabó, Péter Bori

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How the war in Ukraine is changing Poland

Consequences of the war, which broke out three years ago in Poland, are unprecedented and have had a wide reach. The social, political and economic consequences of the Russian invasion affect not only the direct participants in the conflict, but all international actors who experience the shocks associated with it.

It should be stated that none of the wars or conflicts to date have had such grave consequences. There are several reasons. First, the war is taking place in a geographically important area. Secondly, the participants in the war are leading players in the international scene. Thirdly, the world is in a phase of globalism, which raises the question of whether the current degree of liberalisation and intense intermingling of economic structures, unprecedented in the past, is really working for us. And finally, the dynamic of political changes, expectations of the international community and the political tension face to face this war bring to the surface previously accumulated tensions and conflicts.

One of the countries that has been and is being affected quite massively by the war in Ukraine, is Poland. It is difficult to hierarchise these impacts based on different aspects, and that is not the point of this article. However, categorising them can help us understand the complexity of the issues and the various impacts on Poland.

Social consequences were perceived first. From 24 February 2022 to 25 February 2023, 10.8 million people entered Poland from Ukraine, 8.2 million headed in the other direction *(Editor's note: some people travelled there and back, others just passed through; these are statistics from the Polish border patrol)*. Poland as a neighbouring state offered refugees refuge on an unprecedented scale. Despite the difficulties – a shared history and different experiences till now – Poles opened the doors of their homes to welcome Ukrainian citizens fleeing from the war. The solidarity of the public, organisations and the government made it possible to offer aid to almost one and a half million refugees, while more than four hundred thousand people benefited from the mass support centres.

Help in the form of a place to sleep, financial and food aid were at the beginning only temporary. Gradually it was expanded by governmental initiatives defined in the law on assistance to Ukrainian citizens. In consequence of these steps, the number of war refugees that gained the status of temporary protection reached almost one million. After Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic admitted the most. All in all, the countries of the EU admitted 4.3 million people.

System test

Poland belongs to the group of states of the European Union, in which the number of Ukrainian citizens after 2022 has significantly changed not only the ratio of migrants in the population, but also affected the size of the job market, the level of employment and its structure. Three quarters of a million Ukrainian refugees were able to find official employment in Poland, which proves the ability of its job market to absorb a significant amount of additional employees, the adequacy of supply to demand and, finally, the growing demand for employees, particularly in the service sector.

The rate of employment among Ukrainian refugees stood at 28 percent in the first half of 2022, towards the end of the year it was already at 65 percent. At the same time the share of income from employment on their total income was quite high – 80 percent. This confirms a noticeable change in the structure of income for households and their influence on the level of consumption and decisions in investments, in a wider context also on the value of polish GDP. Thanks to higher rates of consumption the recession in Poland wasn't prolonged, but the process of overcoming it was not dynamic. That is mostly because of the demographic structure of the newly arrived Ukrainians, who had with them a significant amount of children. Roughly half of them are well educated (48 percent of refugees have a higher education) people of younger working age (27-44).

Analyses show that refugees contributed a share of 0.7 to 1.1 percent to Polish GDP in 2023. Over a longer period, this contribution can rise to 0.9 to 1.35 percent, which means not only taking into account the shock and its consequences for the economy caused by the wave of arrival of Ukrainian citizens, but also the impact of changing consumer needs, decisions on buying a home, children's education, etc. Among the effects, one should also point out the additional tax revenues, capital inflows from abroad, higher wages and, as a consequence, higher consumption exceeding government spending related to refugees.

Among the consequences on Polish society, we can mention the changes in its structure. The fact that, primarily Ukrainian women are arriving (men aged 18-60 are forbidden from leaving their homeland), affects the ratio of men to women in society. The arrival of refugees from Ukraine has also lowered the average age and affected the number of marriages. In terms of attitudes towards formal unions, Poland has so far represented the modern trend of declining marriages every year. In the last three years, however, the number of ethnically mixed marriages with Ukrainian citizens has increased two and a half times, from four hundred to almost one thousand.

Solidarity with Ukraine was strong in Poland in 2022. This also applied to the city of Szczecin. *Photo: Tomáš Fošum*

The war in Ukraine gave Poland a historic chance to renew not only its position on the international scene, but also to succeed in the strategy of heightening security and strengthening its geopolitical influence in Europe. With hope one could also see improved relations with Ukraine and the growing importance of Poland as an ambassador of Ukraine for EU accession.

It was expected that more attention would be paid to the countries of central and eastern Europe in building relations on the continent. At the beginning there were even perspectives for extending cooperation with Belarus. For Poland this meant taking on the role of a regional leader not only in the context of an economically and politically weakening Russian federation, but also a rebuilding of the political order. The shift of the Russian federation towards confrontation with NATO and the USA sped up expected changes and significantly increased the possibility of an economic and political crisis in Russia.

The war in Ukraine has shaken the credibility of Germany and France, but also the confidence in their ability to meet the demands of the geopolitical crisis and to lead the EU integration processes.

Ascendance of Rzeszów

From a geopolitical standpoint the war revealed the consequences of dependency resulting from the international division of labour and the concentration of industrial production in states not only geographically distant but often also at high risk of political instability. Dependence on the supply of parts and components and supply chains heavily dependent on international relations are another factor influencing the image of the world today.

States including Poland realised not only the need for finding alternative suppliers, but also the possibility of creating new supply routes and the need to take on a new, more important role in economic relations. An example of this new development is the Polish airport in Rzeszów, which has seen an increase of 30 percent in charter flights, but it has also gained in importance because it functions as a main transportation hub for foreign aid to Ukraine. In consequence of this, the surroundings of Rzeszów have seen extremely intense development both economically and infrastructurally. The different

possibilities for land use in this area is gaining in importance not only from the perspective of Poland, but also other countries of Europe, which have supported Ukraine during the war and would like to aid in its reconstruction in the future.

The war in Ukraine has brought a reorganisation of the current balance of power. One possible scenario is a re-division into geopolitical and economic blocs of East and West with Russia and China on one side and the US and EU on the other.

In geopolitics, economic changes, exacerbated by the consequences of war are shown clearly. A wide variety of sanctions against the Russian federation showed the possibilities of influencing its economy and citizens, but also revealed a number of existing dependencies on food or energy imports. It quickened the initiative in the direction of gaining independence and diversification.

The outbreak of the war and the sanctions against Russia have had a strong impact on the macroeconomic situation both in Poland and in the world, especially in the energy and agricultural markets.

The price of oil after the invasion of Ukraine rose to almost 140 US dollars per barrel, the highest level in more than thirteen years. In an effort to limit the income of Russia from oil trading, Canada, the USA and Great Britain decided to impose an embargo on its oil. This is significant considering that Russia is the third biggest exporter of oil after the USA and Saudi Arabia. Its role is also key for the stability of the global energy commodities market. The reaction of the market after the invasion was so strong, that the International Energy Agency decided to intervene and release 61.7 million barrels from strategic reserves, followed by a search for alternative sources to supply the European and Middle Eastern markets.

In the agricultural market, the war raised concerns about food security. Ukraine was one of the largest grain exporters. After the conflict broke out, its production dropped by a full 29 per cent. The situation was further complicated by the closure of Black Sea ports (more than 90 percent of Ukrainian exports were by sea). The limited supply of grain caused global price increases and fears of a wave of famine in Asian and North African countries.

This made it necessary for Poland to engage in the creation of alternative transport routes and to increase its share of the world grain trade.

The opening of the border to Ukrainian grain and other agricultural products has sparked conflict in Poland over complications accompanying transport through its territory and further exports. Due to the time constraint and the size of the shipments there was a risk that they wouldn't be properly checked. Some of the Ukrainian grain remained in Poland, thus influencing supply and prices. Protests by Polish producers and inspections have highlighted differences in the quality of grain. In the end Poland and other countries of the EU imposed embargoes on Ukrainian grain, sparking protests from Ukraine which was seeking new outlets for its products.

The war in Ukraine has revealed a non-declining dependency of countries on shipments of not only energy raw materials, but also food. Furthermore it has pointed out a strong polarisation of political interests in the region and has become a chance for the rebuilding of existing world order. The prolonged conflict of social, economic and political change is consolidating and making it increasingly clear that the world stands at a crossroads. Before it lies a decision, how the future of economic relations will look, whose current arrangements do not suit either developing countries or – above all – the states that have shaped them so far.

Dorota Niedziółka

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From Czech translated by Alžbeta Kovárová.

There's no going back to the life before the war

Assertiveness on the international stage and broad support for high defense spending—the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, ongoing for more than three years, has left a clear mark on Polish politics. Attitudes toward the threat posed by Russia and the challenges to the country's security are weakening the polarization that has been deepening for years. Changes are also taking place in society: by supporting war refugees from Ukraine, people have felt a sense of agency, and today they are slowly beginning to accept that Poland has ceased to be a monoethnic country.

From my first trip to the Ukrainian border after full-scale war broke out, I mainly remember the adrenaline. I was buzzing with emotions while speeding along the A4 highway in my car, although I'm usually very critical of such wrongdoings. At the border crossing I saw images that I had considered impossible: Polish border guards addressing Ukrainians with empathy, cross-border towns and villages, very sceptical of their neighbours on a day-to-day basis, adorned with yellow and blue crêpe paper, finally – volunteer drivers who were queuing to offer rides to the refugee groups. I wasn't alone with these emotions. Their abundance translated into the aid that the Poles extend-

Ukrainian refugees protest against Russian aggression in March 2022 in Kraków, Poland.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Silar

ed to the Ukrainian refugees on a massive scale. According to Statistics Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, GUS), some form of help – money, a ride or hosting someone – was declared by 70.2% of the population. Researchers from the Collegium Civitas' Institute of Sociology later identified very different motivations behind it: we helped because that was the right thing to do, because other people helped, because we wanted to feel better, because we wanted to benefit from it, because, finally, we understood that the Ukrainians were fighting for us, and if they lost, we would be next.

A lot has changed since then. News from Ukraine stopped being clickable, more and more often you hear about war-weariness and how the Ukrainian refugees are mostly resented. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the swell of emotion it gave rise to, has left a permanent mark on the Poles.

First of all, it's a feeling of agency we haven't experienced in a long time. Part of the public recalls the 4 June, 1989 democratic parliamentary elections in this way. Earlier on there had been a few historical events such as the victory of the Polish-Soviet War or the Greater Poland uprising. However, the wind of change rarely blows for us from a favourable direction, and even more rarely are we able to successfully set sail to the wind. Community deliriums are usually intertwined with suffering. They are preceded by lost wars and uprisings, and recently, during peace time – events such as the Smolensk air disaster or the death of John Paul II.

This time we reacted actively and with agency, perhaps also inspired by the Ukrainian will to fight that was accompanied by effective war propaganda – a woman taking down drones with jars of pickled tomatoes, a farmer towing away a tank with his tractor, a babushka handing the Russian soldiers sunflower seeds, so that something useful would grow out of their corpses. The Ukrainian grass roots power has enabled it to brave the subsequent months of war. It is present everywhere the country doesn't work well – supplying soldiers with equipment, fighting against Russian disinformation, clearing up war debris. At the start of the war, the Poles experienced something similar, albeit on a much smaller scale.

