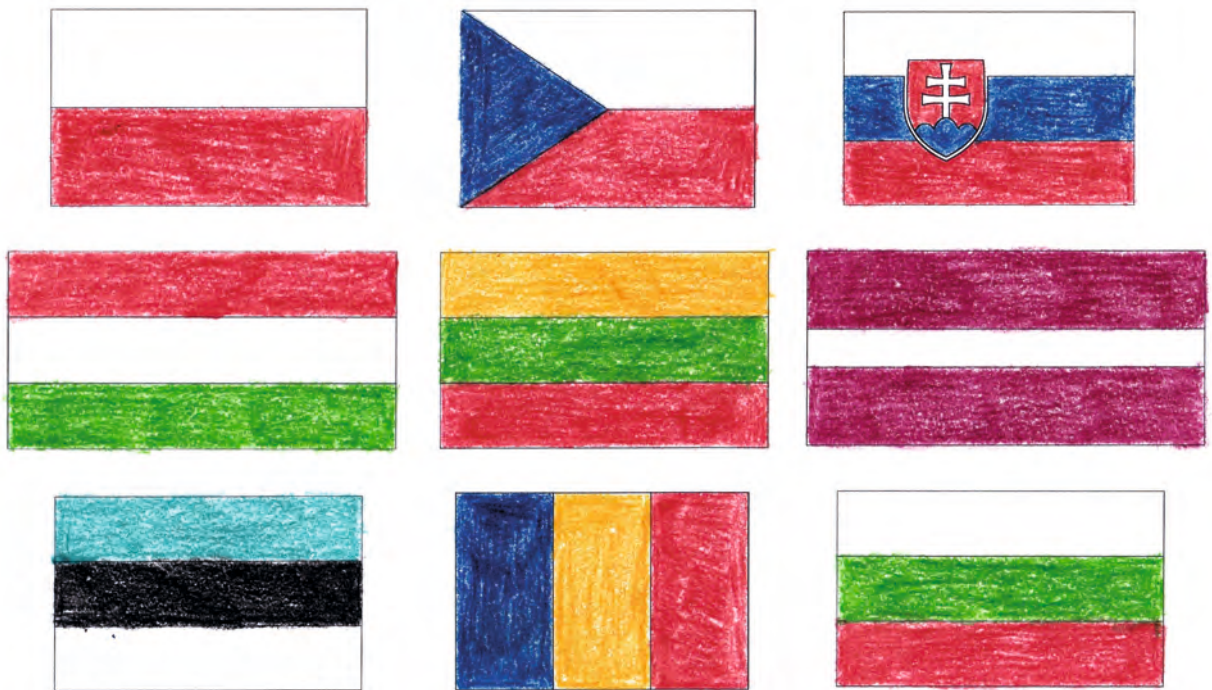


PISM REPORT

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE AFTER RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE: CHANGES AND PROSPECTS



TOMASZ ŻORNACZUK | JAKUB PIENKOWSKI (EDS.)
KINGA DUDZIŃSKA | VERONIKA JÓŹWIAK | ŁUKASZ OGRODNIK

THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych
ul. Warecka 1a, 00-950 Warszawa
tel. (+48) 22 556 80 00, faks (+48) 22 556 80 99
pism@pism.pl, www.pism.pl

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine affected the dynamics of regional political cooperation among Central European states. This was not due to a change in the eastern or security policies of these countries at the strategic level under the influence of the war but to the divergent policies pursued before its outbreak. Therefore, it highlighted the inability of the members of some formats to act together and justified the tightening of cooperation between others. Two years later, this condition persists.
- The main reason for the amplification of the region's incoherence on core eastern and security issues was the war's indisputable accentuation of Hungary's pro-Russian policy hostile towards Ukraine, in significant contrast to the approach of its regional partners. Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia were in the global vanguard of supporting Ukraine and isolating Russia after the outbreak of the full-scale war, also by initiating European Union policy in this regard. This was accentuated by the backdrop of indecision on the part of some Western European countries. Romania, in turn, waited for the reaction of Western partners before deciding on its own actions in support of Ukraine. Bulgaria, both secretly and prominently, supported Ukraine, although for many months it was officially abstaining due to an internal political crisis.
- The biggest change in regional cooperation in Central Europe has been the significant reduction in political cooperation in the Visegrad Group. Before the war, frequent contacts within the V4 mainly served to coordinate EU-related policy in view of the divergence of foreign policy interests, but since February 2022, the group has also reduced this dimension of joint activities. Thus, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the V4 found itself in its biggest crisis since its members joined NATO and the EU. This is a reversible state, but a breakthrough in the near future is unlikely in the absence of prospects for Hungary to abandon its current policies or Fidesz to lose power. Slovakia's government, sworn in at the end of 2023, shares many elements of Hungary's eastern and security policy.
- The outbreak of the full-scale war has increased the importance of the Bucharest Nine, which was established in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. However, this platform still serves only to politically coordinate the positions of the region's countries on security issues within NATO, not to launch new initiatives.
- The war justifies further strengthening of cooperation within the "3+1" format, which has developed through joint actions between Poland and the Baltic States on Eastern issues. The 2023 Riga Declaration paves the way to formalise this format. Its activity shifts the vector of effective regional cooperation with Poland's participation to the north, which may favour this country's further inclusion in joint activities also with the Nordic states.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022¹ had an immediate impact on world politics. It was particularly evident in Central Europe, where most countries border either Ukraine or Russia. The region then experienced the direct aftermath of the military assault of a neighbouring country. Among the consequences have been changes in regional political cooperation.

This report assesses these changes and identifies the prospects for political regional cooperation in Central Europe since the invasion. The basis of the analysis is a comparison of the functioning of the most important Central European political regional cooperation formats before and after the latest instalment of Russian aggression. These formats are the:

- Visegrad Group (V4, established in 1991);
- B3 (1991);
- Bucharest Nine (B9, 2015);
- Slavkov Triangle (S3, 2015);
- Three Seas Initiative (TSI, 2016);
- Central Five (C5, 2020);
- “3+1” format (has intensified activities since 2020);
- Lublin Triangle (L3, 2020).

The report thus takes into account the main Central European cooperation formats that serve political consultation or, as in the case of the Three Seas Initiative, include such a component.

In addition, it takes into account the oldest contemporary formula for political regional cooperation in Central Europe:

- The Central European Initiative (1989).

However, despite a name suggesting a focus on cooperation in the region, the initiative extends beyond Central Europe significantly and consists of a similar number of EU and non-EU countries.

¹ The terms “war”, “aggression”, and “invasion” are understood in this report to be the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022, unless otherwise indicated.

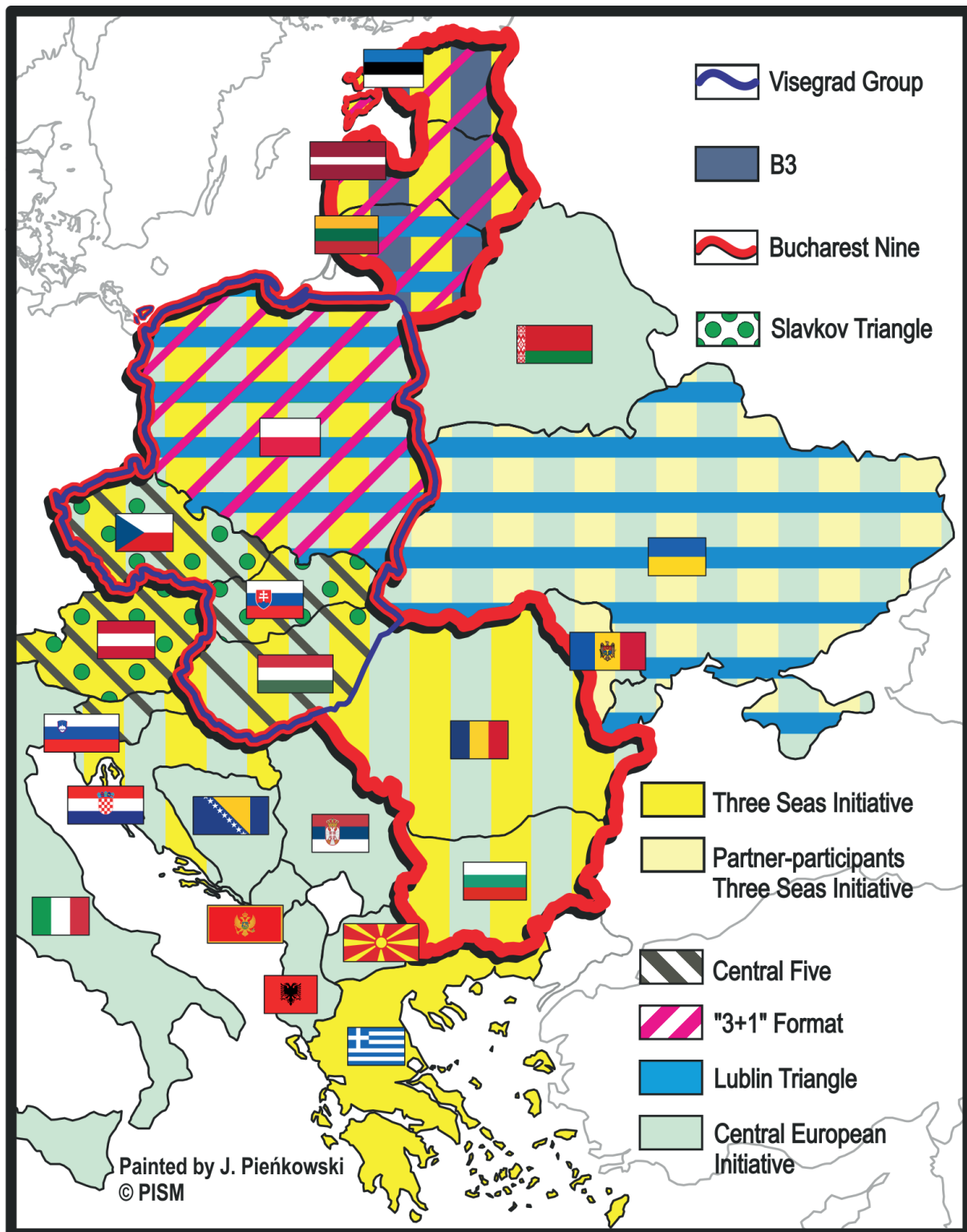


FIGURE 1. REGIONAL POLITICAL COOPERATION FORMATS IN CENTRAL EUROPE.

The most important determinant of regional cooperation is the involvement of states that see it as an instrument for the realisation of their own national interests. Therefore, the analysis is based on a review of the main directions of the foreign and security policies of individual states of the region and modification of these policies since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Taking into account the political and strategic factors, and to a lesser extent historical, geographical and cultural ones, the authors consider the member states of the Bucharest Nine as belonging to the region. They include:

- Poland;
- Czechia;
- Slovakia;
- Hungary;
- Lithuania;
- Latvia;
- Estonia;
- Romania;
- Bulgaria.

All the countries in the format are members of both the EU and NATO. With the exception of Czechia, they constitute the Eastern Flank of the Alliance.

Based on the above, the report is divided into the following parts:

- Part I assesses the functioning of regional cooperation formats prior to the start of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, highlighting both key issues common to Central Europe and dividing lines.
- Part II outlines the foreign and security policy assumptions of Central European countries until 2022, their policies within the EU and NATO, as well as towards Russia and Ukraine, the United States and China, and engagement in regional cooperation. Also, it identifies the most important elements of the political and military responses to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Finally, it presents and evaluates key changes in the foreign and security policies of individual countries in the region in the first two years since the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine.
- Part III shows the impact of the war on the functioning of the most important political formats of regional cooperation in Central Europe during the corresponding period.
- The report's last part offers the most significant conclusions and prospects on this cooperation.

