



NAVIGATING NEW WATERS. RUSSIAN MILITARY AGGRESSION ON UKRAINE AND EFFECTS ON THE VISEGRAD GROUP

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Abstract:

In this article, the author examines the dynamic evolution of the Visegrad Group (V4) countries in response to Russia's war on Ukraine. Although V4 cooperation is deeply rooted in shared historical experiences, recent geopolitical challenges have revealed significant differences among member countries. Poland and the Czech Republic are strongly supportive of Ukraine and oriented towards NATO, while Hungary and Slovakia are more ambivalent, creating internal tensions. The author examines the factors that shape national identities and their influence on these divergent responses, highlighting that these factors have implications for the future of the V4 countries. The researcher used mixed methods to analyse official documents, political speeches and opinion poll data from the V4 countries, to examine the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on V4 unity and solidarity, and to consider the implications for the future of the V4 countries. The findings point to a fragile unity and growing concerns about the V4's ability to respond coherently to external threats.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, Russia, Ukraine, solidarity, national identity

Titulo en Español: Navegando en nuevas aguas: La agresión militar rusa en Ucrania y sus efectos en el Grupo de Visegrado.

Resumen:

En este artículo, el autor examina la evolución de los países del Grupo de Visegrado (V4) en respuesta a la guerra de Rusia contra Ucrania. Aunque la cooperación del V4 está profundamente arraigada en experiencias históricas compartidas, los recientes desafíos geopolíticos han puesto de manifiesto importantes diferencias entre los países miembros. Polonia y la República Checa apoyan firmemente a Ucrania y se orientan hacia la OTAN, mientras que Hungría y Eslovaquia son más ambivalentes, lo que crea tensiones internas. El autor examina los factores que conforman las identidades nacionales y su influencia en estas respuestas divergentes, destacando que estos factores tienen implicaciones para el futuro de los países V4. Para ello utiliza métodos mixtos para analizar documentos oficiales, discursos políticos y datos de encuestas de opinión de los países V4, con el fin de examinar el impacto de la invasión rusa de Ucrania en la unidad y solidaridad de los V4, y estudiar las implicaciones para el futuro de los países V4. Los resultados apuntan a una frágil unidad y a una creciente preocupación sobre la capacidad de los V4 para responder de forma coherente a las amenazas externas.

Palabras Clave: Grupo de Visegrado, Rusia, Ucrania, solidaridad, identidad nacional

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Introduction²

A historical analysis of the strategic cultures of the Visegrad Group (V4) countries^{3,4} suggests that their cooperation is deeply rooted in their shared experiences and historical contexts. However, circumstances have changed considerably since the formation of the V3 (later V4) in 1991, when (then) only three member states sought to harmonise their political, economic and security approaches. The current Russian aggression has prompted the V4 countries (especially Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) to revisit the original foundations of their cooperation and common identity; while some are willing to proactively support North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and European Union (EU) initiatives, others are struggling to balance their interests due to the historically established patterns of behaviour that underpin their strategic cultures. In this context, the key question is how the common identity of the V4 countries, on the one hand, and their identities as individual states, on the other, will evolve in the wake of these challenges, and what values will continue to shape the region in the future.

The historical context and shared values of the V4 countries play a crucial role in their cooperation. Shared identities and value systems, shaped by major historical events, have brought these states together in times of crisis.⁵ For example, the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine provided an opportunity for them to strengthen their sense of togetherness. However, the pursuit of national interests by some countries is currently undermining unity and cooperation. The key question for the future is whether the V4 countries will be able to unite to counter external threats, or whether they will diverge because of internal conflicts and political ambitions. Previous approaches to analysing the V4 countries have often ignored the subjective factors that shape their identities and values, but these may be crucial to understanding the evolution of regional relations. Expert surveys have shown that common threats can harmonise different national identities or create internal tensions and disagreements.⁶ At critical moments in history, it is particularly important for political leaders to respect and evaluate their political narratives and to continue to promote dialogue that fosters coherence and effective cooperation at the international level. Russia's aggression against Ukraine should have constituted a common threat and reinforced the need for defence and security cooperation, despite the various internal tensions that the V4 has faced since its inception, but it did not, and this has changed the dynamics of the V4 countries.⁷ This situation has contributed to a volatile political discourse on strategic orientation, with initially Slovakia, and later Poland and the Czech Republic, clearly siding with Ukraine, and Hungary, and later Slovakia, being more ambivalent. However, current political relations are characterised by persistent divisions within the group, raising concerns about its long-term stability and overall cohesion (with regard to the influence of Russia and China).

