



Examining Changes in Regional Cooperation in Central Europe from a Polish Perspective

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The Visegrad Group (V4), until recently the most active and multidimensional cooperation platform in Central Europe, does not serve currently to strengthen the voice of the region on the most essential issues concerning its security. This is because Hungary's stance on Russia's attack on Ukraine is different than that of its partners. That is why Poland is tightening relations with the other Visegrad countries—Czechia and Slovakia. At the same time, Poland is also intensifying cooperation with the Baltic states, which has its source in joint actions on security and eastern affairs in the years preceding the war.

Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine and the V4. The fundamental difference in the approach of Hungary and the other Visegrad countries to the [Russian aggression in Ukraine](#) has significantly limited political cooperation in the V4. Since February 2022, the only meetings of the group's prime ministers have been the visit to London in March 2022, planned before the war, and to Košice in October, where the positions could not be brought closer. The only meeting of the presidents in Bratislava, also in October, had the same effect. Parliamentary cooperation also ceased. The record short programme of the [Slovak presidency of the V4](#), which started in mid-2022, was limited to promoting cooperation in, for example, culture and tourism. As a consequence, in his report from April this year on objectives for Polish foreign policy, Minister Zbigniew Rau indicated the V4—for three decades the most important platform for regional cooperation for Poland—now comes after the Bucharest Nine (B9) and the Three Seas Initiative (TSI).

[Hungary's position on the war, unchanged more than a year since the full-scale invasion](#), differs not only within the group but also across the EU. While Hungary adopts common Union decisions, it regularly conditions the EU aid to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. Additionally, it does not sanction Russia individually and has not tried to become independent from its energy sources. Not only has Hungary not supported Ukraine politically but also it has hindered the actions of other countries, for example by not agreeing to the transit of arms

deliveries. At the same time, Hungary maintains regular political contacts with Russia, expressed by, among others, the visits of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó to that country, with the most recent in June 2023.

Hungary's position then is highly incompatible with the approach of Poland, [Czechia](#), and [Slovakia](#). These countries were in the vanguard of aid to Ukraine from the beginning of the invasion. They support it politically, also in integration with the EU, and they transfer arms and solicit supplies from other countries. The prime ministers of Czechia and Poland, as well as Slovenia, were the first to visit Kyiv in the third week of the full-scale war (followed by the Slovak prime minister).

Tightening Bilateral Cooperation with Czechia and Slovakia. Serious limitations of political cooperation in the V4 have resulted in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia intensifying bilateral contacts. In addition to heightened support for Ukraine, this is also facilitated by a convergent threat perception. In Czechia's case, it was strengthened first by President Miloš Zeman's end to sympathising with Russia after it unleashed its full forces, and then by the start of Petr Pavel's presidency in March this year.

The strengthening of bilateral cooperation is manifested both in the intensity of political contacts and in symbolic gestures. On his second foreign visit, made after the traditional first trip to Slovakia, the new Czech president went to Poland, which had not happened before. Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Wlachovský also made Poland his second foreign visit—

traditionally after Czechia—after his inauguration in May this year. In 2022, intergovernmental consultations between Poland and Czechia resumed after three years, and with Slovakia after a five-year break.

Tightening Regional Cooperation with the Baltic States. The inability to express an impactful voice of the region through the V4 has led Poland to tighten political regional cooperation with the three Baltic states: [Estonia](#), Latvia, and [Lithuania](#). It is facilitated by the same perception of the threat posed by Russia, and it manifests itself, among other things, in intensified contacts at the highest level. In April 2022, the presidents of Poland and the Baltic states were the first to travel to Ukraine to support it politically since the outbreak of war. At the same time, the foreign ministers of these countries consulted this issue in Riga, and at the beginning of 2023 they signed the Riga declaration on closer cooperation. These countries also coordinated actions just before the Russian aggression. The presidents of Lithuania and Poland, as part of cooperation in the Lublin Triangle, were the last to visit Kyiv before the invasion. At the end of 2021, in turn, the Polish prime minister went for consultations to the three Baltic states.

The tightening of cooperation with the Baltic states in order to strengthen the regional voice on security issues began earlier and concerned primarily Belarus, hence also eastern issues. On the one hand, this cooperation was based on the immediate vicinity of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia with Belarus and [the shared perception of the threat it poses](#). On the other hand, it was a necessity in the absence of the V4's ability to express a strong voice on this matter in view of Hungary's good relations with Belarus—the last meeting of their foreign ministers took place this spring.

The intensification of the activities of Poland and the Baltic states was also visible during [the border crisis with Belarus using migration pressure](#) that began in the summer of 2021. In an August statement dedicated to the issue with Belarus, the prime ministers of the four countries called for an end to hybrid attacks and to violations of international law, and appealed to the EU and the UN to take action. This was in contrast to a V4 statement issued only at the end of 2021 after a meeting of the prime ministers that did not mention Belarus, although migration and the protection of the EU's external borders were topics of the joint declaration, and Hungary usually boldly speaks out on these issues.

Poland and the Baltic states also took a stronger stance than the V4 during the pro-democratic protests in Belarus after the [rigged presidential elections in August 2020](#). Although the V4 presidents expressed concern, called on the authorities to refrain from violence and supported the right of Belarusians to free elections, the potential to formulate a firmer Visegrad declaration, apart from Poland, was shown by Czechia and

Slovakia, which did not recognize Alexander Lukashenka as the legally elected president. Meanwhile, the presidents of Poland and the Baltic states issued a faster and stronger appeal, calling for, among other things, the immediate release of protesters. Discrepancies in the V4 after the Lublin summit a few weeks later resulted in the lack of a statement on Belarus by the prime ministers.

Consequences and Prospects. As a result of the crisis in the V4, its function of representing the voice of Central Europe in security and eastern matters important for Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia has been significantly limited. Also, the group does not make use of the potential to present a regional approach to support Ukraine, as shown, for example, by the Nordic countries during the May summit in Helsinki with the participation of President Volodymyr Zelensky.

This crisis does not mean the freezing of all V4 activities or that the suspension of joint actions in security and eastern matters is irreversible. However, there is no prospect of their restoration as long as the positions of Poland and Czechia in supporting the defending Ukraine and the position of Hungary in favouring Russia, as well as Belarus, remain petrified. In addition, there is a risk of deeper divisions as SMER-SSD—the Slovak party leading in opinion polls before the September parliamentary elections—is for withholding political and military aid to Ukraine.

Joint political activities with the Baltic states are becoming increasingly important for Poland. Moreover, they are often the only way for to quickly express a strong view by the governments of the region. Among the other formats most important for Poland, the B9—which is an initiative to strengthen political cohesion within NATO focused on the security of the entire Eastern Flank—operates in the presidential formula. Cooperation within the TSI, in turn, is intended first of all to support development of infrastructure.

Potential formalisation of Poland's cooperation with the Baltic states on the basis of the Riga declaration is not necessary, as they have already worked together ad hoc in the B3+1 format. However, it could streamline these activities and give them more visibility. Regardless of the fate of the Visegrad political cooperation, the Baltic Four will continue to share goals in security policy, the perspective of the Russian threat, as well as the need to support Ukraine and the democratisation of Belarus, which are all priority issues for Poland. What is more, it can help Poland get even closer to the Nordic countries with which the Baltic states regularly cooperate. Tightening contacts with the northern neighbours under the new framework would not be perceived as a further obstacle to Visegrad cooperation by Poland's partners—Czechia and Slovakia, which, for example, established the [Slavkov Triangle](#) with Austria or the [Central Five](#) with Austria, Slovenia, and Hungary a few years ago.