I. CENTRAL EUROPEAN COOPERATION BEFORE RUSSIA'S 2022 INVASION OF UKRAINE

VISEGRAD GROUP



The Visegrad Group (V4) is one of the oldest formats of informal regional cooperation in Central Europe. It was established in 1991 by Czechoslovakia (prior to its breakup in 1993 into Czechia and Slovakia), Poland, and Hungary in order to improve cooperation and mutual support in European and Transatlantic integration. These ambitions were fulfilled by the accession of Czechia, Poland, and Hungary to NATO in 1999, and Slovakia in 2004, and the accession of all four to the EU in 2004. Since then, the V4 has acted primarily as a consultative forum at the presidential, governmental, and working levels on European policy issues. The V4 has a single institution—the International Visegrad Fund, established in 2000—which finances, among others, joint cultural and scientific undertakings with an annual budget of €10 million.

A goal of V4 cooperation added after 2004 was to support the democratic transformation of the countries in the European Union's immediate neighbourhood, primarily with the use of the EU's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans and the European Neighbourhood Policy in the East, which has been implemented since 2009 as part of the Eastern Partnership. At that time, the Visegrad countries were among the most involved in these policies as member states, but also through the "V4+" formats. The group's strong political support for the Eastern Partnership was maintained until the Russian annexation of Crimea and the aggression against Ukraine in 2014. After that time, the assessment of the conflict and the level of involvement in supporting Ukraine were conditioned by the bilateral relations between the individual V4 countries and Russia, including Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Slovakia under Prime Minister Robert Fico, who were the least involved, which made joint actions difficult. In addition, the Visegrad Group conducted political dialogue in the "V4+" formula with partners from the EU and the European Economic Area (e.g., the Nordic and Baltic States) and non-European partners (among others, South Korea, Japan, and Israel) focused on economic cooperation.

Since 2015, migration crises have comprised a common theme for the V4. All four countries rejected the compulsory admission of refugees and opposed the solutions proposed by the European Commission (although Czechia and Slovakia have accepted a symbolic number of asylum seekers). This position has been largely shaped by the internal political struggles in the individual countries of the group. To increase their own government's support, member states used the V4 to present their actions as part of a region united in opposition to the decisions of the EU institutions.²

A new dividing line in the V4 arose in connection with disputes with the EU over compliance with rule-of-law principles involving Hungary since 2011 and Poland since 2015. Czechia and Slovakia distanced themselves from the other members in order not to be associated with the problematic EU states (Poland and Hungary had been the only Member States subject to

² "Grupa Wyszehradzka: rezygnacja z relokacji uchodźców to nasz sukces," *Informacyjna Agencja Radiowa*, 12 October 2018, www.polskieradio24.pl.

the Article 7 TEU procedure, since 2017 and 2018, respectively). This had consequences for finding a common position of the V4 in the debate on the future of the Union, which has been developing since 2017. It was thus limited to basic demands, such as the deepening of the single market, and without a detailed plan for reforming the functioning of the community.

One of the most important achievements of the V4 was the establishment of the Visegrad Battle Group under Polish command within the EU in 2016. It has been on rotation for the six-month duty period as part of the European Rapid Reaction Force three times so far: in 2016, 2019, and 2023. The group has contributed to deepening defence cooperation and increasing the interoperability of the armed forces of the Visegrad countries.

From the very beginning of its existence, the constant ambition in V4 cooperation was to develop transport and energy infrastructure for greater cohesion and energy security in Central Europe. Although the governments of the Visegrad countries declared that they treated this task as a high priority, progress was slow. The reason for this was the focus on developing road connections primarily with Western Europe, and the lack of real interest in Slovakia and Hungary becoming independent of Russian energy resources. However, the infrastructure connecting the north and south of the region has been significantly expanded compared to the state in the early 1990s, which has improved transport and facilitated access to alternative energy sources.

In the run-up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the V4 focused on EU cooperation, mainly around energy and climate policy (for example, ensuring a "just green transition"). Although the states reacted as a group to Russia's increasingly aggressive policy in the region (for example, a statement issued by the prime ministers after the Czech security services revealed Russia's responsibility for explosions at ammunition depots in Vr̂b̂tice in 2021), the V4 have not taken decisive action together. It was similarly restrained or not at all about the challenges in Belarus around the rigged presidential election in 2020 and the forced refugee crisis on the border with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia in 2021. In both cases, the reason for this lack of agreement was Hungary's policy-affirming approach to Russia and subsequently also to Belarus, which prevented the V4 from taking a strong stance on Eastern and security policy issues.

B3



Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, after restoring their independence and leaving the USSR, have experienced a similar political transformation, and with that common background they have systematically tightened trilateral cooperation. In 1991, they formally established the Baltic Assembly, which deals with parliamentary cooperation and is intended to support the development of a common foreign policy and to foster the development of future institutional common actions in the B3. Subsequently, the Agreement on Baltic Parliamentary and Governmental Cooperation,³ signed in Tallinn in 1994, provided the basis for the Baltic Council of Ministers. Since 2004, annual summits of both formats have been held, organised under presidencies held in rotation by each country. These cyclical joint events are accompanied by the Baltic Assembly, a meeting of the Baltic Council and the foreign ministers of these three countries.

³ The agreement on parliamentary and governmental cooperation was concluded on 13 June 1994 in Tallinn (Estonia), and the protocol amending the agreement was signed on 28 November 2003 in Vilnius (Lithuania).

The cooperation of the Baltic States, which have similar, small demographic, economic, and military potential, is based on a common perception of threats as well as on the Nordic model. It mainly covers government consultations on activities at the NATO or EU level, also in the field of security policy. A triad has also focused on energy and infrastructure projects. It served as a crisis-management tool during the pandemic and the manufactured migration crisis on the border with Belarus. Faced with the reality of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the defence ministers of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia issued a statement in January 2022 on the joint rearming of the Ukrainian army.

BUCHAREST NINE



The Bucharest Nine (B9) is a format for informal coordination of the security policies of Central European states that are simultaneously members of NATO and the EU, established in response to the threat of increasingly aggressive Russian imperialism. Its nucleus was a working meeting of the region's presidents in July 2014. At the invitation of Polish President Bronisław Komorowski, the leaders of Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary came to Warsaw. Their aim was to discuss the situation in Ukraine, grappling with Russia's hybrid aggression in Crimea and Donbas, and the need for NATO to respond to the growing sense of insecurity of its eastern border members.⁴

The first official meeting of heads of state in this format in November 2015 in Bucharest—hence its name—was initiated by Presidents Andrzej Duda of Poland and Klaus Iohannis of Romania. It served to establish a common position of the region ahead of the NATO summit in Warsaw, planned for June 2016, which was in turn to decide how to strengthen the Eastern Flank. As a result, the demand for the deployment of allied troops there, as unequivocally voiced by Poland, Romania, and the Baltic States, became common for the region,⁵ although Czechia and Slovakia were not interested in the presence of such forces on their territory and Hungary and—at that time—Bulgaria were sympathetic to Russia. The position developed by the B9 helped overcome the fears of some Western allies of deploying troops on the territory of eastern NATO members, which would supposedly provoke Russia to further aggressive moves. In the end, at the Warsaw summit, the Alliance decided to set up multinational battlegroups in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, meeting their expectations. By contrast, in Romania, to its disappointment, only a multinational training brigade was established.

At the next B9 meeting in June 2018 in Warsaw, the presidents decided to make this format cyclical⁶ so that the concerns and expectations of the region would be more effectively articulated within NATO. The next B9 summits were held in Košice, Slovakia, in February 2019 and in Bucharest in May 2021. Independent of the presidential cooperation format, the B9 has also hosted meetings of foreign ministers since 2016 and defence ministers since 2018.

⁴ President of the Republic of Poland, "Meeting of the Presidents of the Baltic States, the Visegrad Group, Bulgaria and Romania," 22 July 2014, www.prezydent.pl.

⁵ President of the Republic of Poland, "President in Bucharest: We showed unity and capacity for decisions," 4 November 2015, www.prezydent.pl.

⁶ President of Romania, "Joint Declaration of the Heads of State Bucharest 9 meeting (Warsaw, 8th June 2018)," 8 June 2018, www.presidency.ro.

SLAVKOV TRIANGLE



Founded in 2015, the Slavkov Triangle (S3),⁷ which brings together Czechia, Slovakia, and Austria, operates primarily at the level of foreign ministers for consultation and coordination purposes. It includes a selective segment of regional cooperation, focusing on fostering economic growth and addressing current European challenges. The most frequently discussed topics by S3 ministers include migration and the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU.

In contrast to the V4, this format rarely adopts joint documents. That is why the declaration on “digital humanism” announced in July 2021 in Poysdorf, Austria, which emphasises the importance of human rights in the digital transformation—was exceptional.

The group’s approach to Russia and Ukraine until February 2022 was of secondary importance. However, the S3 took the initiative in the face of the threat of Russian aggression, with the foreign ministers jointly visiting Kyiv and the part of the Donbas under Ukrainian control on 7-8 February 2022. During their meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky, they expressed support for, among others, Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the link between its security and that of the rest of the continent.

THREE SEAS INITIATIVE



The Three Seas Initiative (TSI) was established in 2016 by 12 countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. It aims to harmonise EU integration by expanding transport infrastructure, strengthening energy security, and developing the digital economy in Central Europe. Observer status has been granted over time to Germany, the U.S., the European Commission (EC), the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Bank.

The difficulty in converting the annual summits of presidents into joint implementation of projects was the result of different levels of commitment, from Poland, Romania, and—until 2020—Croatia, which were states that promoted the initiative, to Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary, which were passive towards TSI. Moreover, inaugurated in 2019, the Three Seas Initiative International Fund has accumulated less than €1 billion, or just 0.5% of the total value of just the priority projects. The fund’s main shareholder remains Poland, with a contribution of €750 million, while Austria, Czechia, and Slovakia have not joined it. Therefore, TSI countries continue to make infrastructure investments based on EU funds and national priorities.⁸

⁷ D. Kałan, “The Slavkov Triangle: A Rival to the Visegrad Group?”, *PISM Bulletin*, No. 19 (751), 16 February 2015, www.pism.pl.

⁸ For more, see: T. Żornaczuk and K. Dudzińska, V. Józwiak, Ł. Ogrodnik, J. Pieńkowski, “Promotion of the Three Seas Initiative in Member States and Among Observer States,” *PISM Strategic File*, No. 12 (104), December 2021, www.pism.pl.

CENTRAL FIVE



Launched in 2020 by the foreign ministers of Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia, the Central Five (C5)⁹ is a format originally focused on coordinating the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on border controls. Cooperation in the C5 has extended also to EU issues, including consultations on the programmes of the EU Council presidency, migration policy, and accelerating the European integration of the Western Balkan countries.

On issues of Eastern policy, the group's attitudes towards Ukraine and Russia were not among the main topics before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This was in part because of the members' different perceptions of Russia as a threat.

"3+1" FORMAT



The "3+1" is an ad hoc formula for political cooperation between Poland (the "1") and Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (the "3"). It centres on security, often energy-related issues, and on Eastern matters. At its core has been the converging perception of the threats posed by the border with Russia and, in the case of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, also with Belarus.

The intensification of cooperation at the highest political levels occurred in 2020 in response to the rigged presidential elections in Belarus and to address the related threats. For Poland, joint action was additionally important due to the V4's inability to express a strong regional voice on the issue. At the time, the presidents of Poland and the Baltic States took a stronger stance than the presidents of the V4, where divergences also resulted in the absence of a statement from the members' prime ministers on Belarus.¹⁰

Further strengthening of "3+1" cooperation was evident in 2021 during the migration border crisis instigated by Belarus. This included Belarusian authorities allowing migrants from Africa and Asia to enter the country and then bringing them to the EU borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. It resulted in, among other things, the first-ever meeting of the foreign and defence ministers of Poland and the Baltic States in Riga in September. They discussed Belarus and cooperation within NATO, which the ministers also announced would be coordinated in the future.¹¹ The commonality of interests and threat assessments was behind Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's consultations in the Baltic States in late 2021 amid the growing danger of Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

⁹ Ł. Ogrodnik, T. Żornaczuk, "The Central Five: Wrapping Up the Forum's First Year," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 120 (1816), 21 June 2021, www.pism.pl.