That has changed the neurotic Polish identity. Being a Pole is not only about suffering any more – preferably for millions – but also about helping, working together, hosting. This constructive vibe came back in September 2024, when southwestern Poland was affected by floods. Jour-

nalistic comments from left to right resonated with pride: we have overcome another crisis together. A comforting conclusion in contemporary times described by the historian Adam Tooze as the "polycrisis".

Poland will be next

The feeling of internal power has translated into an increase of assertiveness in thinking about international relations. Before 2022, Poland was divided in this regard, as were many peripheral countries – the liberals (globalists) were uncritically taking the point of view of the hegemonic West, the right (localists) saw Europe as an enemy and acted in defiance. At the same time, as opposed to their Western partners, both sides saw the danger arising from Russia. After the invasion both sides wanted to say "I told you so".

Of course, this willingness arose not only in Poland, but also in other countries of the region, e.g. the Baltic states, but first and foremost, in Ukraine. The famous "I don't need a ride, I need ammunition" quote by the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy made its way into the diplomacy hall of fame. Although his attitude is nowadays being considered restitutionary among European elites, the Western mainstream accepted the Eastern European point of view regarding security. In August 2022 the German chancellor Olaf Scholz proclaimed that "the centre of Europe is moving eastwards", which was later echoed by many politicians and commentators. That's why we feel like we're in the centre of global affairs.

Secondly, in 2022 the Poles understood that peace is not eternal, whereas war is possible. Although the one in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014, it hasn't really aroused general interest due to its local character. The full-scale invasion proved that the Kremlin is poised to move past successive red lines, and so it's not entirely impossible that Russia will attack one of the NATO states. After 2022 it redoubled its hybrid attacks on NATO's eastern flank, including Poland. Reports about jamming the GPS signal on the Baltic, mysterious fires of buildings and vehicles, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure (recently on purification plants and water pipes) have become a regular staple of the Polish news services.

The atmosphere is further fuelled by Kremlin propagandists ("Do the Poles want to be next?", "Moscow would show no hesitation in wiping out Polish cities", said Vladimir Solovyov), and recently also Donald Trump, whose withdrawal from Europe makes Poland, which is dependent militarily on the United States, anxious.

The feeling of danger brought back cultural codes from the times that had shaped our image of war – which is World War II. They influence our understanding of current events. The memory of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact made even the biggest Germanophiles start to look at Germany with more caution. The memory of how the Soviets behaved saved us from believing in disinformation regarding Russian war crimes. The memory of being betrayed by our allies strengthens the belief that we should be arming ourselves.

A majority consensus has been reached in Poland about the need to increase the military budget, even though it already gets close to 5% GDP and is the biggest in all of NATO. According to public opinion research, further investments in the army are supported by 70-80% of the Poles, including the far-right Konfederacja (Confederacy), who has been flirting with Russian narratives and Razem (Together), who are close to the ideas of pacifism and modern left-wing populism similar to the Spanish Podemos or the Greek Syriza. Distinct voices are politically marginal – although it may yet change.

The rising feeling of danger somewhat weakened political polarisation, at least regarding security issues. Liberal parties, including the currently leading Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform) have started to talk about the army or migration in the language of the Right. Liberal prime minister Donald Tusk and right-wing president Andrzej Duda happened to exchange pleasantries. "The government and the president need to work together", they declared a few times, which hasn't happened in Poland since the EU accession efforts. However, it doesn't prevent them from accusing each other's parties of aiding the Russian agenda.

There's no Polish identity without a Ukrainian identity

Finally, the Ukrainian war refugee surge helped the Polish society become aware that it had stopped being monoethnic. It's a process that started over a decade ago, when a big migration of former Soviet Union citizens, especially Ukrainians, commenced. A few years later you could find more and more people from different parts of the world in Poland, for example from India, the Philippines or Colombia. According to various assessments there are about 2.5 million foreigners in the country, 6.7% of workers with social insurance.

A broader social debate on this subject has been hindered for a long time because of the twin-track politics run by the right-wing government of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, 2015-2023). Their representatives were turning the public against migrants coming to the EU, presenting themselves as a power that would save Poland from multiculturalism on the one hand, while on the other quietly liberalising migration rules, thus supplying Poland with a workforce from all around the world. For a lot of Poles these rules have remained invisible.

It changed with the Ukrainian war refugee surge, although the Ukrainian diaspora was already the biggest one in Poland antebellum, and a part of it emigrated because of the war. The Polish solidarity AD 2022 resulted in numerous direct contacts between the Poles and Ukrainians – we started to meet each other at work, schools and even homes. We have been exposed to the Ukrainian language in TV adverts, at offices and on hotlines and

there have been more migrant voices in the public debate – that is Ukrainian journalists, experts and artists.

Modern Poland doesn't exist without Ukrainians any more – even taking into consideration that the unusual affection for the Ukrainians from the beginning of the war dissipated greatly. It was replaced by weariness and anxiety (about competing for medical resources, the job market, Tinder), fuelled by Russian disinformation and local politicians. Poles – as shown by research from the University of Warsaw – accuse the refugees of entitlement, ingratitude and Soviet mentality, although the majority still approves of taking them in.

This difficult acceptance of the new Polish multiculturalism isn't accompanied by a deeper self-reflection about the role of Poland during the Ukrainian War of Independence: actively fighting against it – during the partitions of Poland, first and foremost in Austria-Hungary, as well as during the interwar Second Polish Republic. It hasn't left a significant mark in Polish historical memory, as the latter became dominated by the Massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia: an ethnic cleansing of Poles inspired by Ukrainian nationalists during World War II. This wound – along with the unfulfilled expectations of an apology from the Ukrainian side – has made it difficult for a lot of Poles to build trust towards their neighbours.

While talking to Ukrainians you might often hear that "there's no going back to the life before the war". While during the last three years the Poles haven't shared even a fraction of their neighbours' every day war experience, they might agree with that sentence. Another short period of peace in our region has come to an end.

Kaja Puto

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Translated from Polish by Marta Zielińska.

The most emotional ally

Poland's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was nothing short of wholehearted. In 2022, it seemed as though Polish politicians had set themselves a competition over who could help Ukrainians more, and then proudly awarded themselves first place. Three years on, military and logistical cooperation continues, but the rhetoric at the top has undergone a complete reversal: today, elections are won by those who promise to push Ukrainian refugees out of line and assure voters that Kyiv will never join NATO.

In late February 2022, as the world watched Volodymyr Zelenskyy's defiant speeches and Russian shells raining down on Kharkiv, another image went viral: thousands of Ukrainian women and children, clutching pets and suitcases, trudging across the Polish border, and met by thousands of Poles offering hot food, warm clothes, and even places in their homes. As we soon learned from the American press, at that time, President Andrzej Duda and the Polish government were among the few insisting to Washington and Western Europe that Kyiv would not fall in three days, and that urgent, full-scale military aid to the Ukrainians was essential.

In 2022, Poland led the way in supplying tanks and planes to Ukraine. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Law and Justice (PiS) leader Jarosław Kaczyński were among the first Western high officials to visit Kyiv that spring. Warsaw and Kyiv were preparing to sign a sweeping strategic partnership agreement.

For a moment, Polish domestic politics seemed suspended. In spring 2022, internal disputes faded as the entire political class, left to right, rallied behind Ukraine's cause. On the international stage, Warsaw relished pointing fingers at Germany and France for years of failed appeasement of Moscow. It was symptomatic that the Polish prosecutor's office "failed" to detain a Ukrainian diver suspected of sabotaging Nord Stream 2 in German territorial waters. When Duda addressed the Ukrainian parliament that June, he declared: "Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian women and children are not refugees [in Poland], they are our guests."

That phrase captures Polish warmth but also contains a telling ambiguity. Indeed, at the time, even Poland's far-right Confederation, a union of alt-right forces or PiS's right wing, traditionally anti-Ukrainian, called anyone questioning support for Ukraine a "Russian agent." But a refugee has rights as well as obligations; a guest, by contrast, depends entirely on the host's goodwill. So when the romantic infatuation between the two nations faded, it turned out that Ukraine became a toxic topic in Polish politics. You could build little on sympathies for Ukrainians, but you could lose a lot.

Ungrateful and demanding

By summer 2022, Polish parties were competing over who could hit Russia harder and praise Kyiv louder. Poland backed every EU sanctions package, cut off most visas for Russians (except for a humanitarian one), and welcomed for an extended period more than a million Ukrainians affected by war. The media was abuzz with

stories of newfound friendships between the people and the states.

The idyll did not last. The atmosphere started to change in autumn. Zelenskyy visited Washington and Paris, but not Warsaw. Kyiv refused even symbolic gestures on sensitive memory politics, such as lifting its block on exhumations of Volhynia massacre victims, something Poland had especially pushed for since the mid-2010s. Online, false stories gained traction about Ukrainian ladies being allowed to cut in line at hospitals, and less false ones – about Ukrainian men driving expensive cars. Far-right politician Grzegorz Braun, already known for anti-COVID and antisemitic remarks, went on tour around the country with the slogan "Stop the Ukrainianization of Poland."

The spark that triggered the first powerful wave of Ukraine criticism in Poland's mainstream was the fall of debris from a Ukrainian air-defense missile in the village of Przewodów, killing two people. Zelenskyy and his team stubbornly claimed it was a Russian missile – most likely trying to present the incident as a direct attack on a NATO state and thereby mobilize the Alliance to provide more support. This denialism infuriated Poles: after all, no one was blaming Ukraine; Russia had started the war, so why insist so much? Kyiv's refusal to take responsibility was seen as ingratitude.

Even greater irritation came with the grain crisis of 2023. To support Kyiv economically, the EU had opened its market to Ukrainian agricultural products, expecting them to move in transit. Instead, with the help of local businesses that looked for quick profits, they flooded local markets, undercutting Polish farmers. Though farmers are a small part of Poland's society and economy, their protests against EU climate policy and Ukrainian food exports were supported by over 80% of Poles. Since this coincided with the parliamentary campaign, politicians of all stripes joined the chorus against Ukrainian grain.

The Polish government again expected Kyiv to treat the matter in a special Polish context and, out of gratitude, drop its complaint against Poland's embargo before the European Commission. For Zelenskyy, however, this was a simple economic issue, without special bilateral meaning. While both liberals and conservatives, Donald Tusk and Mateusz Morawiecki, posted TikTok videos about "poisonous wheat", it quickly became clear that the far right played the anti-Ukrainian theme best. Confederation supporters not only organized transport blockades on the Polish-Ukrainian border but also spilled grain from wagons meant only to transit through Poland. "Ungrateful" and "demanding" – these two words, since then, have stuck to the Ukrainian leadership.