² This study was prepared within the framework of VEGA project n° 1/0578/23, "Cyber-social security threats in contemporary world: case study on threats on disinformation and emerging security threats in the societal context"

³ Cabada, Ladislav: "The Visegrad Cooperation in the Context of Other Central European Cooperation Formats", in *Politics in Central Europe*, Vol. 14, n° 2 (September 2018), pp. 165-179, DOI: 10.2478/pce-2018-0014

⁴ Ušiak, Jaroslav (2013): *Security and Strategic Culture of the Visegrad Group Countries*, Banská Bystrica, Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations, Matej Bel University.

⁵ Jagodzinski, Andrzej (2006): *Visegrad Group - Central European Constellation*, Bratislava, International Visegrad Fund.

⁶ Ušiak, Jaroslav: 'Slovakia in NATO: The Evolution of Security and Defence in the Era of Alliance Integration', in Kandrik, Matej; Tarasovič, Vladimír and Sýkora, Juraj (eds.)(2023): *Thirty Years of Slovak Security and Defence Policy*, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, pp. 73-88.

⁷ Ušiak, Jaroslav (2020): 'Visegrad Group as an Institution for Central European Cooperation: Ups and Downs of Small International Organisations', *Revista UNISCI*, n° 54 (October 2020), pp. 9-16, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-95>.



The first act of aggression was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Then, in 2022, Russia launched a massive military attack on Ukraine, which had a significant impact on the foreign policy priorities of individual V4 countries. Although the V4 were initially unanimous in their support for Ukraine⁸ (although Hungary was reluctant), developments following Slovakia's parliamentary elections in 2023 showed that unity is fragile and depends on the policy choices of the ruling coalitions, especially in the case of Slovakia, which is increasingly leaning towards Hungary's positive view of relations with Russia. Moreover, Russian aggression has sparked debates on the need for deeper integration in security and defence to ensure collective responses to external threats and to strengthen the sense of belonging among the V4 countries.⁹

In this article, the researcher aimed to answer the following questions: to what extent has the Russian invasion of Ukraine strengthened or weakened the unity and sense of belonging among the V4 countries, what factors have influenced the situation, and how will they affect the future of the group? In order to achieve this goal, the researcher used a combined methodological approach that included the analysis of official documents, politicians' speeches and media output, existing V4 studies and research, published interviews with key actors and experts, polling data, and media discourses and political speeches on Russia and Ukraine in each of the aforementioned countries.

In line with international relations studies that emphasise the importance of identity and constructive processes,^{10,11} the researcher departed from the traditional state-centric view of international relations and focused mainly on subjective factors such as identity and values that play a key role in shaping international cooperation. The researcher also focused on the discourses in each of the V4 countries (and among their political leaders) that have shaped their identities and value frameworks, as well as their relations with other V4 countries, NATO, the EU and Ukraine (based on opinion polls). This approach facilitated a better understanding of changing perceptions of identity, unity and belonging in the context of a turbulent international environment.¹² Previous studies and papers^{13,14} have shown that while EU and NATO membership, as well as globalisation processes in general, put pressure on national identities, shared values can at the same time strengthen the sense of belonging among the V4 countries. The analysis of discourses and ideologies allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of political attitudes and their impact on mutual cooperation in the context of Russian aggression.

⁸ Bugajski, Janusz and Assenova, Margarita: *Eurasian Disunion: Russia's Vulnerable Flanks*, June 2016, The Jamestown Foundation, at <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Eurasian-Disunion2.pdf>.

⁹ Mesežnikov, Grigorij: "Slovakia's Security and Defence Through the Optics of Public Opinion", in Kandrik, Matej; Tarasovič, Vladimír and Sýkora, Juraj (eds.) (2023): *Thirty Years of Slovak Security and Defence Policy*, Bratislava, Institute for Public Affairs, pp. 139-176.

¹⁰ Wendt, Alexander (1999): *Social theory of international politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Buzan, Barry, Wæver, Ole, & de Wilde, Jaap (1998): *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

¹² Peißker, Antonia; Cowburn, Mike; Klinger, Ulrike (2024): *Disinformation Resilience in Backsliding Democracies: Media Capture & Civil Society in the Visegrád Group*, at <https://mikecowburn.com/wp-content/uploads/Peisker-Cowburn-Klinger-Disinformation-Resilience-in-Backsliding-Democracies.pdf>

¹³ Orzelska-Stączek, Agnieszka (2024): *The Three Seas Initiative: An Original Concept of Regional Cooperation in Different Approaches*, Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, at <https://real.mtak.hu/200773/1/TheThreeSeasInitiativeebook.pdf#page=182>

¹⁴ Cameron, Ian: "East Versus West: European Strategic Autonomy and Transatlantic Ties", Report on European Transatlantic Autonomy, *Review of European and Transatlantic Affairs*, Vol.VIII, n° 1 (Spring 2024) at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/600a1d923babe5139207aed2/t/665a16eb20ec1d496b046ccf/1717180146690/RETA_2024_Final.pdf