¹⁰ For more, see: T. Żornaczuk, "Examining Changes in Regional Cooperation in Central Europe from a Polish Perspective," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 78 (2197), 21 June 2023, www.pism.pl.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Riga hosts a historic meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs and defence of the Baltic States and Poland," 13 September 2021, www.mfa.gov.lv.

LUBLIN TRIANGLE



The Lublin Triangle (L3), which brings together Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine, was founded in 2020 by the respective foreign ministers, and also functions in the format of heads of other ministries, prime ministers, and presidents. According to the founding declaration, the L3 is to bring Ukraine closer to EU and NATO membership and to strengthen relations between the nations of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, among other aims. The members of the format are thus open to the possibility of Belarus joining it in the event of a change of system to a genuine democratic one. The L3 also emphasises the role of military cooperation, which takes place as part of the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian (LitPolUkr) brigade inaugurated in Lublin in 2016. In July 2021, the foreign ministers adopted a declaration of joint European heritage and common values,¹² in which they underlined the illegality of Russia's annexation of Crimea, condemned its aggression against Ukraine, and announced joint efforts under the Crimea Platform.

Before February 2022, the L3 was also tasked with combating disinformation and Russian hybrid activities. Towards that end, Poland and Lithuania declared that they would persuade EU and NATO countries to show greater solidarity with Ukraine. In a gesture of support for it, the presidents of Lithuania and Poland visited Kyiv on the eve of the Russian invasion. In a declaration signed at the time, they condemned Russia's recognition of the independence of the so-called "Luhansk People's Republic" and the "Donetsk People's Republic".

CENTRAL EUROPEAN INITIATIVE



The Central European Initiative (CEI) is the oldest and broadest platform for cooperation in the region. It started from the so-called Quadrangle agreement in 1989—the name "Central European Initiative" has been used since 1992—on cross-border cooperation between Austria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Italy, states which at that time belonged to different political and economic systems. After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the break-up of Yugoslavia, and the dissolution of the USSR, more states joined. Today there are 17 members: Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia and Slovakia (originally as Czechoslovakia), Hungary, Italy, Moldova, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Ukraine (Austria left in 2018).

The CEI focuses on supporting countries applying for EU membership, and its original aim was to bring transforming post-communist states closer to the West, strengthening peace, democracy, economic cooperation, and social contacts in the region. The main animator of the CEI for a long time was Italy, which saw it as an instrument to inhibit the influence of

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Declaration of the Lublin Triangle Foreign Ministers of joint European heritage and common values," July 2021, www.gov.pl.

a united Germany in Central Europe and the Balkans. The Italian authorities also spurred the establishment of the institution of the Secretary General and the Executive Secretariat in Trieste.

The CEI's functionality is modest. Its main activities are the annual presidencies and the mostly courtesy annual summits of prime ministers or foreign ministers and meetings of parliamentarians. Only small-scale projects of exchange of experience have had a tangible effect. These are supported by the Cooperation Fund, financed by member contributions, and the Italian-funded CEI Fund at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, from which in 2022 was spent around €0.46 million and €3.7 million, respectively.

II. FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN STATES AND ITS EVOLUTION AFTER RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE IN 2022

POLAND



According to the Polish Foreign Policy Strategy 2017-2021, the only such document produced by the United Right governments of 2015-2023, Poland's membership in the EU and NATO served two overarching goals: guaranteeing the security of the state and its citizens and ensuring the conditions for development. Hence, the strategy's premise that "efforts to strengthen them and consolidate them internally" are crucial.¹³

However, as of 2015, Poland in principle rejected participation in deepening European integration and saw in the future of the EU a strong role for its Member States. Poland remained in dispute with the European Commission over the rule of law, which was reflected in the triggering in 2017 of the Article 7 procedure of the Treaty on EU and the lack of disbursements from the National Recovery Plan from 2021. Poland promoted the Union's enlargement and the need for a more ambitious policy towards its eastern partners. It supported mechanisms for EU security cooperation that complement NATO's activities, rather than those leading to their duplication and weakening transatlantic ties, as reflected in Poland's 2020 National Security Strategy. This is why Poland was sceptical of the idea of strategic autonomy, among others.

Poland considered NATO and the United States, which it perceived as the key country in the Alliance, to be the main pillars of security in Europe. The U.S. maintains an anti-missile base and a military contingent in Poland under a bilateral agreement, and it commands a multinational battlegroup in the country as part of a NATO initiative. Poland pointed out that its security environment deteriorated as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict the Russians triggered in eastern Ukraine. Poland loudly signalled Russia's revisionist inclinations, as well as highlighted the threats from Belarus after the rigged 2020 presidential election and its triggering of a migration crisis on the EU's eastern borders a year later. Poland remained in the Union's mainstream of countries assessing relations with China with increasing restraint. In doing so, it was not only taking into account the unsatisfactory results of cooperation in which it had aimed for, among other things, to increase Polish goods exports to China but also the need to limit its negative influence on EU security, including in the economic sphere.

Poland also has shaped its security policy through cooperation with regional partners that "share the Polish view of Eastern European challenges",¹⁴ mainly with the V4, Romania, and the Baltic States. For years, it has consulted its partners in the V4, the most important regional forum for Poland, on European policy; and since 2015, the United Right government stressed the significance of V4 cooperation, especially on migration issues. Also, Poland saw Hungary as a major political partner in the region and in the EU, where both countries supported each other in their dispute with the EC. It valued this cooperation more highly than with Germany

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Polish Foreign Policy Strategy 2017-2021," p. 3, www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

and France, which was reflected in, among other things, the minimisation of involvement in the Weimar Triangle format. Poland initiated and remained the main animator of cooperation in the Bucharest Nine to strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank. It promoted the Three Seas Initiative as its co-author and suggested its usefulness in the security area as well. It cooperated with the Baltic States in the "3+1" format, and within the framework of the Lublin Triangle, with Lithuania and Ukraine, in order to, among other things, bring the latter closer to NATO and the EU. Poland supported Ukraine's democratic transition and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, even though relations were strained by historical issues, most notably the dispute over the World War II massacres in Volhynia and over the exhumation of its victims.

Russia's increasing aggressiveness, though, became a key consideration in Poland's foreign and security policy as of late 2021 and early 2022. Poland's goal was for NATO to adopt a strategy that would identify Russia as a military threat and pave the way for changes in the Alliance to strengthen the Eastern Flank and increase the forces capable of rapid redeployment in times of crisis.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland—not least because of its geographic location and past policies—was in the vanguard of comprehensive assistance to Ukraine. This included supplying arms and ammunition (including being the first, alongside Slovakia, to donate MiG-29 fighter jets), taking in refugees, evacuating the wounded, and establishing a military and humanitarian hub. The country initiated international political support, such as a letter from eight Central European presidents supporting Ukraine's application for EU membership. Poland was active in advocating for Ukraine's candidate status,¹⁵ as well as pushing for NATO to strengthen cooperation with it and for Russia to be isolated.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine confirmed the validity of Poland's main security policy assumptions. In July 2022, NATO adopted a strategy that met most Polish expectations. The Russian aggression led to a strengthening of Polish-American political relations—Joe Biden was the first U.S. president to visit Poland twice within one year (in March 2022 and in February 2023). Poland also reinforced negative perceptions of China, mainly due to its support for Russia, although the authorities in Warsaw continued to maintain channels of communication with China and did not rule out all cooperation.

After Russia's attack on Ukraine, Poland did not have to significantly adjust its eastern, allied, or EU policy, but it did make changes in regional policy. It discontinued bilateral political cooperation with Hungary, whose reaction to the war in Ukraine resulted in an almost complete suspension of V4 political activities. Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau, in a briefing on foreign policy tasks presented to the Sejm in April 2023, pointed to the V4 as only the third most important regional cooperation format—after TSI and B9—for Poland.¹⁶ At the same time, he developed cooperation within the "3+1", including by signing the Riga Declaration.¹⁷ After the coalition government led by Donald Tusk took power in December 2023, the prime minister announced in his exposé his intention to strengthen cooperation

¹⁵ T. Żornaczuk, "Demand the impossible: How Ukraine became a candidate for EU membership," *Europeum Policy Paper*, 20 February 2023, www.europeum.org.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Information on the principles and objectives of Poland's foreign policy in 2023," 13 April 2023, p.18, www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy.

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Minister Rau visits Riga and signs joint declaration with Baltic States' foreign ministers," 31 January 2023, www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy.

with the Baltic¹⁸ and Nordic countries in the area of security.¹⁹ In addition, Poland returned to Weimar cooperation, among other things.

Poland has made changes to its internal defence and security policy. In March 2022, it passed the Law on Homeland Defence. According to it, starting in 2023, defence spending was to rise to at least 3% of GDP. In fact, in 2023 it amounted to 3.9% of GDP—the highest among NATO countries. In the 2024 budget, in turn, it is to be about 4.2% of GDP, like in the proposal of the previous United Right government, which in mid-2023 announced the construction of the Alliance's strongest land army in Europe within two years.²⁰ According to these declarations, the Polish army would number 300,000 by 2035. Just before the second anniversary of the outbreak of the full-scale Russia-Ukraine war, the Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Army proposed further modernisation, indicating that the force could be expanded by 150,000 people in the active reserve, up to a total of 450,000.²¹



The basis of Czechia's security policy is its membership in NATO and the EU. This is indicated by, among others, the Security Strategy 2015-2023,²² which emphasises the importance of cooperation not only in the transatlantic dimension but also in the EU. This approach corresponded with the widespread support among the Czech political class for the EU's so-called strategic autonomy, seen as an impulse for the development of domestic industry and the deepening of cooperation with European partners. Since December 2021, European policy, including in the area of security and defence, has been a result of the positions of the ruling coalition of five parties led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala.

Although the strategy did not explicitly point to Russia as a threat, the annual, unclassified reports of the Security Information Service (BIS) did. On the other hand, the programme of the Fiala government from January 2022²³ assumed a revision of relations with Russia. This was a consequence of their deterioration over the years, which was influenced by the results of an investigation announced in 2021 that found Russia was behind the explosions at

¹⁸ The prime minister indicated that after his first foreign visit to Brussels, he would travel to Tallinn to meet with the prime ministers of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. Ultimately, the visit did not materialise in December due to health reasons on the part of the hosts. However, Tusk met with the Latvian prime minister in late February 2024 in Warsaw and with the Lithuanian prime minister in early March 2024 in Vilnius. Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, in turn, met with Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis in January 2024 in Vilnius and in March 2024 in Warsaw, with Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna in February 2024 in Warsaw, and with Latvian minister Krišjānis Kariņš in March in Riga.

¹⁹ Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, "Prime Minister Donald Tusk: 15 October will become a symbolic date in Poland," 13 December 2023, www.gov.pl/web/primieminister.

²⁰ Polish Press Agency, "Szef MON: w ciągu dwóch lat Polska będzie miała najsilniejszą armię lądową w Europie," 28 June 2023, www.pap.pl.

²¹ A. Grochowińska, "Polskie wojsko ma liczyć 450 tys. żołnierzy. Ekspert ostrzega: jest mnóstwo czynników ryzyka," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 22 February 2024, www.gazeta.pl.

²² Government of the Czech Republic, "Security Strategy of the Czech Republic 2015," February 2015, www.vlada.gov.cz.