Soon, "ungrateful" and "demanding" became the buzzwords attached to Ukrainian refugees, too. Polish politics is often described as a "dictatorship of polls" – and in 2023, the polls changed. No longer over 90%, but only 60% of Poles supported accepting Ukrainians affected by the war; support for military aid to Kyiv also dropped. Social moods were summed up and reinforced by Zbigniew Parafianowicz's bestselling book *Poland at War*. Complete with bitter quotes of a dozen "high-ranking Polish politicians well acquainted with the behind-the-scenes of Polish-Ukrainian cooperation in 2021–2023," this text described how Poles gave Ukrainians all the equipment they needed and their hearts, and in return received malice and a plastic bag of meaningless medals. The book instantly became the bible of political realists from the center to the right. The refrain was everywhere: *the Ukrainians are exploiting us, and we need to be tougher.*

In 2023, neither PiS, which won the elections but could not form a government, nor Civic Coalition (KO), which took the helm of a centrist-left coalition, questioned full military and logistical support for Kyiv or its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The effort was instead to separate topics: yes, migration and agriculture could be fields of political speculation, but in national security, the consensus should prevail.

But by the 2025 presidential campaign, the wall came down. At the very beginning of the race, PiS candidate Karol Nawrocki, soon echoed by liberal challenger Rafał Trzaskowski, proposed cutting the "800 plus" family benefit for Ukrainian refugees who did not work or pay taxes. Initially a Confederation idea proclaimed two years earlier, it now drew support from a staggering 88% of Poles – near-total consensus in a deeply divided country.

Nawrocki pressed further. In March 2025, he suggested moving Ukrainians to the back of doctors' queues, explicitly invoking an urban legend of their supposed privileges. After winning the election, he vetoed a refugee aid bill and called not only for cutting family benefits to the unemployed but also for stripping them of access to the national health system.

Chasing Confederation voters before the final battle for the Presidential Palace, Nawrocki visited Confederation leader Sławomir Mentzen, who had won nearly 15% in the first round. During a YouTube-streamed conversation, Nawrocki signed Mentzen's program declaration, promising, among other things, to block Ukraine's NATO membership and refuse to send a Polish contingent eastward even in the event of a ceasefire. Trzaskowski rejected these points at the time, but just months after losing, KO placed adverts on social media with the same slogan – no Polish troops in Ukraine, and proposed its own bill, which likewise radically cuts aid to Ukrainian refugees. Anti-Ukrainianism has crossed into the mainstream, no longer confined to the far right.

Two to tango

Cutting benefits to single mothers or pensioners caring for grandchildren and physically not able to work may be cruel, but it does not endanger the state. The absence of lasting peace in Ukraine does. Yet it seems that Polish politicians are willing to risk even that for the sake of polling numbers.

For now, Confederation plays the anti-Ukrainian card most effectively. It is hard to say what exactly contributed more to Mentzen's support – distrust in the social security and tax system, or hostility toward Ukrainians. But it is worth noting that after both President Nawrocki and the KO government ultimately declared that "800 plus" would only go to working Ukrainian refugees, their parties' ratings rose while support for Confederation dropped.

As ever, much in Polish politics will depend on Washington. Warsaw's eastward policy has always mirrored America's. Donald Trump's hard line on Ukraine appeals to the Polish right, even to PiS, once firmly anti-Russian. With Poland's defense model built on what might be called "security on subscription" – stationing as many NATO troops on its soil as possible and buying the latest American weaponry – it is hard to imagine Warsaw striking a radically different line on Ukraine from the US one.

Zelenskyy, wary of Trump's mood swings, has turned increasingly to Europe. That should align with the current Polish government; yet, during a recent European leaders' visit to the White House, Poland was notably absent.

In the 2023 campaign, the issue of the Volhynia massacre also returned to Polish politics. Under sustained official and unofficial pressure, Kyiv unblocked the question of exhuming UPA victims, and in September 2025, the first burial of victims' remains took place in the village of Puźniki. Although everyone in Poland demands exhumations, from municipal councillors to the president, the highest-ranking participant at the ceremony was only Senate Speaker Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska.

Of course, it takes two to tango. Ukrainian authorities still treat much of Poland's support as self-evident. Playing the "Ukraine card" in Polish domestic politics would have been far harder if exhumations had begun years earlier, or had Polish businesses been assured a fundamental role in Ukraine's reconstruction.

On the other hand, Ukrainians increasingly see Poles as too emotional a partner – one whose decisions are driven less by rational calculation than by surges of feeling. But Ukraine, worn down by nightly shelling and American pressure, has no shortage of emotions of its own.

Olena Babakova

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In mid-March 2022, a group of Central European politicians traveled to Kyiv. From left: Jarosław Kaczyński, Petr Fiala, Janez Janša, and Mateusz Morawiecki. On the far right stands Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/President of Ukraine

Cognitive failure in Slovakia, or a cultivated feeling of irresponsibility?

Slovakia, under the leadership of Prime Minister Robert Fico, has experienced a paradigmatic turn in relation to the war in Ukraine. From the reputation of a country that in 2022, under the government of Eduard Heger, was one of the first to start supplying weapons to Ukraine and expressing all-round support for it, it has moved to the position of a state openly defending Russia as an aggressor, breaking the consensus within the European Union regarding assistance to the attacked Ukraine and sending many hostile and stigmatizing signals towards Kiev.

Public opinion in Slovakia has also undergone many changes in the last three years in connection with foreign policy and geopolitical challenges, and they are even more remarkable because research mapping shifts in value orientations and attitudes towards polarizing cultural and civilizational topics has recorded practically no development. The inhabitants of Slovakia are therefore not moving anywhere in terms of values, although some manifestations of pragmatism and even utilitarianism have deepened among them. Similarly, numerous cognitive crashes that regularly occur in respondents to public opinion polls were exposed.

The March survey by Future Slovakia Forum and the Focus agency, entitled *Where Does Slovakia Belong?*, brought favourable results (at first glance, at least) from the perspective of the so-called pro-Western and pro-European forces. Almost two-thirds of Slovak citizens (63.5 percent) prefer the country to orient itself towards the West, or rather towards the European Union. This is three times more than those who would prefer to orient themselves towards the East (Russia) – 19.2 percent (see Table1).

Those who tend to see the glass half empty as half full must be satisfied. The Western alternative is more than three times more likely than the Eastern alternative in the eyes of Slovaks. However, sceptics will argue that such a high level of foreign policy preference for the East is unusual among EU countries and points to a significant deviation of Slovakia from the remaining states of Central and Eastern Europe, except for Bulgaria, where, according to repeated Globsec surveys, it is similar, but even there it is slightly lower.

To see today's world and Slovakia in the most optimistic light possible, it can be stated that the cited research indicates that Robert Fico and his government, with their actions and the overall logic of their foreign policy, are going against the majority opinion, will and needs of the country's citizens. Moreover, because Slovakia is still the most rural state in Central Europe with a significant rural-urban split in value orientations, it is surprising that the population density of residential locations plays a smaller role in pro-Western orientation than one might assume. The preference for the West is held not only by the urban population, but also by people living in the smallest municipalities with up to one thousand inhabitants (56.8 percent for, 20.5 percent against, the rest do not know). However, some of those who feel part of the West are not negatively disposed towards Robert Fico's government. Its steps in the field of foreign policy are critically assessed by 54.8 percent of respondents. Which is less than the 63.5 percent of the population declaring a pro-Western orientation.

The "devil" is hidden, as usual, in details. Even though the people of Slovakia feel they are part of the West, they also expect that they will not have to pay too much for it. This is of course an illusion, there is no such thing as a free dinner. The utilitarianism of a country that has become accustomed to protection from allies and is at the same time largely convinced that there is no point in defending itself is quite evident. Although 70.6 percent of its inhabitants prefer that Slovakia remain a member of the EU and NATO, at the same time almost half of society (49.8 percent) wants military neutrality. Therefore, the statement by the Slovak Minister of Defense, Robert Kaliňák, in Warsaw, which at first glance is shocking, that there is no need to defend itself against Russia, because sooner or later the Russians will always leave, has its own cover and response among Slovak citizens.

Table 1

Should Slovakia orient more toward the West or the East?	**In %**
Preference for the West (EU)	63.5
Preference for the East (Russia)	19.2
Don't know	17.3
Total	100.0

The relatively high preference for neutrality seems inconsistent with the support for NATO membership. However, sceptics often suggest that it is not as inconsist-

ent as it might seem. It is as if some Slovaks were saying to themselves: "We will be neutral within NATO, mainly so that no one sees us and no one gets angry with us. And most importantly, it would be ideal if someone else paid for it." Does that sound cruel and unfair? Well, judge for yourself. Seven out of ten Slovaks support NATO membership, but half of them (49.6 percent) do not want to invest more money in defence. According to them, defence spending should not increase above two percent of GDP. Only a tenth of the population would be willing to accept an increase above three percent of GDP.

When it comes to supporting Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, it suddenly becomes clear that solidarity with others is not exactly something Slovakia can boast about. While 67.3 percent of Slovaks support humanitarian aid to the attacked country, only 26.3 percent support military aid. Moreover, more than half of the population chooses in surveys, among the options for how the war in Ukraine should end, a "peace agreement" that would give Russia part of Ukraine's territory, which is de facto capitulation to the aggressor. Acceptance of the thesis that the defence of Ukraine also means the defence of Slovakia is a relatively marginal issue under the Tatras.

Bearing in mind attitudes towards the conflict in Ukraine, it is important to point out the lack of solidarity of the Slovak population towards other states if they were threatened by military aggression. Almost 30 percent of respondents would prefer not to intervene in war conflicts in neighbouring countries. Almost half of the citizens would prefer humanitarian aid and only 12 percent would consider military aid. It turns out that the idea of one's own smallness and lack of self-confidence leads to atrophy of solidarity with neighbours among Slovaks. It is unclear what kind of partner Slovakia would be with such a public opinion in the event of a wider conflict in Europe.

Table 2

Opinion on the foreign policy of the current Slovak government	In %
Definitely positive	9.6
Rather positive	23.0
Rather negative	28.2
Negative	26.6
Don't know	12.7
Total	100.0

Table 3

Should Slovakia remain in NATO?	In %
Definitely should remain	45.1
Prefer to remain	25.5
Prefer to not remain	9.8
Definitely should not remain	8.6
Don't know	11.0
Total	100.0

Table 4

Should Slovakia increase defense spending?	In %
Do not increase (keep at current 2% of GDP	49.6
Slightly increase (up to 2.5% of GDP)	27.3
Significantly increase (3% of GDP or more)	10.0
Don't know	13.1
Total	100.0

Table 5

Should Slovakia provide military assistance to Ukraine?	In %
Definitely should	14.3
Prefer to provide	12.0
Prefer to not provide	22.8
Definitely should not	41.9
Don't know	9.0
Total	100.0

What can we take from this data? The Slovak population is declaratively pro-Western and the majority understands that Slovakia's place is in the West, or rather in what is left of it. Slovaks are also utilitarian and pragmatic, which no one can blame them for. The question remains, however, whether the effort to suppress solidarity with partners and the idea that it is necessary to be on good terms with everyone, play it safe and not draw too much attention to oneself is a pragmatic and rational approach in a time of paradigmatic changes in the geopolitics.