2. Historical development of V4 unity and identity

The common historical experiences of the V4 countries created a basis for a shared identity and common values, but also fostered different perceptions of these experiences, which gradually emerged and intensified after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Habsburg monarchy and later communist control shaped cultural and social perceptions in the region, with some countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, experiencing traumatic historical events that continue to influence their internal identities.¹⁵ Subsequently, the fall of communism in 1989 opened up possibilities for new interpretations of attitudes and identities in the face of political and economic change, but also led to transformations and redefinitions of national values. EU and NATO membership also strengthened common attitudes, but internal contradictions and divergent geopolitical orientations re-emerged in the context of Russian aggression.¹⁶ This dynamic process needs to be analysed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the present and future development of the identities of the V4 countries and thus of the V4 identity.

2.1 Shared experiences and divergent traumas

The Habsburg Monarchy (covering Hungary and later Austria-Hungary) left a significant cultural and political legacy in Central Europe that has shaped the identities of the V4 countries. Under this monarchy, many national elites played a key role in shaping national consciousness, independence and democratic principles that reflected the multi-ethnic character and diversity of the region. In addition, shared historical traumas, such as military conflicts and totalitarian regimes, influenced the collective consciousness and redefined the national identities of the V4 countries. These experiences laid the foundation for common values, but also reinforced national differences.¹⁷ Now, in the current context of Russia's aggressive behaviour and geopolitical tensions due to Russian and Chinese influence, shared historical experiences have led countries in new directions that can potentially influence the further development of the V4, deepen historical differences and either contribute to greater regional integration or trigger further fragmentation.

The national identities of the V4 countries have been deeply influenced not only by their communist legacies, which are also reflected in their cultural understandings of national self-determination. First, the collapse of the socialist bloc and, second, the transition to democratic systems have led to complex redefinitions of national identities, which have had to adapt to the new realities of pluralism.¹⁸ Third, EU and NATO membership has generally strengthened integration and cooperation in the region, but the communist legacy continues to leave its mark on perceptions of cohesion and mutual trust among people who align themselves with coherent blocs such as the V4, the EU or NATO. This context is important because it has formed the basis of the V4 countries' understanding of collective defence and their common geopolitical orientation. In the context of Russian aggression, however, there seems to be a greater need to overcome historical traumas and build a shared identity rather than formulate individual national interpretations.

The post-1989 transformation of the V4 brought about the first differences between states, even though many shared common experiences of communism and different historical traumas and their political interpretations led to different identity narratives. This

¹⁵ Ušiak, Jaroslav (2013), *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Kucharczyk, Jacek and Mesežnikov, Grigorij (2015): 'The V4 in Comparative Perspective,' in Kucharczyk, Jacek and Mesežnikov, Grigorij (eds.): *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, Prague and Warsaw, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 1st ed., pp. 195-206.

¹⁷ Forsythe, David P. (2000): *Human Rights and Comparative Foreign Policy*, New Delhi, Manas Publications.

¹⁸ Hann, Chris (2019): *Repatriating Polanyi: Market Society in the Visegrád States*, Budapest, Central European University Press.



transformation not only led to the redefinition of national identities, but also meant that post-communist countries had to cope with new challenges and adapt to democratic norms. EU and NATO membership has reopened the debate on national sovereignty (against the background of calls for a collective identity).¹⁹ However, as this article will show, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced the V4 countries to reassess their priorities, values, national attitudes and positions on regional cooperation.

The historical traumas of the V4 countries are reflected in their contemporary national identities. The collapse and break-up of the common state of Czechoslovakia in 1993 also left Hungary, deeply affected by the Trianon Treaty²⁰, with a permanent loss of identity and territory, while Poland and Czechoslovakia have been affected by partitions (1980s in Poland and 1968 in Czechoslovakia), occupation and totalitarianism, which are key elements of their collective memory.²¹ These traumas have had a significant impact on how these different V4 nations (politicians and also citizens) perceive each other, as well as on their responses to external threats, as exemplified by Russian aggression. These differences in the perception of past traumas significantly complicate the development of mutual unity and trust among the V4 countries and undermine their cooperation in crisis situations.²² Although solidarity with Ukraine was strengthened by the shock and sense of belonging with Ukrainians, historical trauma hindered the emergence of a unified approach to the common challenges posed by this aggression.