²³ Government of the Czech Republic, "Policy Statement of the Government," 1 March 2023, www.vlada.cz.

ammunition depots in Vrbětice in 2014²⁴ and by the removal of the monument to Marshal of the USSR Ivan Konev in Prague in September 2019.²⁵

However, the government's critical policy was at odds with the pro-Russian actions of President Miloš Zeman, who had been in office since 2013. In the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he revised his position (before 24 February 2022, he had ruled out the scenario of a Russian invasion) and called for the toughest possible sanctions to be imposed on Russia. Until the end of his term in office, Zeman was a supporter of cooperation between Czechia and China. Meanwhile, Fiala's government was both sceptical of it (including the "17+1" initiative) and at the same time strengthened relations with Taiwan. Although Slovakia has traditionally been Czechia's closest partner (due to its cultural, geographical, and historical proximity), differences in approach to the war following the change of the Slovak government led to a crisis in bilateral relations in early 2024. A manifestation of Czechia's regional activity is the initiation, co-creation, and support of various formats of cooperation in Central Europe, including the V4, S3, and C5.

Czechia has comprehensively supported Ukraine and consistently condemned Russian aggression. Fiala visited Kyiv together with the prime ministers of Poland and Slovenia on 15 March 2022. In April 2023, President Petr Pavel, in office since March last year, also made the trip together with the President of Slovakia Zuzana Čaputová, and he has pursued a coherent eastern policy with the Fiala government. As a result of this visit, together with President Zelensky they signed a declaration on cooperation and partnership.²⁶ The presidents of Czechia and Slovakia also supported Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led Czechia to strengthen its transatlantic relations and to deteriorating relations with Russia and China. The DCA,²⁷ a bilateral defence cooperation agreement ratified in August 2023, served to strengthen the bond with the U.S. In its 2022 report,²⁸ the BIS identified Russia as the greatest threat to the security of Czechia (and China as a "complex threat"). Although the Russian aggression confirmed the legitimacy of the strategy's main assumptions on security issues, it prompted the government to prepare acts that were even more fitting to the situation. In 2023, Fiala's government approved a new security strategy²⁹ and a defence strategy³⁰. They explicitly define Russia as a threat and its invasion of Ukraine as a turning point in European security. Russian aggression has also prompted Czechia to increase its defence spending to 2% of GDP from 2024, a year earlier than expected (in 2022, it spent 1.33% of GDP, the least of the V4 countries).

²⁴ Ł. Ogrodnik, "Crisis in Czech-Russian Relations Seven Years after the Explosions in Vrbětice," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 33/2021, 21 April 2021, www.pism.pl.

²⁵ Ł. Ogrodnik, "Complications in the Czech Republic's Relations towards Russia," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 179 (1425), 16 December 2019, www.pism.pl.

²⁶ President of Ukraine, "Joint Declaration by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of the Slovak Republic Zuzana Čaputová and President of the Czech Republic Petr Pavel," 28 April 2023, www.president.gov.ua.

²⁷ Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, "Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA)," 27 April 2023, www.mocr.army.cz.

²⁸ Security Information Service, "Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2022," 26 October 2023, www.bis.cz.

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, "Security Strategy of the Czech Republic 2023," 11 September 2023, www.mzv.cz.

³⁰ Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, "The Defence Strategy of the Czech Republic," 4 October 2023, www.mocr.army.cz.



NATO membership has remained a pillar of Slovakia's security policy. Relations with the U.S., though, were a derivative of the political orientation of the parties governing Slovakia at the time, and thus differed significantly with each change. The constant element, however, was defence. The relations were also influenced by Slovakia's critical policy towards China. Good relations with neighbouring Ukraine, whose integration with the EU the Slovak government supported before the Russian invasion, have affected Slovakia's position in contacts with the U.S. Slovakia, however, saw its economic security as anchored in EU structures.

Slovakia defined Russia's actions as threats even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In January 2021, the right-wing coalition government adopted updated security and defence strategies,³¹ the first in 16 years. The documents assume that Slovakia "will contribute to the realisation of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic ambitions", that Crimea is illegally occupied by Russia, and that this country is a source of challenges.³²

Slovakia has remained involved in numerous formats of regional cooperation,³³ as its authorities have seen them as tools for overcoming the limitations of the size of the country. In addition to the V4, which is the most important of these formats for Slovakia, it also belongs to the S3 and C5. Traditionally, Czechia has been Slovakia's closest partner, as evidenced by the practice of high-level reciprocal visits immediately after taking office and annual intergovernmental consultations.³⁴

At the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Slovakia was in the vanguard of countries providing comprehensive humanitarian, political, and military assistance to Ukraine. On the day of the invasion, Russia was condemned in a joint statement by the three constitutionally most important people in the country—President Čaputová, Prime Minister Eduard Heger, and the Chairman of the National Council Boris Kollár. In April 2022, Heger accompanied the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen on a visit to Kyiv. Slovakia, along with Poland, was one of the first to send MiG-29 fighters to Ukraine. Ludovít Ódor's technical government,³⁵ in place from May to October 2023, largely continued Heger's policy towards Ukraine.

After the parliamentary elections in September 2023, the interim government halted arms deliveries due to the prospect of a change of power, which is also associated with a re-evaluation of Slovakia's eastern policy. A new cabinet was created in October 2023 by Fico, and it was joined by pro-Russia parties, which called for a reduction in aid to Ukraine. Fico reiterated his pre-election declarations to suspend arms deliveries to Ukraine and his opposition to its membership in NATO.³⁶ Although Slovakia shares these policy elements with Hungary, it continues—unlike the latter—to support its eastern neighbour in many

³¹ Ł. Ogrodnik, "Slovakia's New Security and Defence Strategies," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 40 (1736), 26 February 2021, www.pism.pl.

³² Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, "Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic," January 2021, www.mosr.sk.

³³ T. Strážay, "Central European challenges in Slovak foreign policy," in: P. Brezáni (ed.), *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2022*, Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava 2023, www.sfpa.sk.

³⁴ In March 2024, Czechia cancelled the intergovernmental consultations. This occurred immediately after a meeting between Slovak Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Diplomatic Forum in Antalya. This meeting was the result of a pro-Russian turn in Slovakia's foreign policy.

³⁵ Ł. Ogrodnik, "Slovakia in Emergency Mode-Assessing the Performance of the First Technical Government," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 86 (2205), 3 July 2023, www.pism.pl.

³⁶ Ł. Ogrodnik, "Slovakia First: Fico's Fourth Government Changes Foreign Policy Course," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 29 (2337), 21 February 2024, www.pism.pl.

aspects. This includes, for example, the question of EU membership, as well as the repair of military equipment and assistance with de-mining in Ukraine, as confirmed by Fico's meeting with Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal in Uzhhorod in January 2024.³⁷ The change in Slovakia's policy towards Ukraine is also conditioned by pro-Russian public sentiments³⁸ and the narratives that fuel them, present for example in social media.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Slovakia's cooperation with the U.S. and other NATO partners intensified. Slovakia has used it to strengthen its security as a state on the Alliance's Eastern Flank. This included the establishment of a battlegroup in Slovakia under Czechia's lead, as well as the modernisation of the army in cooperation with partners within the Alliance. The Slovak government has been maintaining defence spending at the pre-February 2022 level of 2% of GDP. On the other hand, the change of government in Slovakia is associated with a deterioration in relations with the U.S. and the prospect that the new authorities will seek opportunities for cooperation with China.

HUNGARY

Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Hungary recognised NATO and the EU as the basis of its security.³⁹ At the same time, it emphasised the need to increase EU competences in defence (including the creation of a “joint European force”). In the government's political discourse, this was reflected in views about the progressive erosion of the Alliance and the need to increase Europe's independence vis-à-vis NATO and the U.S. Paradoxically, this did not involve a commitment to deepening European integration, towards which Hungary remained critical, and the statist model built by Orbán's post-2010 governments generated increasing disputes with EU institutions. On the other hand, relations with the U.S. were burdened by Hungary's failure to take into account American interests⁴⁰ when, among other things, intensifying relations with China without heeding the risks involved—for example, it aspired to be the most important Central European member of Chinese cooperation formats, such as the “17+1” and the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴¹ Hungarian defence spending has been increasing rapidly since 2015, from 0.9% to 1.44% of GDP in 2022 (2% is expected to be reached in 2024). This is necessary for the implementation of a modernisation programme for the armed forces worth around €10 billion, spread over the period 2016-2026.

Hungary regarded Germany and Poland as its most important strategic partners, while non-European migration and Islamist terrorism were seen as the main threats to the state. In contrast, Hungary did not see Russia as a threat, as confirmed by the strengthening of Hungarian-Russian political and economic cooperation. Such an approach resulted in Hungary's limited contribution to Allied deterrence and defence against Russia and, with its small potential, in

³⁷ K. Dębiec, “Fico meets Shmyhal: Slovakia's two-track Ukraine policy,” *OSW Analyses*, 26 January 2024, www.osw.waw.pl.

³⁸ Ł. Ogrodnik, T. Żornaczuk, “Slovaks' Perception of the War in Ukraine is Changing—a Socio-Political Perspective,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 124 (2243), 7 September 2023, www.pism.pl.

³⁹ “A Kormány 1163/2020 (IV. 21.) Korm. Határozata Magyarország Nemzeti Biztonsági Stratégiájáról,” *Magyar Közlöny*, 2020/81, 21 April 2020, <https://magyarkozlony.hu>.

⁴⁰ V. Józwiak, “Prospects for US-Hungarian Relations under the Biden Administration,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 19 (1715), 2 February 2021, www.pism.pl.

⁴¹ For more, see: D. Héjj, “Węgry,” in: S. Czarnecki, D. Héjj, Ł. Lewkowicz (eds.), “Czechy, Słowacja i Węgry wobec Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej: współpraca polityczna, gospodarcza, społeczna,” *Prace IES*, No. 13/2022, pp. 55-76, www.ies.lublin.pl.

its weak position in NATO. Bilateral relations with Ukraine were strained by a dispute over the minority rights of the 150,000-strong Hungarian community in Transcarpathia, which escalated with Hungary blocking high-level NATO-Ukraine talks.

Although in the declarative sphere cooperation in Central Europe was one of the pillars of the Hungarian government's foreign policy, its approach towards the Hungarian minority in neighbouring countries was a source of many tensions (in particular with Romania and Slovakia, but also others) and an obstacle to building closer ties in the region. The most important platform for regional cooperation for Hungary was the V4, which served primarily as an instrument to increase the country's and Orbán's personal influence in the EU. Crucial for the leader in this respect was Hungary's relations with Poland, whose potential—through ideological proximity and the positions of the respective Fidesz and United Right governments—was used to strengthen his own political position. Hungary's involvement in other formats of regional cooperation was marginal.

Hungary's response to Russian aggression against Ukraine was restrained.⁴² It was limited, in some cases conditionally, to accepting community and allied decisions, while the government took no bilateral action to sanction Russia and bring Ukraine closer to victory. Hungary did not provide Ukraine with armaments and opposed in principle making Hungarian territory available to the transfer of arms from allies.⁴³ Hungarian support for Ukraine consisted mainly of humanitarian aid and the training of military medics. By the end of 2023, Hungary had provided international protection to about 33,000 refugees who had left Ukraine, which, in relation to the size of the country, is substantially less than other states in the region.

After the Russian invasion, Hungary maintained its foreign and security policy without correction. It invariably takes a pro-Russian stance towards the war.⁴⁴ It maintains close diplomatic relations with Russia and Belarus and wants to continue economic cooperation with them. It has a similar attitude towards China, which it does not recognise as a systemic rival, contrary to the declared NATO strategy and the EC position. At the same time, Hungary's political support for Ukraine in its rapprochement with the Alliance⁴⁵ and the Union is conditioned on improvement in the situation of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. All this shows a lack of readiness to defend the existing security system, which is the strategic goal of NATO and the EU. In Hungary's bilateral relations in Central Europe, the biggest change has been in its relations with Poland, which collapsed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. This is because, in the face of the war, fundamental differences in the understanding of interests and threat perception became obvious, especially to the Polish public.⁴⁶

Hungary's security policy has remained unchanged.⁴⁷ The authorities continue to have little involvement in NATO initiatives. It has resisted hosting NATO forces and infrastructure on its

⁴² "Megszólalt Orbán Viktor az orosz támadásról," *Portfolio*, 24 February 2022, www.portfolio.hu.

⁴³ V. Józwiak, "Hungary's Reaction to the War in Ukraine," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 27/2022, 2 March 2022, www.pism.pl.