Developing the country's position as part of the global West and the willingness to defend the values, with which Slovakia joined the EU and NATO more than twenty years ago appear, despite various inconsistencies, to be important to most of the population.

At the same time, however, it appears that cognitive pitfalls among the population of Slovakia threaten the geopolitical security and democratic orientation of the country. Although it is a member of NATO and the EU, half of society dreams of neutrality. Slovakia supports Ukraine in a humanitarian dimension, but would not hesitate to sacrifice it for the sake of a false peace. And while hybrid warfare is visibly influencing public opinion, Robert Fico's government is turning away from reality and reinforcing narratives that are systematically distancing Slovakia from its European allies.

A good example is the shocking differences in how Slovaks perceive geopolitical threats – 51.5 percent of them consider Russia a danger, but a high 38.6 percent do not. Conversely, 38.7 percent of citizens consider the United States a threat, which reflects a long-standing anti-American sentiment.

Table 6

What stance should Slovakia take toward military conflicts in neighboring countries?	**In %**
To remain neutral and not intervene	29.5
To offer humanitarian assistance but not engage in military operations	49.5
To support a military solution in accordance with international law	12.0
Don't know	9.0
Total	100.0

Source of tables: Future Slovakia Forum

And so, at a time when European leaders are creating a strategy to strengthen the continent's security, Slovakia is teetering on the edge. Instead of becoming an active player in the so-called coalition of the willing, it is becoming an EU pariah. Slovak public discourse is increasingly dominated by narratives that undermine the country's European future and create the illusion that it can survive being militarily neutral.

Michal Vašečka

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Translated from Slovak by Michal Vašečka.

The war in Ukraine has put Slovakia to a historic test

Russia's war against Ukraine has thrown Slovakia into a stress test, laying bare its weaknesses, but at the same time speeding up a long-delayed transformation. Without the war, GDP growth would have been faster and more stable. Instead, the 2022 invasion triggered a sharp surge in energy prices, pressure on industry, and household budgets. Yet at the same time, Slovakia has gained new opportunities: the migration wave helped ease a strained labour market, the defense industry is experiencing an unprecedented boom, and Ukraine's reconstruction is opening space for the involvement of companies and public institutions. What began as a shock may turn into an accelerator of transformation – if Slovakia manages to use its position and capacities.

The war in Ukraine is not only a geopolitical turning point but also a major economic test for Slovakia. As the only eurozone state directly bordering Ukraine, Slovakia finds itself at a unique crossroads: together with Poland, it is one of the West's main gateways to a country at war. While Romania is massively investing in infrastructure to benefit from the European Union's southern connection with Ukraine, Slovakia has not yet managed to fully turn its position into a strategic advantage.

According to the latest assessment of damages and needs (the Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment report from February 2025, jointly prepared by the World Bank,

Zuzana 2 howitzer.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Jacob Bradford

the Ukrainian government, the European Commission, and the United Nations), the total cost of Ukraine's reconstruction amounts to 524 billion US dollars. That's almost three times Ukraine's entire annual GDP – making reconstruction one of the greatest investment challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. For Slovakia and its neighbours, the meaning is clear: demand for capacities, technologies, and services will be extraordinarily high in the coming years. The decisive question is whether they can build their supply in time – from infrastructure and industry to export financing tools and human capital. Those ready to act will ride a wave of long-term growth; those who hesitate will be pushed to the margins.

The conflict also highlighted trends that had long been overlooked under the Tatras: dependence on cheap labour, weak export diversification, and underfunded infrastructure. These weaknesses now stand out as critical limits to future competitiveness.

At the same time, however, the war has opened new opportunities. Slovakia's defense industry is experiencing record growth, the state-owned Eximbanka has launched projects to support exports and participation in Ukraine's reconstruction, and the presence of Ukrainian workers has become an important stabilizing factor for both the labour market and tax revenues. Slovakia is therefore in a unique position: the war has forced it to address long-postponed problems more quickly, but at the same time offers a once-in-a-generation chance to turn geography and industry into real economic power.

The first shock: migration

The immediate consequence of Russia's aggression was the migration wave of 2022–2023. More than one million people crossed Slovakia, with roughly 100,000 – 150,000 finding longer-term refuge here.

For the economy, the effect was twofold. On the one hand, it provided quick relief to a strained labour market –Ukrainian workers helped partially offset shortages in industry, transport, and services. According to estimates by the Institute for Financial Policy, their contributions in taxes and social insurance add 0.1 – 0.2% of GDP annually to the state budget.

On the other hand, integration brought new challenges: recognition of qualifications, language barriers, and pressure on schools and healthcare in regions with higher concentrations of refugees. With the UNHCR winding

down its presence in Slovakia, responsibility now falls squarely on the state – to systematically support towns and municipalities with integrating Ukrainian families. The toughest cases are often teenagers, who arrived only with mothers or grandparents and now struggle with language and schooling. With the right support, today's burden could become tomorrow's dividend.

The war has fundamentally reshaped Slovakia's labour market. What at first looked like a crisis burden is increasingly proving to be a structural opportunity – a way to slow workforce aging and strengthen public finances.

Energy – from dependence to resilience

As recently as 2021, Slovakia was one of the states in the EU most dependent on Russian gas and oil – Russian supplies covered the bulk of its consumption. The invasion and Gazprom's breaches of contract shattered that logic: today, Russian gas makes up less than half of imports, the rest coming from LNG and European routes. With the transit agreement through Ukraine ending in early 2025, the question is no longer whether Slovakia will have gas - but what price it will pay for it. Slovakia urgently needs medium-term contracts and smarter price hedging. Without them, the country will remain dangerously exposed to global market swings.

The backbone of Slovakia's electricity sector is still nuclear – Mochovce and Bohunice plants generate more than half of domestic output and even create room for exports, including to Ukraine. To reduce vulnerability, Slovakia must modernize its transmission grids, deepen interconnections with neighbours, and develop renewables and flexibility – meaning storage and demand-side management, on a rational footing.

But the energy transition will not succeed without infrastructure upgrades. Slovakia is lagging in building new interconnectors and reinforcing its transmission system. Stronger links to regional gas and oil flows are essential if the country is to play its part as a reliable node in Europe's energy security - and as a partner to Ukraine.

The energy shock after 2022 hit steel, chemicals, and the automotive industry – sectors built on cheap power. In the short term it meant production cuts and shutdowns. In the long term, it demands a change of trajectory: carmakers must embrace the shift to EVs and diversify suppliers, while steel and chemical plants need to invest in efficiency and decarbonization. Crucial here is predictable tax and investment stability, giving businesses the certainty to move toward greener technologies and higher-value production. The old model, cheap energy plus cheap labour, is exhausted. Future growth must be driven by innovation, digitalization, and value-added output.

Beyond technology, industry faces a stark infrastructural test. Unfinished motorways, weak railways, and limited logistics at the eastern border are bottlenecks slowing adaptation. If transport links don't catch up fast, Slovakia's exports, and its role in Ukraine's rebuilding, will be left in the dust. Here, systematic use of the Recovery Plan and EU funds will be decisive, without them, pressure for transformation could collapse into mere contraction and lost competitiveness.

A second pillar of exports?

Before 2022, Slovakia's defense sector was stagnant. The war changed everything. Orders financed by allies – like the Zuzana 2 howitzers – along with new programs, boosted revenues and profits across firms such as VOP Nováky, Konštrukta-Defence, MSM Group, Grand Power, and Glock SK. Tech companies like Aliter, SEC, and Telegrafia have also plugged themselves into the value chain.

Since Russia's invasion, Slovak arms exports have increased tenfold, hitting over €1.1 billion in 2024 – equal to nearly 0.9% of GDP. In relative terms, that's only a shade below the United States, the world's number one arms exporter. In only three years, Slovakia has shot up as one of Europe's fastest-rising defense players.

The biggest potential lies in munitions, where Ukraine and NATO face the sharpest shortages, and in new technologies – simulators, sensors, communication systems. Yet the boom has also exposed structural weaknesses: some companies are stuck with limited capacity or rely heavily on foreign sub–suppliers, like the specialized forgings needed for Zuzana howitzers. There's also a striking gap between internationally seasoned firms (like Aliter or SEC) and those still tied almost exclusively to the domestic market.

The decisive question is whether state and industry can anchor this boom in long-term contracts, EU joint armament programs, and investments in R&D. If they can, defense could become Slovakia's second export pillar, standing alongside the automotive sector. If not, the boom will burst – just another wartime bubble.

The risk of political isolation

Russia's aggression has fundamentally reshaped the institutional environment Slovakia operates in. NATO, at its Hague summit, raised the bar for defense spending – from the old 2% of GDP to at least 3.5% for the military and up to 1.5% for broader security by 2035. For Slovakia, this means defense will become one of the largest items in the national budget. These costs must be squared with fiscal consolidation and the long-term sustainability of public finances. Unless leaders win the public over, higher defense spending will be easy prey for populists – threatening not just policy, but the backbone of Slovakia's security strategy.

At the European level, the war has acted as a catalyst for Ukraine's deeper integration. The Slovak government, together with Eximbanka, prepared an impact study on Ukraine's potential EU accession, showing that enlarge-

ment is not a threat but an opportunity – especially for eastern Slovakia. It opens the door for cross-border projects, new transport and energy infrastructure, and investment that could bring real growth to the regions. The study also serves as a key basis for negotiations on the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034. Slovakia therefore has a chance not only to benefit, but to actively shape European priorities – from infrastructure to digitalization to the green transition.

The war has also underlined the importance of Visegrad cooperation. Transit corridors, energy security, and labour mobility are challenges no single country in the region can solve alone. Coordination within the V4 – and broader Central European platforms – could strengthen bargaining power in Brussels and NATO, while reducing the risk that individual states pursue only their own interests. But unless Slovakia speeds up investment in its own infrastructure and secures stable defense financing, it risks being sidelined – while Poland and Romania set the pace and priorities for the whole of Central Europe.

If Slovakia wants to seize the opportunities offered by Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and the EU's new budgetary framework, it cannot undermine Western unity. Continued blocking of sanctions against Russia – most recently with the 18th sanctions package – and staged contacts with Vladimir Putin and Sergei Lavrov directly erode Slovakia's credibility with its partners. Kyiv has been blunt: it will not cooperate with states that sabotage Europe's collective effort while maintaining special ties with the Kremlin. Such a course would wreck Slovakia's credibility – and risk locking its firms out of flagship projects in one of the century's biggest investment booms.

The war in Ukraine has put Slovakia to a historic test. It has exposed long-standing weaknesses – dependence on cheap energy, underfunded infrastructure, demographic decline – but at the same time opened the door for fundamental transformation: strengthening the defense industry, driving technological modernization, and playing a role in Ukraine's reconstruction.