⁴⁴ V. Józwiak, "Hungary Maintains Course on Russia One Year after the Invasion of Ukraine," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 38 (2157), 4 April 2023, www.pism.pl.

⁴⁵ See, for example, statements by Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó: "Hungary will only support integration efforts of Ukraine if the pre-2015 rights of the Transcarpathian Hungarians are restored" (Telex, 4 April 2023, www.telex.hu); Prime Minister Orbán: "The accession of Ukraine to NATO would cause immediate start of World War III, due this would have meant that NATO was at war with Russia. Therefore, it was necessary to oppose the Ukrainian demands" [related to setting a clear accession path at the NATO summit in July 2023], 14 July 2023, www.miniszterelnok.hu.

⁴⁶ Poles' sympathy for Hungarians reached the lowest level in the last 30 years (36%) in 2023, with the highest level of dislike (27% vs. 9% in 2022). See: CBOS, "Attitudes towards other nations," March 2023, www.cbos.pl.

⁴⁷ D. Héjji, "Strategia bezpieczeństwa Węgry," in: B. Surmacz (ed.), "Strategia bezpieczeństwa i obrony państw Europy Środkowej: Czechy, Słowacja, Węgry," *Prace IES*, No. 1/2023, pp. 65-86, www.ies.lublin.pl.

territory, although after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it agreed to form a battlegroup under its command. The government continues to use rhetoric that deprecates the Alliance while strengthening relations with China,⁴⁸ criticises U.S. support for Ukraine, and delayed ratification of Finland's and then Sweden's accession to NATO.

LITHUANIA



The conservative-liberal cabinet of Ingrida Šimonytė,⁴⁹ which took power in December 2020, announced a new approach to foreign policy, which was to be based on values.⁵⁰ This idea, which boils down to giving priority to the principles of international law, democratic rule, and human rights, in practice has meant, for example, limiting relations with authoritarian states, especially Belarus, Russia, and China. The National Security Strategy⁵¹ adopted in December 2021 confirmed a security policy based on European and transatlantic cooperation, in particular the importance of the strategic partnership with the U.S. Lithuania also perceives Russia as the main source of threat, the scale of which has been increasing since the annexation of Crimea.

Lithuania has strengthened relations with the U.S. and sought the permanent presence of American troops on its territory. Its credibility in the NATO forum was to be increased by plans at the time to increase defence financing to 2.5% of GDP by 2030. Lithuania also supported the development of EU security policy, including PESCO, but only as a complement to the Alliance's activities. It considered membership in the Union as a guarantee of economic stability and financial discipline but was not a supporter of deepening integration in the political dimension. Lithuania also supported the EU's active Eastern policy and the development of the Eastern Partnership.

For Lithuania, apart from the cooperation with the other Baltic States (B3), Poland was a particularly important partner. The intensity of bilateral relations has been increasing, especially in the face of the growing threat from Russia, as well as from Belarus after the rigged elections in 2020 and the forced migration crisis at the border in 2021. This resulted in the strengthening of both the B3 and "B3+1" formats and, as a consequence of the pandemic, the increased importance of regional cooperation on the Baltic Sea—the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Baltic and Nordic states (NB8).

Lithuania initially wanted to develop relations with China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, counting on economic benefits. Ultimately, due to the lack of profit, as well as changing U.S. policy towards China, Lithuania began to limit Chinese investment plans. In 2021, it was the first country to withdraw from the "17+1" initiative. Moreover, that same year Lithuania enabled the opening in Vilnius of an informal embassy called the Taiwanese Representative Office (not the Taipei office, as is the case in other countries).

⁴⁸ V. Józwiak, "Hungarian Policy Increasingly Linked to China," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 152 (2271), 26 October 2023, www.pism.pl.

⁴⁹ K. Raś, "Priorities of the New Lithuanian Government," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 3 (1699), 7 January 2021, www.pism.pl.

⁵⁰ "Vertybinė Lietuvos užsienio politika kelia klausimų: vieniems ji per brangi, kiti pabrėžia nuoseklumo trūkumą," Lithuanian Radio and Television, 11 December 2021, www.lrt.lt.

⁵¹ Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, "The Seimas approved the reviewed National Security Strategy," 16 December 2021, www.kam.lt.

In February 2022, Lithuania strongly condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine and pointed to a further risk of escalation of the conflict. It considered it necessary to provide comprehensive support, including providing weapons and ammunition. It also repeatedly appealed for the international community's support for Ukraine.

The war confirmed the Lithuanian authorities' need to pursue an even more assertive and decisive policy towards Russia. Therefore, Lithuania supported a restrictive policy of sanctions and limiting Russia's profits from the export of energy resources. It gave up supplies of Russian gas in favour of more expensive LNG from different directions. At the same time, it tried to gradually redirect trade with Russia to other directions, suffering losses, for example in the logistics industry. It also took individual actions, for example by blocking transit from Russia to Kaliningrad in 2023, which resulted in the intervention of the European Commission. In this way, Lithuania has sought to isolate Russia in many dimensions, especially politically and economically. At the same time, it is trying to give the EU greater opportunities to defend its external borders and introduce a more restrictive migration policy, one it believes is adequate to current events.

Another effect of the war has been that Lithuania has taken a number of actions to strengthen its own security. First of all, the Lithuanian government decided to expand its strategic partnership with the U.S., which determined an assertive position towards China and tighter cooperation with Taiwan. This is also expected to translate into further military cooperation with the U.S. and a further increase of NATO soldiers in Lithuania, which is planned for 2025-2026. At the same time, the Lithuanian government is increasing defence expenditures: in 2023, they amounted to 2.52% of GDP; in 2024, they are to increase to 2.75% of GDP (€2.1 billion); and, the authorities are signalling the possibility to reach 3% in the coming years.

The Baltic Sea is becoming an even more important area for NATO with the accession of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024, which encourages Lithuania to become more involved in regional cooperation formats (the B3, NB8, and the Northern Group). At the same time, in Central Europe, Poland—apart from the other Baltic States—remains Lithuania's key partner, which translates into further strengthening of cooperation within the "3+1" format. The growing importance of this forum could have been what prompted Lithuania to apply to host the Three Seas Summit in Vilnius in 2024.

LATVIA



Latvia considered membership in NATO and the European Union as the basis of its foreign and security policy.⁵² The importance of the bilateral partnership with the U.S. has increased for Latvia, especially since Russia's annexation of Crimea. Although Russia was considered a direct threat, it remained until recently one of Latvia's main trading partners. However, this fact did not mean that the Latvian authorities opposed the EU's sanctions policy towards Russia and Belarus.

The fear of Russian expansionism prompted Latvia to return to the idea of a defensive army after years of specialisation and focus on foreign missions. Therefore, it began increasing defence

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Speech by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at the annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima)," 28 January 2021, www.mfa.gov.lv.

financing, from 1.41% in 2016 to 2% of GDP from 2018, and to arm its military in accordance with the Security Strategy for 2020-2024.⁵³ The priority has been on the modernisation of the army, including mechanisation, the development of air defences, and increasing the ability to accommodate allied troops.

The EU has been key to building a stable economic and social environment for Latvia. The forced migration crisis on the border with Belarus in 2021 increased the importance of the EU in terms of security and crisis management, especially in the protection of external borders and migration policy. Moreover, Latvia, as part of the EU, has attached great importance to cybersecurity. It ceded relations with China to EU institutions and promoted the EU-China format instead of the "17+1" format, despite initial hopes for obtaining benefits from Chinese investments.

As a result of the pandemic, the importance of regional cooperation via the B3, NB8 and CBSS has increased for Latvia. It also has been involved in TSI, including as host of the Riga Summit in 2022. Due to common security challenges, the role of cooperation between the Baltic States and Poland in the "3+1" format has also grown.

Latvia condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine and called on the EU to adopt a restrictive policy of sanctions and abandon Russian energy sources. At the same time, it undertook to help Ukraine on a large scale by providing various military equipment (drones, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons). It was important for Latvia to support not only the protection of its own critical infrastructure but also Ukraine's.

As a result of the war in Ukraine and after experiencing the crisis on the border with Belarus, Latvia adapted its foreign and security policy,⁵⁴ among others, as part of the new Security Strategy of September 2023. It points out the need for even closer cooperation with the U.S. and within NATO, including Canada, which commands the Alliance's battlegroup stationed in Latvia. At the same time, Latvia limits relations with China: already by mid-2022, it had withdrawn from the "17+1" initiative together with Estonia, pointing to the Chinese investment model as risky (this particularly concerned concessions for the port of Riga, which were desired by China). The strategy also assumes, among others, the development of air and coastal defence, long-range rocket artillery, drones, and increases in the number of troops from 24,000 up to 31,000 and defence financing in 2024 to 2.4% of GDP (€1.2 billion).

The government of Evika Siliņa, appointed in September 2023, has announced further support, including military aid, for Ukraine. At the same time, it pays particular attention to hybrid threats coming from Russia, for example, disinformation in Russian-language media. It emphasises even more the need to secure the EU's external borders and sees the Union as an increasingly responsible entity in the field of security, especially in the dimension of crisis management. Latvia also sees greater importance of cooperation within the B3 format, as well as the "3+1", in which Poland has become an even more important partner.

The Latvian government continues to limit cooperation with Russia and Belarus, despite the financial damage, especially in the logistics sector. To compensate for these losses, it is looking for new partners, including those from Asia, and it has intensified diplomatic activities in this dimension. However, this does not include China.

⁵³ Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, "Saeima approves the National Defence Concept," 28 September 2020, www.mod.gov.lv.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, "The State Defence Concept," 28 September 2023, www.mod.gov.lv.



In Estonia's foreign and security policy after regaining independence, regardless of the political grouping in power, transatlantic relations and a pro-EU orientation are the priorities. The proof of consistency in this area has been, for example, the adoption of the euro first among the Baltic States in 2011. At the same time, a component of Estonian foreign policy distinguishing it from the other Baltic States has been its Nordic identity,⁵⁵ which has resulted in a strong emphasis in this country's external activities on the northern dimension. It was visible in Estonia's actions in regional initiatives (CBSS, NB8), including those related to the Arctic. Estonia has cooperated with the Baltic States (B3) and Poland within the "3+1" framework, which resulted from the coherent policy of these countries towards Belarus and Russia.

Among the Baltic States, only Estonia maintained universal military conscription even before 2022, and in February 2017, the Ministry of Defence adopted the Development Plan for 2018-2021, which had as a priority an innovative programme for strengthening armoured units, establishing a cyber command, and increasing the ability to control the situation in the Baltic Sea.⁵⁶ In 2016, Estonia, as one of only five Alliance countries, had already met the aim of allocating 2% of GDP spending on defence. It also modernised and increased the armed forces operating in the so-called mixed model, one with twinned pillars of a professional and conscript army. As a result of such actions, it significantly increased the defence budget and modernised its military, including expanding territorial defence activities, which have a long tradition in this country.

The government's plan for security policy from the end of 2021 included an increasingly tough approach towards Russia.⁵⁷ Estonia defined Russia clearly as a threat to its security, which resulted from its aggressive actions in the region. Therefore, Estonia also strongly supported the other Baltic States and Poland during the forced migration crisis on the border with Belarus. The Estonian authorities were also involved in EU security initiatives and supported the development of its defence capabilities (PESCO, Strategic Compass), but as complementary to NATO. The priorities in EU policy included strengthening the single market and the competitiveness of the Union and increasing the possibilities of cooperation with partners from outside it. Estonian initiatives at the EU forum were also increasingly conditioned by threats from Russia.

After the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Estonian government was among the first to encourage international aid for the besieged country and decided to arm it on its own.⁵⁸ It sent anti-tank weapons, armoured vehicles, and other equipment. Estonia's aid in the first month of the war amounted to about 0.8% of its GDP⁵⁹ and made it a leader among countries supporting Ukraine. At the beginning of 2024, Estonia also made the globally unprecedented decision to donate 0.25% of its GDP for four years to military aid to Ukraine. Thanks to such

⁵⁵ Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia, "Estonia AND the Nordic countries—Estonia AS a Nordic country?" 1 September 2016, www.norden.ee.

⁵⁶ K. Raś, "Baltic States Adjust Their Security Policy," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 44 (1486), 9 May 2017, www.pism.pl.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Estonia, "National Defence Development Plan 2031," 14 December 2021, www.kaiseministeerium.ee.

⁵⁸ K. Dudzińska, "Estonia's Response to the Russian Aggression Against Ukraine," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 79 (1996), 17 May 2022, www.pism.pl.

⁵⁹ "Estonia sent Ukraine aid worth 0.8 percent of GDP in first month of war," ERR News, 20 April 2022, www.err.ee.

actions and others, including activity in the international arena, Prime Minister Kaja Kallas became an icon of European diplomacy in support of Ukraine.⁶⁰

Russia's full-scale aggression resulted in a further hardening of the attitude towards it. Estonia supported taking more steps to isolate Russia internationally and to stop importing Russian energy resources. It indicated that NATO should develop capabilities to deter and defend against Russia.

Estonia's readiness to further strengthen its security is reflected in the March 2023 strategy.⁶¹ In it, this country aims for total defence and will increase defence spending up to 3.2% of GDP (€1.3 billion) in 2024. Moreover, it is strengthening relations with the U.S., the guarantor of security in the region, and limiting relations with China, leaving the "17+1" initiative in mid-2022 together with Latvia. It has strengthened military cooperation with the United Kingdom, which commands the multinational NATO battlegroup stationed in Tapa. At the same time, Estonia is working to further strengthen the Eastern Flank (in 2022, the number of Alliance troops in this state almost doubled and amounts to about 1,700 soldiers). This country also supports the development of European defence capabilities as compatible with the Alliance. The priority is the rapid development of medium-range air defences. Estonia is to modernise the air base at Ämari and, together with Lithuania and Latvia, acquire rocket artillery systems by 2024.

Estonia is intensifying regional cooperation, including in the Nordic dimension. Finland has become an even more important partner for Estonia, seeking to cooperate to a greater extent with it within NATO, as well as in the energy sector and critical infrastructure protection. The forced migration crisis on the EU-Belarus border and the war in Ukraine have increased Estonia's involvement in cooperation within the "3+1" framework, which is becoming important for this country.

ROMANIA



Romania's foreign policy is subordinated to its security policy, so the assumptions of both are defined by the National Strategy of Defence of the State for 2020-2024, adopted in 2020.⁶² It reflects the almost universal consensus on the country's security that has prevailed on the political scene for years. The foundation of this consensus is the close alliance with the United States, which has an anti-missile base in Romania and uses air and logistics bases there. For Romania, the main threat is Russia and its aggressive policy in the Black Sea basin.⁶³ The Romanian authorities are seeking to strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank. However, they believe that the Alliance did not pay enough attention to the Black Sea before 2022. They see the

⁶⁰ K.K. Cho, "Who is Estonia's Kaja Kallas, and why is her election win key for Ukraine?" *The Washington Post*, 7 March 2023, www.washingtonpost.com.

⁶¹ Government of the Republic of Estonia, "The National Security Concept presented by the Prime Minister is approved in the Riigikogu," 22 February 2023, www.valitsus.ee.

⁶² President of Romania, "Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării pentru perioada 2020-2024 a fost aprobată prin Hotărârea nr. 22 a Ședinței comune a Senatului și Camerei Deputaților din 30 iunie 2020," *Monitorul Oficial*, Part I, no 574, 1 July 2020, www.presidency.ro.

⁶³ P. Oleksy, "Strategia obronna Rumunii," in: B. Surmacz (ed.), "Strategie bezpieczeństwa i obrony państw Europy Środkowej: Bułgaria, Rumunia, Serbia, Ukraina," *Prace IES*, No. 6/2022, pp. 31-48, <https://ies.lublin.pl>; K. Cășu, "Romania's new security strategy," OSW Analyses, 15 July 2020, www.osw.waw.pl.

creation of the B9 as a prestigious success. They also perceive it as a valuable consultative forum that enables them to limit the influence of Russia-sympathetic Bulgaria and Hungary on the security of the region. Romania fears that Hungarian historical policy is in fact a drive to revise the borders established by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.⁶⁴

Romania presents itself to its allies as a contributor to common security. This country has sent soldiers to a battlegroup in Poland and previously to missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Mali, and elsewhere. Since 2017, it has earmarked 2% for defence and is implementing an extensive modernisation programme for its armed forces.

Romania wants to join the mainstream of EU integration. Therefore, it is avoiding conflicts with institutions and its main European partners, Germany and France.⁶⁵ In particular, Romania is seeking full membership in the Schengen area. It wants to adopt the euro by 2029. It backs the strengthening of the EU's foreign and security policy, including reducing the requirement for unanimity, but expects the Union to be complementary to NATO in these policies. It supports in particular the accession of Moldova to the EU, as well as enlargement to the Western Balkans and to Ukraine and Georgia. At the same time, it is moderate in cooperating with regional partners, as it does not consider them equivalent to Western Europe. Romania's scepticism stems from its negative experience with the Black Sea Synergy, a format established in 2007 at its initiative under EU auspices but which proved dysfunctional and effectively died in 2010. That is why, apart from the B9, Romania has only become more actively involved in the Trilateral Initiative, assuming that U.S. involvement in it will accelerate the construction of road and rail infrastructure that could be crucial for allied support in a time of crisis.

The Romanian authorities have sided with the U.S. in its rivalry with China, although they had previously eyed investment opportunities in the "17+1" and Belt and Road Initiative. In 2019, they excluded Chinese companies from building 5G networks, and in 2020, they cancelled a contract with a Chinese investor to develop the Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant.

Romanian-Ukrainian relations have been burdened by long-standing mistrust. This was not overcome by the 1997 Treaty on Relations of Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation, nor by the 2009 International Court of Justice settlement of the Black Sea shelf dispute. The status of the Romanian minority in Ukraine and that country's recognition of Moldovans as a separate minority—around 400,000 people in total—remain unresolved issues.⁶⁶ There are also arguments over some parts of the border in the Danube Delta and the Ukrainian deepwater navigation channel, the Bystroye Canal, in the area that threatens a UNESCO biosphere reserve, according to the Romanian authorities. The rapprochement after the 2014 Russian aggression against Ukraine had already collapsed by 2017, as Romania criticised the restriction of education opportunities for the Romanian minority in its own language. It nevertheless supported its neighbour, albeit in a limited way, in building a cybersecurity system, among other things.

However, in February 2022, the Romanian authorities unequivocally condemned the invasion of Ukraine and supported sanctions on Russia. President Iohannis was not a signatory to the letter issued that month by Central European presidents on giving EU candidate status to Ukraine but supported this demand in a separate position, extending it to Moldova. Romania is, after Poland,

⁶⁴ J. Pieńkowski, "Romania on the Centenary of the Treaty of Trianon," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 36-2020, 6 June 2020, www.pism.pl.

⁶⁵ M. Chudziak, P. Oleksy, "Czy trilog ma przyszłość? Rumunia i Turcja jako partnerzy dla polityki zagranicznej Polski," *Prace IES*, No. 5/2023, pp. 25-31, <https://ies.lublin.pl>.

⁶⁶ J. Pieńkowski, "A New Rapprochement in Romanian-Moldovan Relations," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 4 (1921), 10 January 2022, www.pism.pl.

the most important hub for Western humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine. However, it has kept details of its own support secret, citing security concerns. It has only confirmed shipments of fuel, helmets, ammunition, and bandages worth a few million euros. In fact, it has donated negligible quantities of heavy weapons. It is an important supplier of artillery ammunition, though, and it makes its bases available for the training of Ukrainian troops, including F-16 pilots. In view of the Russian blockade of Ukrainian Black Sea ports, it has become the main channel for Ukrainian grain exports. By autumn 2023, about 30 million tonnes—around 60% of the total exported volume—of grain had been sent through Romania's Constanța and Danube ports.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Romania is putting even more emphasis on its own security.⁶⁷ It declared an increase in military spending to 2.5% of GDP from 2023 and accelerated purchases of F-35 fighter jets and Abrams tanks, among others. It has also asked allies to deploy troops on its territory, which, in response, the U.S. tripled its contingent, and NATO established a French-led multinational battlegroup in the country at its Madrid summit in July 2022. Romania sees the B9 as a tool to promote its position in the Alliance. Iohannis co-hosted not only the summit in Bucharest in June 2022 but also the ones in Warsaw in February and Bratislava in June 2023.

The war in Ukraine has confirmed the traditionally reactive and opportunistic nature of Romania's foreign policy. In the face of the crisis, it remained passive, waiting for key allies to act first.⁶⁸ Romania only became more extensively involved in helping Ukraine when it was unequivocally supported by the U.S., Germany, and France. Romania has eventually become one of Ukraine's key allies—in October 2023, presidents Iohannis and Zelensky established a strategic partnership, and the governments held their first joint meeting. Previously, Romanian support had been restrained: Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă delayed his visit to Kyiv until late April 2022, although a number of European leaders had visited the city by then. Iohannis only arrived in June, joining the leaders of France, Germany, and Italy.



The basis for Bulgaria's foreign and security policy with a horizon of up to 2025 is set out in the 2018 Updated National Security Strategy.⁶⁹ It declares the country's deep roots in EU and NATO structures. In reality, Boyko Borisov's cabinets—in power with short breaks from 2003 to 2021—have been manoeuvring between Western partners and Russia and China. Similarly, the technical cabinets of 2021 and 2022-2023, associated with President Rumen Radev, did the same. Real Euro-Atlantic policy was pursued only by the Kirill Petkov government in office in late 2021 and early 2022.

In fact, Bulgaria sees Turkey's revisionism as its greatest threat, challenging the borders established after the First World War and playing politics with Bulgarian Turks (8.5% of the

⁶⁷ J. Pieńkowski, "Romania Boosts Defences in Wake of Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 28 (2838), 20 February 2024, www.pism.pl.

⁶⁸ For more, see: K. Całus, "Punching below its weight. Romania's foreign policy dilemmas," OSW Report, September 2023, www.osw.waw.pl.

⁶⁹ Държавен вестник, "Актуализирана стратегия за национална сигурност на Република България, Приета с Решение на Народно събрание от 14.03.2018, 26," 23 March 2018, www.parliament.bg.

population). This threat is neutralised by its NATO membership and bilateral alliance with the U.S. As part of maintaining alliance credibility, Bulgaria has provided its allies with training grounds and logistical bases. It has also sent troops on missions to Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. However, at the same time, Bulgaria neglected to modernise its own army.⁷⁰ It has also blocked the Romanian initiative to establish a permanent NATO force in the Black Sea, as its core would be the Turkish fleet.

Bulgaria, despite numerous spy scandals, did not treat Russia as a threat, but rather as a desirable partner. This was fostered by the pro-Russian sentiments of parts of society and the political class,⁷¹ including President Radev, who relativised the Ukrainian nature of Crimea after Russia occupied it since 2014. The authorities in Sofia searched for investments from Russia in strategic sectors. However, a contract for the construction of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant failed due to disagreements over the final price and the reluctance of Western companies to join in the investment, leaving Bulgaria to pay high compensation to Russia for the already completed equipment. Also, a gas pipeline built under the Borisov government to deliver Russian gas from Turkey to the Balkans, although it was supposed to provide large profits from transit, has been unprofitable. At the same time, Bulgaria did not maintain close relations with Ukraine until the 2022 invasion despite the 180,000-strong Bulgarian diaspora living there.

The Bulgarian authorities saw the “17+1” and Belt and Road Initiative as opportunities to accelerate economic development and the possibility to export food to China. At the same time, Chinese investment in infrastructure was expected to induce Western partners to become more involved. Bulgaria’s enthusiasm waned after the failure of flagship projects, including in 2018 when the Chinese investor pulled out of the Plovdiv airport expansion and in 2019 when attempts to get China to continue building Belene finally collapsed. In 2020, the Bulgarian and U.S. governments signed a declaration excluding Chinese companies from 5G network construction.