The decisive decade of 2025–2034 will determine whether Slovakia seizes this chance. The key steps are clear:

- secure stable defense financing and explain to the public why it is an investment in national security
- accelerate infrastructure projects and cross-border interconnectors so the country is not pushed aside by Poland and Romania in regional logistics and transit
- use European funds (MFF 2028–2034) strategically as leverage for the green transition, digitalization, and human capital development

Slovakia's future will not be decided only in debates about sanctions or gas, but above all by whether the country can redefine itself as a confident and reliable member of the democratic West. Ukraine's reconstruction is a chance that will not come again. Slovakia must choose to stand at the center of events – or be left on the sidelines.

Dávid Bořuta

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Attitudes towards Ukraine as a polarizing factor in Slovakia

The war in Ukraine has been going on for four years and has an impact on Slovakia that cannot be overlooked and is fundamental given the country's European future. However, it is not primarily about economic factors, although these are of course also important. The topic of the war in Ukraine, Slovakia's attitude towards the war, towards the attacker and the victim, as well as Slovakia's specific policies in relation to Ukraine and Russia have become a key polarizing factor for the Slovak population. Even against a background of other strongly divisive issues, shortly after the start of the war in February 2022, relations with Ukraine became a topic on which parliamentary and presidential elections are being decided and which has helped derail the country from normality.

Those who remember the attitudes of the Slovak population and the Slovak political elite towards Ukraine might be surprised in retrospect. The attitude towards Ukraine and Ukrainians before the war was incomparable with the attitudes towards other neighbours of Slovakia, in short, Ukraine did not really exist in public opinion. Unlike other EU neighbours of Ukraine – Poland, Hungary or Romania, Ukraine and Ukrainians did not arouse great emotions. Most of the population did not know much about Ukrainians and were not particularly interested in them. People did not go to the seaside in Ukraine, or consume Ukrainian products, except perhaps for smuggled cigarettes.

Ukrainians went to work in the Czech Republic significantly more often than in Slovakia, the Ukrainian mafia of the 1990s was a thing of the past and Ukrainians played hockey less successfully than Slovaks. From the point of view of Slovaks, there was nothing to be gained.

It is only now clear and already explicitly communicated by opponents of Ukraine that behind the attitudes of many in Slovakia was the systematic adoption of narratives from Russia. The attitude towards Russia is and always has been a completely different story in Slovakia, and so one part of the political and social elite began, very surprisingly for Slovakia, to adopt the position that Ukraine is an artificial state, a non-historical entity that should not even exist. It is actually only the result of the long-term influence of the West on the population that was, is and should be Russian. Slovaks mostly do not know much about the story of the so-called Polish Smuta (Time of Troubles), about the negotiations in the Bialowieza Forest in 1991, or about Ivan Franko, Stepan Bandera, or Taras Shevchenko, but they have adopted the theses of Russian propaganda more quickly.

And that this is a cognitive failure can be documented precisely by the fact that many Slovaks have adopted the attitude that Ukraine is an "artificial state". The thesis about a non-historical country often, and not entirely without justification, appears precisely in relation to Slovakia. So why do some people in Slovakia believe that only they can explain it? Cognitive breakdowns are often difficult to explain.

Against public opinion

Immediately after the start of the war, however, the reaction of Slovakia and the country's inhabitants may have surprised many who know the inner world of the country's inhabitants. Although Eduard Heger's government did not react immediately, all parts of Slovak civil society began to organize themselves even more. The immediate assistance to refugees on the border with Ukraine and the humanitarian aid delivered to all parts of Ukraine were visible and, in some respects, surpassed similar activities of civil society structures from other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Eduard Heger's government also responded subsequently, and although it is largely forgotten today, together with Estonia and Poland, Slovakia was among the first countries to begin delivering aid to Ukraine in the form of weapons, including those that were not thought about much in Western European countries at the time – aircraft, air defence systems and a lot of artillery shells, everything from old, pre-1989 stocks that Slovakia owned.

However, this is where the problem begins that accompanies Slovakia to this day. No matter how much the Slovak government and the civil sector did everything they could for the benefit of their neighbour under attack by Russia, they largely went against the majority public opinion. Today, this may sound obvious in times when the attitude of Poles, Czechs and many other Europeans has changed to some extent, but the Slovak people were not prepared for such strongly pro-Ukrainian and at the same time anti-Russian positions and activities, and they did not welcome them. Here, in the spring of 2022, Slovakia's fall into authoritarianism, flirtation with Russia and transformation into a pariah of Europe begins.

The first Eurobarometer mapping the attitudes of the people of Slovakia towards Ukraine and Ukrainians (Flash Eurobarometer No. 506 from April 2022) pointed to the lack of enthusiasm in relation to Ukrainians. When asked how sympathetic respondents felt towards Ukrainians attacked by Russia, Slovakia found itself at the bottom of the EU countries, along with Bulgarians and Hungarians. Only Hungarian respondents answered "definitely agree" to a lesser extent than Slovak respondents. It was only a matter of time before the result of April 2022 would be reflected, also with the help of massive pro-Russian propaganda in Slovak social media.

Attitudes toward Ukrainians in Slovakia are not exceptional – relations with other nationalities, with the exception of Czechs, are not significantly more positive, and solidarity has long been lacking. Therefore, even the difficult situation of Ukrainians has not led to their majority acceptance. According to a February 2023 survey by the Bratislava Policy Institute, while more than half of Slovaks supported accepting Ukrainian refugees, opposition prevailed on other issues. Most were unwilling to sacrifice part of their standard of living, saw no long-term benefits in their presence, and feared a weakening of the economy and the quality of public services.

It should come as no surprise that attitudes toward Ukrainians and Russian aggression became one of the key election issues in Slovakia – both in the parliamentary elections of September 2023 and the presidential elections in March and April 2024. Analysts also agree that the topic of the war in Ukraine essentially decided these votes. In the parliamentary elections, after which Robert Fico returned to power as head of the coalition government, the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic also played a role. However, the presidential elections, won by the governing coalition's candidate Robert Pellegrini, revolved almost exclusively around peace, peacekeepers, and so-called warmongers. Pellegrini promised not to drag Slovakia into the war. Unlike Andrej Babiš, who a year earlier in the Czech presidential elections relied on a similar rhetoric, Pellegrini succeeded.

The issue of war resonates strongly in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe. But in Slovakia, public opinion has long been vigorously shaped by Vladimir Putin's friends and Volodymyr Zelenskyy's enemies, and politicians are constantly adapting to the majority's whims. This is also indicated by Globsec's research from 2023. If we compare the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, nowhere is Ukraine perceived as the culprit for the war to such an extent as in Slovakia – 17% of the Slovak population thinks that Ukraine is responsible for the war. At the

same time, nowhere is the "West" perceived as the culprit for the war to such an extent – as many as 34 percent of the population claim this, while only 40% of respondents in Slovakia chose the option that Russia as the aggressor is to blame for the war. In Poland, for comparison, 85% of respondents identify the culprit for the war in Ukraine, while 4% perceive the West as the culprit and 3% of respondents perceive Ukraine itself as the culprit. The Czech Republic is somewhere in between – Russia is perceived as the culprit of the war by 71% of respondents, the West by 15% and Ukraine by 8%.

The question remains whether Slovakia is truly exceptional in its attitude towards Ukraine. It turns out that, despite the data provided, it is not – all the trends that we know from other countries are also present in Slovakia. However, it is visible that all these trends are more dominant in Slovakia and, unfortunately, more destructive. There are several reasons for this situation, and another of the problems of the country under the Tatras is that in many respects it does not accept its diagnosis.

National cultural code

The first specific feature of Slovakia is the experience of pan-Slavism in its banal and offensive form. The Russian Federation has been carrying out hostile hybrid operations against Western liberal democracies for years. However, only in some countries of Central and Eastern Europe is Russia able to successfully use pan-Slavism to undermine liberal democracy. In Slovakia, pan-Slavism manifests itself primarily in the form of romantic Slavianophilia and serves to exclude and disqualify liberal elites supporting liberal pluralism. Failure to show loyalty to Slavic origins or questioning the primordial ties between all Slavs leads to self-disqualification in the public sphere.

The second dimension is the strong authoritarianism of the inhabitants of Slovakia. All research analysing the level of authoritarianism of Slovak respondents indicates that Slovakia resembles more the countries of Eastern Europe than its Central European neighbours in the V4 grouping, where, incidentally, this level is also relatively high compared to some Western European countries.

The third factor is the significant anti-Westernism of the Slovak population, which is typical for a moderate majority of the population and has not changed significantly since 1989. Numerous studies in this regard point to a correlation between anti-minority sentiments and anti-Semitism, and the level of authoritarianism. The level of anti-Western sentiment does not change much. The now legendary analyses of Vladimír Krivý from the 1990s revealed a similar level of anti-Westernism as measured by researchers today.

In fourth place, many would probably expect the results of forty years of propaganda promoting eternal cooperation with the Soviet Union. However, this propaganda was similar throughout the Eastern Bloc, yet other post-communist countries are not as susceptible to Russian narratives. It is therefore clear that how a country remembers the period before 1989 matters. In this regard, Slovakia has had significant gaps over the past 35 years. The current collective amnesia concerning the previous era, or even among part of the population, is a consequence of the fact that the period of oppression after 1948 is scarcely recalled in films, literature, or scholarly books. The difference compared to, for example, the Czech Republic and Poland is so pronounced that one can speak of two distinct types of countries that underwent different transformations.

The last dimension is what is usually not seen from the outside – Slovak utilitarianism. The Slovak effort to survive and to join the big and strong is repeated in Slovakia as if from a large textbook. As a small nation, Slovaks have survival as their highest value and subordinate everything to it. This national meme has emerged in the last 4 years, like it did in 1939 or after 1948.

Contemporary Slovakia is thus only playing for itself and trying to be nice to the strong. The Slovak government does not block Ukraine's potential membership in the EU, but Russia does not fundamentally refuse it either. Precisely in the spirit of Russian propaganda, Slovakia is participating in questioning the EU consensus regarding the war in Ukraine and, together with Hungary, is participating in undermining the authority of the Ukrainian leadership. The Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico, from his foresight regarding the future, is creating an aura of a visionary who already knows today that Ukraine lost, Russia won, everything is more complicated, and Slovakia's national interests are based on good relations with Russia.

But is Robert Fico a Russophile, as he is often perceived? Not entirely. He is an autocratic politician whose personality was shaped in his youth by friendship and admiration for the Soviet Union. He is naturally anti-Western, statist, economically corporatist and has long been opposed to an open society. However, in many ways he is also a typical representative of a significant part of the Slovak elite. Both Jozef Tiso and Gustáv Husák were opportunists rather than lovers of Germans or Russians. It was important, in the spirit of the national cultural code, to ensure that the nation survived. And therefore – everything is simpler. The enemies of Ukraine simply do not see it, because in their view of the world it is not important. They are wrong about everything, but that does not bother them. They have their explanations and are visibly proud of themselves. It is as if they wanted to say: "If Ukraine were to fall and the Russians came – we need to quickly pour it on them. They may only rape us, but unlike others, they will not kill us."