Within the EU, Bulgaria generally adopted a conciliatory stance, seeking to maintain unity. Although Borisov asserted his commitment to European values, he tolerated systemic corruption in domestic politics. This was the reason for the continuing blockade of Bulgaria’s full accession to the Schengen area. The authorities also made efforts to adopt the euro, but the COVID-19 pandemic and an internal political crisis dismissed this prospect. Bulgaria supported EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, but blocked the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia, demanding concessions on identity issues.⁷²

Bulgaria supported EU sanctions on Russia, with the reservation of a transitional period for oil imports. It offered Ukraine training of medical personnel and equipment for civil defence. However, it ruled out giving it arms, and Defence Minister Stefan Yanev, who was associated with President Radev, described the Russian invasion as a “military operation”, for which he was dismissed by Prime Minister Petkov. The Bulgarian government helped Ukraine survive the first months of the war by secretly supplying it primarily with ammunition of Soviet design and with fuel. The PM’s need for discretion was forced on him by the attitude of his pro-Russian coalition partners and Radev, who, while supporting Ukraine’s accession to NATO and the EU, has at the same time distanced himself from the unequivocal condemnation of Russia.

⁷⁰ S. Domaradzki, “Bułgaria – (nie)sprawny sojusznik NATO?,” *Komentarze IES*, No. 526 (38/2022), 22 February 2022, www.ies.lublin.pl.

⁷¹ J. Pieńkowski, “Bulgarian-Russian Relations: Between Sentiment and Pragmatism,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 177 (1422), 12 December 2019, www.pism.pl.

⁷² For more, see: J. Pieńkowski, T. Żornaczuk, “Prospects for Breaking the Deadlock in Bulgarian-Macedonian Relations,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 24 (1941), 9 February 2022, www.pism.pl.

The Radev-affiliated next technical government stonewalled supplies to Ukraine and unsuccessfully sought the resumption of Russian gas supplies to Bulgaria. Appointed by the Petkov and Borisov parties in June 2023, the new cabinet of Nikolai Denkov⁷³ announced the resumption of military aid to Ukraine, including ammunition and around 100 BTR-60 transporters, the handover of which was briefly blocked by Radev, who claimed it would undermine Bulgaria's security. During Zelensky's visit to Sofia in July 2023, the government also agreed to sell to Ukraine the reactors and turbines originally bought for the Belene NPP.⁷⁴

Bulgaria's foreign policy has changed radically with the different ideological orientations of successive cabinets. The Petkov government tried to tighten Bulgaria's ties with other states in the EU and NATO but was constrained by a pro-Russian coalition partner and an ambiguous president. Bulgaria then welcomed an Italian-led NATO battlegroup to its territory, although Minister Yanev was reluctant to do so and tried to stipulate that its command be left in Bulgarian hands. A radically Euro-Atlantic turn came with the Denkov government taking power. It announced reforms to enable the country to join the Schengen area in 2024 and the eurozone in 2025. It also envisaged accelerating neglected programmes to modernise the military, with Bulgaria set to spend 2% of GDP on defence from 2024, and to fully decouple energy from Russia.

The smooth implementation of this course will be hampered by the failure of Petkov's and Borisov's parties to reach an agreement in March 2024 to continue to govern together after the previously agreed resignation of Denkov's cabinet. This means that early parliamentary elections will have to be called. The new technical government, which normally administers the state until the appointment of a regular cabinet, will no longer be subservient to Radev, as the constitutional reform of late 2023 significantly restricted the president's freedom to designate the head of such a government.

⁷³ For more, see: J. Pieńkowski, "Coalition of Distrust: Breaking the Political Clinch in Bulgaria," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 90 (2209), 10 July 2023, www.pism.pl.

⁷⁴ S. Domaradzki, "Bułgaria: wizyta prezydenta Ukrainy," *Komentarze IES*, No. 908 (156/2023), 19 July 2023, www.ies.lublin.pl.

III. IMPACT OF THE WAR ON REGIONAL COOPERATION

VISEGRAD GROUP



After Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the V4 faced its biggest crisis since its members joined NATO and the EU. The reason was the lack of agreement between Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia on one side and Hungary on the other on the basic directions of policy towards Russia and Ukraine, which were the priority questions for the security of the region and the EU as a whole. This led to a slowdown in Visegrad cooperation at the political level and made it impossible to take further joint actions that went beyond decisions at the NATO and EU levels.

From February 2022 to February 2024, the V4 heads of government met only four times. The meeting with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in March 2022 was planned before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, while the last one, on 27 February 2024, took place only after Hungary ratified Sweden's NATO membership. Each of the summits ended without any joint declarations or significant conclusions on the international situation and served mainly to maintain the functioning of the format at the government level after the outbreak of the war. Previously, such meetings were held regularly, often monthly, and the prime ministers consulted ahead of European Councils. Ministerial talks also have been cancelled or postponed several times due to the Hungarian reaction to the Russian aggression. After many years of intensive contacts, in autumn 2022 a summit of the presidents of the V4 parliaments was cancelled (it was finally held in February 2023), while the annual summits of presidents were maintained. Since the end of 2022, joint communiqués within the V4 have been issued by defence ministers and ombudsmen (both in 2023) and parliament presidents (2024), although previously there were at least a dozen Visegrad statements at various levels per year and more than 30 in 2021⁷⁵. Due to the crisis of confidence in the Hungarian government by the other members, the aim of both the Slovak programme and the Czech one-year presidency of the V4 (from July 2022 and July 2023, respectively) was to maintain minimum functioning of the group. This was evidenced by the focus on "soft" areas of cooperation that do not require political agreements at the highest level, such as tourism, education, culture, and sport. On the occasion of the few meetings held, the leaders of the V4 maintained that, despite their divisions, they wanted to take up issues that unite these countries.

There has also been regression in the area of cooperation in European affairs. The Polish government wanted to speed up the implementation of the sixth package of sanctions adopted in June 2022 and was critical of the transition periods in moving away from Russian oil negotiated by the other members of the group. Hungary also criticised the EU's sanctions policy and argued that the restrictions mainly affect EU members and not Russia. The only EU field in which the Visegrad countries have acted coherently was an agreement connected to energy and climate policy on the need to freeze the price of CO₂ emissions and to introduce a maximum cap on the price of gas at a level lower than that proposed by the EC. Along with the reduction in the frequency of meetings, contacts with partners in the "V4+" formula have been limited. There

⁷⁵ Visegrad Group, "Official Statements and Communiqués," 4 March 2024, www.visegradgroup.eu.

has also been little progress in terms of infrastructure projects, limited to the commissioning of the long-planned gas interconnector between Poland and Slovakia.

B3



After Russia's attack on Ukraine, the Baltic States intensified their joint actions. They are significantly tightening cooperation in the field of security. This is manifested by, among others, the signing in January 2024 in Riga by B3 defence ministers of a declaration on the construction of the Baltic Defence Line on the border of these countries with Russia, as well as the letter of intent regarding cooperation in the field of rocket artillery.⁷⁶

Moreover, they announced the creation of common air defence of the three countries with the support of NATO, which is intended to strengthen the Eastern Flank of the Alliance in accordance with the decisions of the Vilnius summit of July 2023, including as part of updated defence plans. At the same time, for the Baltic Council, both during the Estonian and Lithuanian presidencies, the priority has remained to minimise the threats from Russia and Belarus, develop strategic energy and infrastructure projects, and continue broad support for Ukraine.⁷⁷

The change in the security situation in the region has also contributed to tightening Baltic-Nordic cooperation. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO further strengthens B3 security cooperation with the Nordic countries, including joint water protection and the development of defence capabilities in the Baltic Sea.

BUCHAREST NINE



The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine confirmed the usefulness of the B9 as a platform for consultation and bringing the positions closer within NATO's Eastern Flank states. The region's presidents used this format to respond quickly, meeting as early as 25 February 2022, just one day after the invasion began. The growing importance of the B9 was also demonstrated by the increased intensity and regularity of meetings. The presidents had previously met at considerable intervals, but they held four summits in the two years since the outbreak of the war in February 2022, matching the previous six years of the format's existence. Similarly, starting with the growing threat of invasion in autumn 2021, foreign ministers and defence ministers consulted annually within the B9.

Despite Hungary's open reluctance to support Ukraine and Bulgaria's ambiguous stance, the B9 remained united and courted NATO to strengthen the Eastern Flank.⁷⁸ The main result was

⁷⁶ Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, "Baltic defence ministers agree on the Baltic Defence Line," 22 January 2024, www.mod.gov.lv.

⁷⁷ Baltic Assembly, "Joint Statement of the 29th Baltic Council," 24 November 2023, www.baltsam.org.

⁷⁸ Compare with: K. Całus, B. Chmielewski, K. Dębiec, Ł. Kobeszko, A. Sadecki, "A multi-speed mobilisation. NATO's eastern flank one year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine," *OSW Commentary*, No. 491, 21 February 2023, www.osw.waw.pl.

the decision at the Madrid Alliance summit in June 2022 to set up battlegroups in Flank states that did not have them before—Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary. This decision was also accepted by the Hungarian authorities, despite simultaneously seeking rapprochement with Russia. This was mainly due to their policy of avoiding disputes within NATO, especially with the U.S., on issues deemed secondary from the Hungarian point of view. This was also confirmed by Hungary's position at the Vilnius Summit in July 2023. It did not veto NATO aid to Ukraine, as this was a priority for the U.S., and the Hungarian authorities themselves did not need to be involved. On an issue key for them—blocking Poland's proposal to invite Ukraine to join the Alliance—the U.S. position at the time was fully in line with their interests.

The main animators of the B9 remain the presidents of the format's founding states, Duda (Poland) and Iohannis (Romania). They are joined by Slovak President Čaputová, who is unequivocally committed to helping Ukraine but was not seeking re-election in spring 2024 elections.

SLAVKOV TRIANGLE



Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not had a major impact on the functioning of this format. The Triangle has served as an additional exchange of information and views on the war. Since its inception, there has been no visit by representatives of the full S3 to Ukraine, but the foreign ministers of Czechia and Austria visited Kyiv together in July 2022.

The subject of the war was discussed both within the S3 group and in an expanded format with external partners, including a meeting in Vienna in August 2023, during which S3 foreign ministers asked their Indian counterpart for diplomatic efforts to persuade Russia to stop its aggression. In turn, during the S3 summit in December 2023 in Belá, Slovakia, in addition to condemning Russia's attacks on Ukraine's critical infrastructure, the ministers expressed hope for a peaceful end to the war in a way acceptable to Ukraine.

THREE SEAS INITIATIVE



Partner-participants

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine did not affect the course of the initiative's primary objective, as the implementation of TSI projects continued to be conducted mainly on the national level. Instead, the main changes from the format's 2022 Riga summit were a broader discussion of security issues and the TSI's commitment to defending Ukraine, as well as giving it the status of a participating partner. This was to enable, among other things, its participation in infrastructure and energy projects, and to help it rebuild after the war. The convening of this

summit just before the European Council's decision in June 2022 to grant Ukraine candidate status for EU membership served to express broad Central European support for the cause.

Security issues in regional cooperation were also emphasised at the Bucharest summit in 2023. That was when the initiative was expanded to include Greece. The motivation was the desire to involve it in discussions on the expansion of transportation infrastructure, some of which are part of TSI projects and are located in that country. In addition, the summit granted Moldova the status of participating partner. An association of businesses and employers was also established and the creation of the Three Seas Innovation Fund was announced.