Michal Vašečka

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Visegrad after 35 years: the end or a new beginning?

In mid-February next year, the Visegrad Group (V4) will mark 35 years of its existence. The celebrations will be awkward. They will be orchestrated by the current Hungarian presidency, which will certainly want to use the event in its tense campaign ahead of the April elections. Viktor Orbán faces his first defeat after sixteen years in power. Slovakia will celebrate, because Robert Fico's dream of a Visegrad antithesis to the West is one of the constants in his politics of many azimuths but no meaning. Under its old-new Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, Czechia will still be in a state of incipient Visegrad exaltation, which will only slowly give way to sobering up, while Poland will remain on the sidelines and flee from its southern neighbors to the north and west.

Visegrad cooperation became one of the topics of this year's Czech election campaign and was also reflected in the new government's program. For many reasons, however, the ideas of the incoming cabinet are illusions, which only show that the program manifesto was written, at least the part that concerns foreign policy, for a world that does not exist. During the campaign, Andrej Babiš often repeated that it was Prime Minister Petr Fiala who destroyed Visegrad by ruining relations with Slovakia and Hungary. This thesis is wrong for several reasons.

Among other things, because the Visegrad Group has in fact been in decline since 2014. At that time, it had had a very successful decade behind it. All four countries had become part of the European Union. Visegrad had managed to effectively defuse internal conflicts when it calmed the then tense relationship between Slovakia and Hungary. It was also an inspiration for the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, both thanks to its members' successful journey to Europe and the ability of the executives of the four states to cooperate effectively.

Last but not least, this quartet has often been at the vanguard of the European Union. Whether it was the issue of energy security, cooperation with countries further east, or other sectoral agendas, it was Visegrad that came up with innovative ideas. It can be said that in some European policies, it was Visegrad cooperation that accelerated the emancipation of member countries after their accession to the EU in terms of their integration into Brussels' structures and mechanisms.

However, after the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the Visegrad consensus on the perception of security risks collapsed, only to be replaced by the false idea that the sole purpose of Visegrad was to fight against relocation quotas for asylum seekers on EU soil. It should be added that Visegrad was successful in this area for a certain period of time. However, the victories achieved came at the cost of ruining its positive image. Moreover, focusing the V4's importance on a single issue (migration) or a single tactic (opposition to „Brussels") led to the neglect of other agendas.

During this period Visegrad became a symbol but its actual substance weakened. Nevertheless interactions between member states resulted in Viktor Orbán's personal involvement in Andrej Babiš's campaign ahead of the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections and the political bromance shared between the Hungarian prime minister and his Slovak counterpart Robert Fico. Until 2023, Orbán also had an influence on some of Poland's European policy agendas. These included, for example, opposition to the so-called principle of conditionality in negotiations on the EU's Multi-year Financial Framework.

However, this was in fact another moment when Visegrad began to crumble. Orbán's help to Babiš was logically disliked by Petr Fiala. The proximity of some Polish national-conservative politicians from the Law and Justice (PiS) party to Orbán led to the new Polish government, led by Donald Tusk, turning against Budapest after the elections in October 2023. This shows that when some countries began to increasingly project their so-called universal political goals onto Visegrad, the change of governments and political styles in the four countries became an obstacle for Central European cooperation.

The murderers of Visegrad

Let's return to Babiš's thesis that it was Petr Fiala who caused the demise of Visegrad after taking office as prime minister in 2021. It should be noted here that despite Orbán's persistent support for Babiš, Fiala did not initially shy away from Visegrad meetings. However, given his supporters, he could hardly show a willingness to meet regularly with Orbán and Fico when his government claimed on a daily basis that it was the only guarantee of the Czech Republic's orientation towards the West.

The situation escalated at a press conference during the Czech presidency of the V4 in the spring of 2024, when Prime Ministers Fiala, Tusk, Fico, and Orbán argued in front of the cameras. Subsequently, given the new Slovak government coalition's friendliness towards Russia and its strange toying with symbols of the Czechoslovak Communist Normalization period of 1970's and 1980's, the

Lineup of Visegrad prime ministers from 2021. From left: Mateusz Morawiecki, Eduard Heger, Viktor Orbán, and Andrej Babiš. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Czech side suspended the traditional joint meeting of the governments of both countries. This was a step that polarized the Czech political scene, with the opposition calling for the restoration of special relations with Slovakia.

The reason for the described disagreements was the rhetoric of Fico and Orbán relativizing Russian aggression against Ukraine. At that moment, it simply did not make sense for Fiala or Tusk to negotiate with them at the highest political level, thus demonstrating the weight of a political alliance that had in fact ceased to exist. However, relations did not completely break down. For example, Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský maintained them and communicated normally with his counterparts in Bratislava and Budapest. Nor does it appear that there are any fundamental issues to be resolved in Czechia-Slovakia or Czechia-Hungary relations. Diplomacy functions normally.

However, the more significant nail in the Visegrad coffin was the escalation of the Polish-Hungarian dispute. This happened after the defeat of the ruling PiS party in the Polish parliamentary elections in the fall of 2023. Some of its politicians came under the scrutiny of investigators. One of the results was the prosecution of former Deputy Minister of Justice Marcin Romanowski, who decided to flee to Hungary to escape the Polish authorities. He was granted political asylum there, and Orbán's regime still refuses to extradite him to Poland.

This is yet another layer of disputes between the current Polish and Hungarian governments. The main issue is the differing attitudes of Budapest and Warsaw towards Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, there are also more personal layers to the dispute, as Tusk is more or less an ally of Orbán's opponent Péter Magyar, as both belong to the European People's Party. Péter Magyar believes that, like Tusk, he will defeat the national-conservative forces in his country.

Where do we need the V4?

However, there is another question about the necessity of Visegrad that goes beyond Babiš's irritation with the Fiala government's Central European policy. In the golden years after EU accession, Visegrad did indeed represent a common interest in many respects. On issues such as energy security or the numerous transition periods associated with accession, Visegrad served as a battering ram. Moreover, it was associated with either a positive or at least neutral image.

However, this image has faded, and after twenty years of EU membership, there are fewer automatic common issues. This is all the more true at a time when the four countries disagree on the key geopolitical event of the first quarter of the 21st century, namely Russian aggression. The V4 countries have simply become normal EU states and have some interests in common and some that differ. Visegrad solidarity no longer exists, and membership in this group does not predetermine anything.

It will simply not be possible to restore close cooperation. The main obstacle will be the fact that Poland and Hungary are not talking to each other. So if the new Czech government majority dreams of Visegrad, it can count on less than half of its population agreeing with them, given Poland's approach. And who knows what the fate of Visegrad will be after the Hungarian parliamentary elections next spring, which Orbán's opponent Magyar may win.

However, it should be added to this outlook that Visegrad may still have a useful role to play. Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary are not about to escape from Central Europe, and are thus condemned to interact. Ideally, this interaction would take the form of friendly relations full of cooperation. It should be noted here that, despite the problematic developments of recent years, good relations in other areas are functioning and business partnerships and interpersonal contacts at the most basic level are deepening. We should celebrate twenty years of joint EU membership not only as the unification of the western and eastern parts of Europe, but also as an unprecedented interconnection of the Central European region.

The foundations of Visegrad cooperation can play a positive role in all of this. One of these is the International Visegrad Fund, which for 25 years has been providing funding for civil society initiatives that deepen contacts in the region.

Of course, the funds are limited and cannot compete with European or even Norwegian funds. Even so, their smart targeting is bearing fruit. This is best seen in the contrast between the depth of the links between Visegrad civil society and the scarcity of such links between, for example, the Czech Republic and Austria, Poland and Lithuania, or Hungary and Slovenia. The funds provided help to connect people's stories, thereby creating a bond between societies despite politics.

However, given current political polarization, it is questionable whether the International Visegrad Fund will be able to withstand all the various pressures. Here, too, it is possible to look for a mechanism that would mean more plurality and less dominance of a particular political direction in the priorities of this institution. The Fund's support is distributed to entire societies, which raises the question of whether its operations should be supervised solely by foreign ministries. Nominees to a „council" of the Fund could be sent, for example, by presidents, parliaments, regions, or municipalities. In this way, the only tangible Visegrad institution would be better protected from the pressures that ultimately brought Central European cooperation as a whole to the brink of irrelevance.

If Andrej Babiš wants to think about reviving Visegrad, he is setting himself a really big task. It will not be easy to reconcile today's Warsaw with Budapest. However, he is more likely to use the magical „V4" as a vehicle to promote his own political ideas about the EU. He will find partners for this in Bratislava and Budapest (perhaps temporarily), but it will likely only lead to further polarization in Central Europe, marginalization of the Czech Republic within Europe, and ultimately the decline of Visegrad. Yet innovative thinking about this stifled format is truly needed today, and the path forward could be precisely the pluralization outlined above.

Vít Dostál

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Translated from Czech by Vít Dostál.

The Visegrad Group's ups and downs

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's efforts to turn the Visegrad Group (V4) into an anti-Ukrainian bloc are currently unlikely to succeed. However, despite political alienation due to differing approaches to Russian aggression against Ukraine, cooperation between Central European countries continues in areas where material interests prevail over ideology. This was the case, for example, with the agreement to ban imports of Ukrainian grain.

The war in Ukraine impacted Hungary's economy, politics and society. The Hungarian government, far from being a passive recipient of external shocks, has actively shaped its own political and economic response to the war; pursuing a balancing act of appeasing both Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, contrasting Hungary's supposedly pro-peace position to the supposed "pro-war stance of Brussels", and a general mismanagement of the Hungarian economy has potentially cost Viktor Orbán more political capital than he would like to admit.

Domestically he faces his biggest challenge yet, as opposition leader Péter Magyar uses much of Orbán's

economic and social welfare failures to rally support. Within the EU, the country has faced financial and political isolation due to rule of law concerns and pro-Russia sentiments.

The self-perception, carefully cultivated by Orbán, of Hungary as a besieged island of stability amid a chaotic West, also shapes its approach to regional cooperation. Could the V4 offer a potential respite for Orbán and does the war in Ukraine influence cooperation within – and indeed the survival of – the block?

United in division

To answer this question it is worth briefly exploring the purpose and origins of the V4. Founded in 1991 by Poland, Hungary, and former Czechoslovakia (initially as the Visegrad Declaration, later as the Visegrad Four), its main aim was to foster the transition to democracy, establish good neighbourly relations and support members in their EU and NATO integration efforts. Its founding principles promoted by the likes of József Antall, Lech Wałęsa and Václav Havel were that of liberal democracy, a commitment to rule of law, tolerance and European integration. For much of its existence, the V4 provided only modest international cooperation, its main benefits lying in cross-border cultural, educational and civil society projects. Deeper political alliances were often hindered by domestic politics and diplomatic tensions surrounding ethnic minorities.

Yet, some commentators argue that the V4 is bound by a broader, shared sense of grievance towards Western Europe, united in a victimhood narrative. Lukáš Macek in his writing on the future of the V4 points out that CEE countries often feel relegated to the peripheries of Europe, and see themselves – as Milan Kundera put it – the "kidnapped West". In practice, this meant that the V4 often played an important role influencing EU policy, though primarily as a rather reactive opposition force. Indeed, the 2015 migration crisis seemingly united the bloc against EU refugee relocation quotas, emphasising sovereignty and cultural homogeneity. Though internal inconsistencies revealed a shallow ideological unity (while Hungary and Poland turned migration into a core domestic political narrative, Czechia and Slovakia approached the crisis more pragmatically, emphasising domestic labour market needs and sovereignty), the united stance cemented the image of a strong V4 bloc.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán walks toward an uncertain political future.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/European Union

And while members of the V4 continued to clash throughout the 2010s over various issues related to the EU and rule of law, the widespread rise of illiberal politics within the bloc was predicted to spur on renewed allyship – albeit one that is based on distinctly different principles than those of the V4 founders: illiberal democracy, euroscepticism and closed borders.

Yet, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia once again revealed that the stability of the V4 alliance is highly contingent on domestic politics and foreign policy agendas. For instance, the Hungarian Fidesz government, by 2022 in its 12th consecutive year in power, continued its commitment to the illiberal project by refusing to offer direct military support, sending arms or allowing NATO members to use Hungarian territory for arms and military transport purposes. Though Orbán himself claims to be pro-peace and remains neutral for the sake of Hungary's sovereignty and the protection of Hungarian minorities in Ukraine, most commentators perceived such politics as playing into the hands of Putin, by limiting a unified European response.

Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (under Prime Minister Eduard Heger) on the other hand adopted clearly pro-Ukraine and anti-Russia positions. The three countries supplied weapons, ammunition and trained Ukrainian troops. While Hungary blocked or delayed several EU sanctions packages – arguing that sanctions hurt Europe more than Russia –, the Slovak, Czech and Polish governments supported and often pushed for stronger EU sanctions against Moscow. On the diplomatic front, President Zelenskyy was frequently invited on high-level visits and received strong public support in these countries, while Hungary mostly avoided bilateral visits.

The stark division was in many ways seen as the nail in the coffin for further V4 cooperation and the first year of the war was characterised by increased diplomatic tension and Hungary's isolation within the block. In March 2022 Hungary cancelled a meeting of V4 defence ministers, after the Slovak, Czech and Polish defence ministers indicated their absence, citing Hungary's close relationship to Moscow. In the same month, the Polish-Hungarian friendship day celebration was postponed, after Polish President Andrzej Duda expressed his reservations towards Hungary's pro-Russian stance.

However, a number of bilateral agreements in war-related policies reveal that the dividing lines are perhaps less clearly defined than expected. These alignments suggest that even amid political estrangement, V4 cooperation persists where material interests – energy, trade, or agricultural protectionism – outweigh ideology. For instance, Slovakia joined Hungary in maintaining Russian gas imports and both criticised EU embargoes as harmful to national economies, eventually resulting in the two countries securing exemptions from the EU oil embargo. Similarly, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia joined forces to impose national bans on Ukrainian grain imports in an attempt to protect domestic markets against competition.

Furthermore, the split alliance characterising the first 1.5 years of the war were further blurred after Robert Fico came back to power in 2023 and immediately reversed the pro-Ukraine policies of the previous Slovak government. Fico announced the country would not send "a single bullet" to Ukraine, stopped bilateral military aid and reframed the official stance on the war as a "proxy conflict between Russia and the West". The shift signaled a potential reactivation of the Budapest-Bratislava axis within the V4.

The shackles of real politics

With the recent electoral success of Andrej Babiš and the potential formation of a far-right government in the Czech Republic, the prospects of renewed reconciliation through an illiberal coalition once again seems to be a possible scenario. Just a few days ago, Viktor Orbán announced his intention to form a new anti-Ukraine alliance in the EU with the Czech and Slovak governments. Drawing inspiration from the V4 resistance to the 2015 migration quotas, the Hungarian Prime Minister's political director Balázs Orbán (unrelated) said the Ukraine-sceptic alliance "will come – and be more and more visible". However, it is unlikely that Poland would join in on the coalition, as Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk continues to publicly back Ukraine through military aid, EU-NATO unity and maintaining sanctions on Russia and international accountability for war crimes.

Overall, it seems then that the primary factor shaping the survival of the Visegrad Four alliance is not so much a shared commitment to certain values, ideologies and norms, but rather the waxing and waning of the current political stances of leaders within the bloc. At its conception the group may have been guided by a belief in liberal democracy, rule of law, European integration and tolerance. Yet, when faced with the crisis of migration, the overwhelming response was that of intolerance and closed borders. When faced with Russian aggression in Ukraine, the bloc divided into two camps of opposing alliances towards Ukraine and Russia. Consistency in Hungary's position simply correlates with the electoral consistency of its ruling regime, while in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia frequent changes in political direction influence the extent to which they can represent consistent roles in the bloc.

The war in Ukraine will certainly continue to divide the bloc and little reconciliation can be expected from that front. The real question then, is whether the V4 can break free from the shackles of realpolitik and reclaim a commitment to the moral and ideological principles that once gave credence to its conception – or whether its future will remain hostage to the shifting interests of its leaders.

Péter Bori

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How the war and Viktor Orbán have changed Poland's view of the Visegrad Group

It will soon be the fourth anniversary of the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine. The events of February 2022 have had a significant impact on Poland's perception of the regional alliance. It became clear that viewing it primarily as a united front of EU sceptics was insufficient. The paradigm of the Visegrad Group's (V4) primacy over any other forms of cooperation quickly came to an end.

It is worth noting that the V4 lost significance in Poland during the rule of the national-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party. It is remarkable in the context of the previous years, as it has usually been liberal governments that perceived the Visegrad cooperation in a more sceptical way, instead prioritising the strengthening of ties with the West.

This time, however, things were a little different. When a liberal government led by Donald Tusk took power in the October 2023 elections, it largely continued the integration course set by its conservative predecessor. This course was directed northward, targeting cooperation with the countries around the Baltic Sea, with which Poland began to be linked primarily by the issue of international security. Also worth mentioning is the significant improvement in relations with Czechia, where Prime Minister Petr Fiala was the first to find common ground with his Polish counterparts, followed by President Petr Pavel after the 2023 presidential elections.

Regardless of political connotations, there was a prevailing belief in Poland that it was necessary to support Ukraine and provide it with as much assistance as possible, including military aid. The Visegrad format began to transform into a forum for Polish-Czech-Slovak cooperation, which until the end of September 2023, i.e. until Robert Fico's victory in the parliamentary elections in Slovakia, was relatively enthusiastic about Ukraine. However, the very name of Visegrad Group ceased to appear in the Polish public debate. There was more talk of the Bucharest Nine (B9), which includes the countries of NATO's eastern border. Hungary became something of a pariah in the existing Central European formats.

The end of a friendship

Without exaggeration, the year 2022 devastated relations with Hungary. In opinion polls conducted after the outbreak of the war, in which Polish respondents were asked about their relationship with other nations, Hungarians saw a significant drop in popularity. Only Russians and Belarusians fell further.

The idea of the Polish-Hungarian friendship has not recovered even three years after the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine. A certain symbol of this cooling was the reaction of the PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński in April 2022 to the words of Viktor Orbán. Three days after the parliamentary elections in Hungary, on 6 April 2022, during a press conference, Orbán said of Russian war crimes in Bucha, Ukraine: "We live in times of mass manipulation, when one does not know whether to believe what one sees."

This apparent attempt to downplay Russia's responsibility for genocide in Ukraine was met with a strong response from Jarosław Kaczyński, who stated in an interview that if anyone cannot see what happened in Bucha, they should go to an eye doctor. On 9 April 2022, Orbán's press secretary released the following statement from the prime minister: "We condemn the genocide in Bucha. We support an international investigation."

The Hungarian government's actions are considered pro-Russian by a large part of Polish society, including the supporters of PiS. It is therefore no coincidence that when, after the European Parliament elections, Viktor Orbán announced the need to create a new political faction, it did not arouse much enthusiasm within PiS. Orbán did indeed become one of the founding fathers of Patriots for Europe, but his Polish political counterparts, it seemed, were not rushing to join the faction, despite the efforts of the Hungarian Fidesz-KDNP government coalition.

PiS thus remained the largest group among the European Conservatives and Reformists. Both factions naturally agree on many issues, but the expected Polish-Hungarian merger with Fidesz did not materialise. A year and a half after the European elections, despite Orbán's loud proclamations, Patriots for Europe is not a strong group in Brussels, even though Andrej Babiš, the winner of the recent Czech parliamentary elections, was involved in its creation.

The erosion of the Visegrad Group is being exacerbated by the exhaustion of the original rationale for cooperation. It should be remembered that the V4 was created for the purpose of coordinating the process of accession to the European Union. After 2004, the group was reformatted into the V4+ with the aim of sharing good practices with other countries aspiring to EU membership. In this regard, regular meetings of prime ministers before European Council summits or of individual ministers before EU sectoral council meetings were essential. These meetings

have largely died out, although meetings at lower levels continue to take place.

In 2025, the political and social situation is different than it was three years earlier. Growing reluctance to help Ukrainians and war fatigue allow for slightly more consideration of different opinions. The biggest proponent of reviving the Visegrad format is Viktor Orbán, who has announced the possibility of resuscitating the V4 at least twice. He did so after the election victories of Robert Fico and Andrej Babiš.

Orbán would like to return to the role of leader of the Visegrad Four, which he enjoyed from 2015 because of the ongoing migration crisis at the time. Because it was the Hungarian prime minister who paved the way in clashes with Brussels (as we learn from materials published by the Hungarian investigative portal *Direkt36*, this was done, among other things, with the help of a spy network built up in European institutions), Hungary's position in the V4 format and in relations with Poland was disproportionately strong. While Slovakia and Czechia quite naturally perceive Polish leadership in this format, Hungary still has ambitions to dominate it.

The main question

A return to the Visegrad Group in its pre-2022 form seems impossible, even if PiS wins the 2027 parliamentary elections in Poland. It seems that the values espoused by this political camp, including a strong anti-Russian stance, are incompatible with Orbán's "dovish" attitude towards Vladimir Putin's Russian regime. The Hungarian prime minister will therefore have to look elsewhere. On social media, it can be seen that one of the factions of the Polish Confederation maintains regular contact with Hungarian government circles. This is a wing close to Krzysztof Bosak, whose MEPs have joined the Patriots for Europe faction. From Fidesz's perspective, this youthful enthusiasm should not go to waste.

It is clear that Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary could cooperate in various formats. There is no shortage of topics for mutual consultation, to say the least. One of them will be negotiations on the European Union's Multiannual Financial Framework. It is in the region's interest to ensure that as much of the European budget as possible continues to be directed towards cohesion policy, which also targets the Visegrad Four countries.