CENTRAL FIVE



The C5 has retained regular ministerial summits: from its inception in June 2020 to March 2024, the group met 11 times. This distinguishes the C5 from the V4, which, because of the crisis in it, saw a significant reduction in meetings. Despite the regular meetings, the C5 is unable to formulate a coherent position on the war, due to the fundamental divisions in its members' Eastern policy. Hungary sympathises with and strengthens bilateral cooperation with Russia. Austria, citing its neutrality, has been very restrained in its support for Ukraine and maintains relations with Russia, while in Slovakia Fico returned to power at the end of 2023, reducing support for Ukraine. Czechia and Slovenia, on the other hand, continue to support it fully.

The C5 ministers expressed their backing for maintaining channels of communication with Russia within the framework of the OSCE, whose headquarters they visited on the sidelines of the OSCE summit in Vienna in September 2023. The C5 meetings were also used to coordinate transports of humanitarian aid to Ukraine and discuss the reception of war refugees. Support for the integration of the Western Balkans with the EU, which is one of the main objectives of the C5, would contribute to limiting the influence of countries such as Russia in the region.

“3+1” FORMAT



After Russia's attack on Ukraine, the importance of the “3+1” format grew even more due to the common threat perception of the countries that comprise it. This is because they were in the vanguard of helping Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. They often initiated such actions or undertook them without waiting for a joint EU response. The Polish side stressed that the assumptive basis for close cooperation was “geographical location, common history and similar challenges in the areas of security and infrastructure”.⁷⁹ Moreover, the development of this formula was part of Poland's reorientation of regional political activities, also in view of the collapse of this dimension of cooperation in the V4. The joint activities of the “3+1” confirmed that this format had become an essential forum for Poland to quickly express its regional position on political issues, and for the Baltic States to strengthen their collective voice.

⁷⁹ “Minister Rau visits Riga...,” *op. cit.*

The “3+1” cooperation proceeded at all political levels. In April 2022, the presidents of Poland and the Baltic States were the first to visit Ukraine after the outbreak of war. At the same time, the “3+1” foreign ministers consulted in Riga on options for direct aid to Ukraine. Governmental cooperation also took place at the level of prime ministers, who, for example, in September 2022 adopted a joint declaration pointing out the serious threat posed by the increased flow of Russian citizens to EU and Schengen countries through the borders of Poland and the Baltic States. Appreciating the suspension of the visa facilitation agreement between the EU and Russia, they reported on a common regional approach and the adoption of temporary national measures against Russian citizens who hold visas issued by EU countries.

As a sign of appreciation of the usefulness of the “3+1” for joint activities, in early 2023, the foreign ministers of Poland and the Baltic States signed the so-called Riga Declaration on strengthening cooperation between their ministries. According to the Polish side, this Riga Format offered “a platform for the gradual institutionalisation of political, military, energy, transport, cyber, and economic cooperation between Poland and all the Baltic States”. It saw it—like the Lublin Triangle—also as an “instrument for harmonising strategies on political, military, and economic support for Ukraine’s war of defence and its later reconstruction”.⁸⁰ The Latvian hosts also saw intensifying cooperation as an opportunity to more efficiently coordinate positions within NATO, including ahead of the Alliance’s summit in Vilnius.⁸¹

The closer cooperation between Poland and the Baltic States also resulted in significantly improved relations and increased intensity of contacts, including at the presidential level, between Poland and Lithuania. In view of common challenges of existential importance, the issue of the Polish minority in Lithuania, which had not been settled to the satisfaction of the authorities in Warsaw and which had burdened bilateral cooperation for years, was relegated to the background.

LUBLIN TRIANGLE



The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is part of the Lublin Triangle, has resulted in the intensification of the platform’s efforts to help it and condemn Russia. L3 members perceived the platform’s activities as complementary to other multilateral formats, such as the International Crimean Platform or the Three Seas Initiative.

The L3 has continued trilateral consultations to strengthen Ukraine’s security. Polish and Lithuania’s support for the country was confirmed by the declaration of the prime ministers in November 2022. At the highest political level, the presidents expressed solidarity with Ukraine at the summit in Lviv in January 2023. It coincided with the 160th anniversary of the outbreak of the January Uprising, which was noted in the joint declaration of the L3 presidents. Tripartite presidential consultations were also held to resolve the crisis involving Ukrainian grain in autumn 2023.

⁸⁰ “Information on the principles and objectives...,” *op. cit.*, p.19.

⁸¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, “Ārlietu ministri: ir svarīgi turpināt sniegt minitāru un cita veida atbalstu Ukrainai,” 31 January 2023, www.mfa.gov.lv.

CENTRAL EUROPEAN INITIATIVE



After Russia started the war in 2022, the CEI became one of several side platforms for political and material support for Ukraine. In March 2022, member states decided to suspend Belarus due to its participation in the aggression—the CEI was the last regional platform in which EU countries maintained contacts with that state. The CEI, in a joint declaration, condemned Russia and expressed solidarity with Ukraine, as well as offered about €200,000 in humanitarian aid to it.⁸²

Notwithstanding the war in Ukraine, CEI member states declare their desire to reform the initiative to enhance its functionality. In February 2024, the first meeting of the Convention to Strengthen the CEI was held to develop a concept for its further operation.

⁸² Central European Initiative, “CEI Annual Report of the Secretary General 2022,” www.cei.int.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

1. Regional cooperation in Central Europe remains important

Regional cooperation after the systemic transformation in Central Europe, and 20 years after most countries in the region joined the European Union, remains one of the most important instruments for them to conduct international policy. It plays a subsidiary role in the pursuit of national interests vis-à-vis the membership of these countries in the EU and NATO, which these countries consider—along with bilateral alliances with the United States—to be the cornerstones of their own foreign and security policy. This approach of Central European states to regional cooperation did not change after Russia's 2022 full-scale attack on Ukraine and will continue.

2. Further weakening of the region's political cohesion

Hungary's intransigent stance regarding Russian aggression made the lack of common ground between the region's states even more apparent against the background of the war. Moreover, at times the weak cohesion with its partners was presented by other countries, for example in the letter published by leaders in the region in late February 2022, urging granting Ukraine candidate status for EU membership, which was not signed by not only the president of Hungary but also that of Romania. Changes in Slovakia's eastern and security policy, ongoing since the end of 2023, have been additionally reducing cohesion in the region. This will continue to prevent political consolidation of the region as a whole but may translate into intensified cooperation within certain formats.

3. Confirmation of previous divisions on Eastern policy issues

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not reorient the Eastern policies of any Central European country but only reinforced existing approaches. Thus, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and the Baltic States intensified and expanded their support for Ukraine, while Hungary continued to strengthen political and economic ties with Russia. Romania, traditionally restrained towards Ukraine, made an adjustment by trying to break down long-standing animosities. Changes in attitudes occurred in the case of individual politicians, such as Czech President Zeman. A redefinition of Eastern policy took place in Bulgaria and Slovakia, but in both cases, it followed parliamentary elections and changes of government.

4. Increased importance of defence cooperation in the region

A natural consequence of Russian aggression was the need for most Central European countries to intensify regional cooperation in defence and security policy. For this reason, formats that served this purpose were strengthened, in particular the B9 and "3+1". Some other platforms—most notably the V4—that were unable to cooperate in this area lost ground. As security will remain a key area of cooperation in Central Europe for the foreseeable future, these trends are likely to strengthen.

5. Crisis in and the reduced relevance of the Visegrad Group

The most visible change in the functioning of Central European cooperation formats has been the significant reduction in the operation of the Visegrad Group, in which political cooperation has almost completely disappeared. This is due to Hungary's pro-Russian and hostile policy towards Ukraine, which has had the effect of other partners distancing themselves from Hungary. Contributing to further divisions within the V4 is the reorientation of Slovakia's foreign policy,

following the election victory and the formation of a government by the Russia-sympathising Fico in October 2023, and the formation of the Tusk cabinet in Poland in December 2023. The latter criticises Orbán's policies not only towards Russia and Ukraine, but also his domestic and EU policies. The V4 summit of February 2024, attended by the new prime ministers, highlighted the fundamentally different approaches to eastern and security policy of Czechia and Poland on the one hand and Hungary and Slovakia on the other. The disappearing political cooperation within the Visegrad format is not irreversible, but real restoration of it will not be possible without a consensus of positions on fundamental issues. Therefore, the goal of Poland's V4 presidency beginning in mid-2024, like those of Slovakia and Czechia, will remain to sustain the group's minimal functioning.

6. Growing importance of the Bucharest Nine

In the face of war, the countries of the region—despite their divisions over Eastern policy—will maintain increased involvement in the B9. This serves to coordinate positions within NATO, a key member of which is the U.S.—the most important security partner for all countries in the format. Admittedly, due to Hungary's politics, the B9 cannot develop a regional position on the war that fully reflects the ambitions of most partners. In contrast, Hungarian indifference to NATO's actions in the mandate area has enabled increased B9 activity to coordinate regional demands and push them through the Alliance. This is especially true in the context of preparations for NATO summits, which decide, among other things, on how the allies will support the Eastern Flank. Since the B9 is a presidential format, it relies heavily on personal engagement and contacts between heads of state. Its main animators remain the presidents of the initiating countries—Duda and Iohannis. Both will finish their tenure after the presidential elections in Romania in late 2024 and Poland in spring 2025. Given the extent of the compromises developed on the national stage on foreign and security policy principles, these countries' involvement in the B9 format is unlikely to diminish.

7. Intensification of cooperation in the “3+1” format

The Russian aggression against Ukraine is causing a further intensification of cooperation in the “3+1” format. Its development is fostered by a strong sense of community of interest in the face of the threat from Russia, with which all the countries of this platform border. For the Baltic States, it allows the B3's voice to be strengthened by a major EU and NATO state. Poland, in turn, is further encouraged to become more involved in joint activities with the Baltic States by the *de facto* suspension of political cooperation in the V4, which has so far engaged its attention most in regional politics. The new government may continue its efforts to formalise Poland's cooperation with the Baltic States on the basis of the so-called Riga Declaration. Indeed, this may not only streamline the implementation of joint ventures and give them greater visibility but also help to bring Poland closer to the Nordic countries with which the Baltic States regularly cooperate.

8. Stable and multidimensional support for Ukraine

The vast majority of Central European countries will continue to support Ukraine, despite the cost to them. They advocate its membership in the EU and NATO, provide supplies of equipment and ammunition to the Ukrainian army and humanitarian support, and seek even greater international involvement for Ukraine. The exception among the governments' actions in all these aspects, except for humanitarian support, since the very beginning of the war is Hungary, which passively contests Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO, while in terms of

sending armaments, their position against it is shared by the new Slovak government, which is also opposed to Ukraine's membership in the Alliance.

9. Intensification of relations with the United States

The aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian war has resulted in the intensification of most Central European countries' relations with the United States and their desire to further develop them in favour of increasing American involvement in the region. This is particularly evident in the security field, which has been reflected in increased U.S. troop levels, as well as defence cooperation agreements and arms contracts. The exceptions in the region are Hungarian-U.S. relations, which have further deteriorated since February 2022, and Slovak-U.S. relations, which weakened since the change of government in Slovakia in late 2023. Regardless of strengthening regional and European security cooperation, the perception of the U.S. as a key partner in this area by most Central European countries will not change after the U.S. presidential election in 2024.

10. Increased distance in relations with China

Russian aggression against Ukraine and China's strengthening of strategic cooperation with Russia have further deteriorated most Central European countries' relations with China. In their policy towards it, they take into account the expectations of the U.S., which plays a key role in the region's security, as well as NATO's strategy and the position of the EC. After the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia left the "17+1" initiative, following Lithuania, which had done so a year earlier. As a result, this Chinese-led project of cooperation with Central European and Balkan countries has been reduced to the "14+1", and no summit has been held since the war started, so it will continue to lose ground. The exception among Central European countries again is Hungary, which continues to treat China uncritically as a desirable political and economic partner. In Slovakia, in turn, the prospect of closer relations with China emerged after Fico took power.



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POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
UL. WARECKA 1A, 00-950 WARSZAWA
TEL. (+48) 22 556 80 00
FAKS (+48) 22 556 80 99
PISM@PISM.PL
WWW.PISM.PL

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