Another potential area of cooperation is climate policy. The countries in the region agree that a rapid transition to green energy is out of the question. However, it seems unlikely that cooperation in the field of energy will be established, as Hungary and Slovakia are not doing much to rid themselves of their dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

The individual countries in the group are also deeply divided in their attitudes toward Russia. Fico is much closer to Orbán than to Poland. Czech policy toward Russia will

Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán shake hands in September 2017 in the Polish Sejm.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Kancelaria Sejmu/Paweł Kula

probably not be fundamentally affected by Babiš's ANO movement taking over the government. This is not only because of the explosions in Vrbětice in 2014, in which Russia was involved, as we have known since 2021. Andrej Babiš is undoubtedly so economically tied to the West that he will not risk a rapprochement with Russia that could jeopardise his business reputation.

The main question is whether or not Orbán's Hungary, loyal to Russia, will desire to overturn the geopolitical table and gain a better position in the world. Viktor Orbán wants to end the paradigm of Hungary as a country defeated in two world wars. In this respect, he remains unpredictable. He strives to restore Hungary's former position and respect for it. It is the source of his great effort to participate in a forum deciding the future of Ukraine. Orbán, who has repeatedly denied Kyiv the right to self-determination, represents an absolutely anti-Ukrainian approach in the Central European club, which is one that the Polish government has a difficult time identifying with.

Dominik Héjj

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Central Europe, the interests of the V4 states and the end of the Kundera's myth

Central Europe is a region full of internal contradictions, grandeur and smallness at the same time. It is full of world visions, breathtaking achievements and exceptional minds, it has been teetering for centuries between doubts and complexes about itself on the one hand and self-stereotypes about grandeur and civilizational superiority on the other. The curse and blessing of the region at the same time has been its location between the West, East and Southeast of the European continent. Therefore, it is surprising in retrospect that the cooperation of the countries of Central Europe, apart from the natural personal connections of the ruling elites, was so little institutionalized in the past.

The renewal of the relatively short-lived institutionalized cooperation of the three medieval kingdoms from the 14th century was fully revitalized only with the establishment of the Visegrad Group in 1991. This occurred after the Central European countries had long experienced domination by various external powers. It would seem that the good and deep cooperation of the countries of Central Europe is so self-evident in view of historical experience that questioning it is an irresponsible gamble with one's own future. Nevertheless, we have buried the Visegrad Four (V4) several times now, and this time we can speak without unnecessary pathos about the clinical death of the grouping.

However, the history of questioning the cooperation of countries within the V4 is quite rich and is related to many political, economic and value differences between the countries. And it is undoubtedly also related to the fact that one of the main goals of the V4 – European integration and the entry of Central European countries into the EU – was achieved in 2004. But immediately after the formation of the V4, uncertainties about the meaning of the group and internal crises came, especially during the governments of Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia, when Bratislava was temporarily isolated from the integration processes. In the 1990s, the V4 was reduced to formal meetings. After the main goal – entry into the EU and NATO in 2004 – was achieved, on the contrary, discussions began whether the V4 had "expired", or whether it should be transformed into a lobbying platform in the EU or just disappear.

The so-called migration crisis of 2015-2016 brought about a united opposition of the V4 countries to migration and EU policies in relation to migration and migrants, but also a strong polarization of these countries. They jointly rejected mandatory quotas for the relocation of migrants, which strengthened the cohesion of the V4 for a short time, but also sparked a dispute with the European Commission, which has not been fully resolved to this day. Since 2017, the polarizing topic of questioning the rule of law in some V4 countries has been added – Poland and Hungary faced EU procedures under Article 7 for violating the principles of the rule of law, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia partially distanced themselves from them, which further weakened the unity of the V4.

The V4 brand gradually became toxic outside the Central European region, and in the logic of the coming poly-crises, the problems began to multiply. The V4 countries also began to distance themselves from each other in matters of attitudes towards nuclear energy, carbon neutrality and the EU's green goals. And then came a topic that practically paralyzed cooperation. Since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the countries' cooperation has practically ended due to different attitudes

towards Putin's Russia and the geopolitical challenges associated with Russia's openly revanchist policy in relation to Central Europe. Today, cooperation continues timidly in the coordinating the transport and energy connections of the V4 countries, for which, however, a V4-type structure is not necessary and indispensable among the neighbours.

However, the questioning of cooperation among V4 countries is taking place at a time – and this needs to be remembered – when economic pressure on the V4 countries is increasing. And when, it seems, not all those involved are aware of it. The V4 accounts for 1.3% of the world's GDP, and even though it lags the most advanced countries in the world in productivity, innovation and living standards, it is not a region that can be overlooked due to its dynamics. In terms of GDP/PPP, it lags the EU average (53,960 USD/PPP) only slightly (by 10-30%), but at the same time the V4 is above the world average, which is 20,886 USD/PPP. In the last decade, the V4 has grown faster than the EU, but the social progress index shows the V4 below the EU average, with the only exception being the Czech Republic.

The end of a myth

It is therefore of course necessary to perceive the current problems of cooperation in the V4 against the background of global changes, and these are – unfortunately – epochal. As Ivan Krastev emphasizes, the year 2024 is a historical turning point (annus horibilis), similar to how 1989 was perceived (annus mirabilis). According to Krastev, today we see that the "future" has returned – not as a project, but as a nightmare, full of uncertainty and geopolitical upheavals.

Krastev claims that 1989 brought the euphoria of freedom and the collapse of the communist bloc, 2024 will be remembered as a period of radical change, characterized by a combination of wars and elections. Liberal democracy faces anti-liberal revolutions, just as communism faced anti-Soviet revolutions 36 years ago. Simply put - after 1989, the West created a myth about the "epochal victory of liberalism", which is no longer valid today. And similarly, the liberal consensus on the future of the Central European region ended.

In the most important – geopolitical direction – against the background of these global changes, 2 types of countries have gradually emerged in Central Europe – at least for now – against the background of these global changes. Poland and the Czech Republic, despite many disagreements with Brussels' policies and Euroscepticism of parts of the population, remain united by the idea of their European future.

In Slovakia, the ruling power, despite the pro-European stance of most of the population, has begun to test public opinion by variously questioning the importance of EU membership. Orbán's Hungary has been openly defining itself in opposition to Brussels for a long time and its inclination towards alternative projects of international cooperation is loudly articulated. On the other hand, regardless of the current arrival of a new government in the Czech Republic and a potentially questionable government in Poland in the future – a departure from the EU in these countries is unlikely, for many reasons.

Despite everything that casts a shadow over V4 cooperation, as well as its current toxicity, there are still many

The Visegrad Declaration was confirmed with signatures by Czechoslovak President Václav Havel, Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall, and Polish President Lech Wałęsa.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Péter Antall

reasons to be cautious about dissolving the V4 currently. In every country today, forces are being heard that would like to revise various decisions and steps from the past. In the case of the Czech Republic, for example, and not illogically, one can see the effort of some to move the Czech Republic closer to Germany and in some ways return to František Palacký's decision to refuse to participate in the pan-German meeting in Frankfurt in 1848. The feeling of a minority in the Czech Republic, that the place of the Czechs should be in cooperation with Germany, has already been articulated by some Czech elites.

Similarly, in Slovakia, although in a completely different direction, there is a return to the policies of some Slovak elites from the mid-19th century, namely towards Russia, to that – in the words of Ján Kollár – "great oak that defies the pernicious times to this day". Not to mention Poland, where part of the political elite is increasingly vocal in support of Roman Dmowski and his visions from the early 20th century, which are in complete contradiction with the ethos of Visegrad cooperation.

Before we dissolve the V4, despite its clinical death, there should be a broad discussion of this topic among social and economic elites. And even if in some of the countries there were several arguments, such as cooperation within the V4 against the national interests of the country, I think we should be careful. The reason is the historical experience of what happened when the Central European countries started to dig exclusively for themselves and when they sank into their ethnolinguistic and nationalistic smallness.

After all, many Central European authors have written about this, most notably István Bibó. He pointed out that the real tragedy of Central Europe was not its – in Kundera's words – abduction to the East, but its essentialist nationalism based on language. In the past, this sought to create homogeneous nation-states, which caused endless conflicts over borders. And as states feared for their existence, the psychology of fear and hysteria led to the deepening of authoritarianism and the creation of fragile democracies.

According to Bibó, democracy requires freedom from fear and the ability to compromise, which, however, have been lacking in the region for a very long time and it seems that this period is returning. The feudal patterns of behaviour, described by many in the past, have clearly not completely disappeared and continue to affect the region's ability to create a stable system of collective security.

Central European threat

In recent years, the Central European region has begun to be, like a kind of testing laboratory, an example of the presence of perhaps all types of alternatives to liberal democracy – illiberal democracies, procedural democracies, plutocracies, oligarchies. soft autocracies and hybrid forms of authoritarianism. The fear of many that the very existence of the V4 may help the entire region gradually, in mutual interactions, turn into a kind of Mordor, is exaggerated. The countries influence each other, of course, but it works both ways – intensive cooperation can lead not only to mutual authoritarian potentiation, but also to the mitigation of autocratic tendencies and steps.

It is therefore more than appropriate to return to the authors who were behind the return of the theme of Central Europe – Milan Kundera, Claudio Magris, István Bibó, or Václav Bělohradský. They all wrote about the European dream of Central Europeans, which could and should help overcome our smallness. It is in such a confrontation that it is possible to see the real tragedy of Central Europe – that Central Europe has lost its European dream. The greatest threat to Central Europe is simply itself.

The paradox lies in where we have begun to move. People like Milan Kundera have pointed out that Central Europe is the most real Europe – the maximum possible diversity in the minimum possible space. As Przemysław Czapliński writes about it – this very "Arch-Europe" has, however, begun to change into "Anti-Europe" in the last ten years. And the problem is that from the outside it looks like the virus is spreading from us, this time it is not us in Central Europe who are waiting for new stimuli and impulses – it is we who are sending them outwards.

Central Europe is simply becoming a potential threat to others. Just as Hungary was almost able to destroy the Habsburg monarchy with its steps and emotions once upon a time, so too are we in principle capable of destroying the EU and endangering Europe's chances of responding meaningfully to current global challenges.

And so many would say – well, that's exactly why it is appropriate and necessary not to revive the corpse of the V4! I would be careful. A lot of strange things were born in the Central European region – communism, fascism, or the two greatest wars that humanity has experienced. But also, the most magnificent art, philosophy and – psychoanalysis. The task of the V4 – and it is quite possibly one of the last, is to manage the region's transition to the period of late modernity and revitalize its European dream.

Central Europeans have shown many times that they know how to move Europe. Since there are many players at the national level who are happy to erode the European project, cooperation at the V4 level can become a good reason to stop this destruction. Not only through ideologically, but also technocratically defined cooperation. Through a pragmatic policy of cooperation, to show how Central Europe is a functioning region precisely thanks to its European dimension and – perhaps still a dream. There will always be enough time to bury the V4. In times of global threats, such a platform for curbing various types of excesses, which we understand here, is still the most appropriate.

Michal Vašečka

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