2.2 The impact of EU and NATO membership on V4 countries' collective identity

In the face of growing geopolitical tensions, especially following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the collective identity of the V4 countries is undergoing a significant transformation. On the one hand, EU and NATO membership has strengthened the security guarantees of the V4 countries and provided them with a common basis for coordination; on the other hand, it has also led to a polarisation of views on external threats. One of the unifying principles of membership in these organisations is unity against external threats, such as the gas crisis of 2009 or the migration crisis of 2015. Thus, one might have expected Russia's expansionist practices to foster a collective sense of unity and identity. However, countries' different approaches and responses to the current crisis, based on historical traumas and national preferences, in particular regarding the reception of Ukrainian refugees and levels of defensiveness, may exacerbate the divergence of identities.²³ It is therefore necessary to examine how these dynamics are likely to affect the future of the V4 and the EU.

Increasing globalisation and post-communist transformation have changed the national identities of the V4 countries. These processes often lead to conflicts between conservative and progressive politicians, as individual countries try to adapt to global trends while preserving their historical and cultural (i.e. conservative) characteristics. Integration also leads to the homogenisation of values and identities, which naturally raises concerns about the dissolution of national specificities and their identities. This process opens space for new discourses on identity that take into account values and social factors, while strengthening democratic values

¹⁹ Kucharczyk, Jacek and Mesežnikov, Grigorij (2015): *op. cit.*, pp. 195-206.

²⁰ The Treaty of Trianon brought about territorial changes that included the recognition of Hungary's new borders after the First World War, when Hungary lost a significant part of its territory.

²¹ Kapsa, Izabela; Lubik-Reczek, Natasza; and Ušiak, Jaroslav: "War in Ukraine from the Perspective of Polish and Slovak University Students," *Athenaeum Polish Political Science Studies*, Vol. 75, n°3 (2022), pp. 270-287, DOI: 10.15804/athena.2022.75.16.

²² Kucharczyk, Jacek and Mesežnikov, Grigorij (2015): *op. cit.*, pp. 195-206.

²³ O'Hanlon, Michael E. (2017): *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 176 pages.



and civic participation.²⁴ The impact of these changes is evident both in the political sphere and in everyday life, in their national identities.²⁵

The historical contexts and geopolitical and foreign policy orientations of the V4 countries have changed dramatically,²⁶ reflecting the dynamics of the international environment and internal political and other pressures. From the Habsburg Monarchy, when national identities first began to take shape, to the communist period, when national sentiments and identities were severely curtailed, geopolitical preferences have changed mainly due to external factors and domestic political processes. Today, Poland and the Czech Republic, on the one hand, and Hungary and Slovakia, on the other, are becoming increasingly antagonistic. Russia's war with Ukraine is a war that can either strengthen solidarity and unity among the V4 countries or deepen the existing differences in their national identities, and these processes require thorough analysis and reflection.

3. The impact of Russian aggression towards Ukraine on the common identity of V4 countries

Historically, the V4 countries have had different attitudes and priorities towards common threats, as Górká²⁷ suggested. In recent years, they have become acutely aware of growing cyber threats and have sought to develop common strategies to strengthen cyber resilience. Kaliaiev and Shapoval²⁸ pointed out that the need for deeper integration in defence policy (joint protection of Slovakian skies by Hungary and the Czech Republic) is raising awareness of common threats in the region.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has created unprecedented conditions that have forced the V4 countries to rethink their common security paradigm and the pursuit of national interests within an integrated grouping. These events have contributed to significant changes in the identities of the V4 countries, leading to a weakened sense of belonging among them in the face of common threats. Despite the countries' different (but shared) historical traumas and geopolitical orientations, they have a strong ambition to ensure collective defence against external threats. However, political developments in individual countries, especially in Hungary and after the elections in Slovakia (post-2023), illustrate their different attitudes towards EU and NATO action against Russia. This raises questions about the integrity and long-term future of the V4 and its shared sense of solidarity and cooperation.²⁹

The different approaches taken by leaders such as Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán reflect their preferences and citizens' feelings about the values of the EU and NATO, with many citizens recognising the importance of

²⁴ Mesežnikov, Grigorij: 'Slovakia's Security and Defence Through the Optics of Public Opinion', in Kandrik, Matej; Tarasovič, Vladimír and Sýkora, Juraj (eds.) (2023): *Thirty Years of Slovak Security and Defence Policy*, Bratislava, Institute for Public Affairs, pp. 139-177.

²⁵ Fukuyama, Francis (2018): *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

²⁶ Ušiak, Jaroslav, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Górká, Marek: "Combating cyber threats as an element of the Visegrad Group's cybersecurity policy," *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Vol. 20, n° 1 (2022), pp. 121-142, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36874/RIESW.2022.1.7>.

²⁸ Kaliaiev, Andrii O. and Shapoval, Oleksandr M. (2020), "Institutional problems of EU security and defense in the context of expanding cooperation with Ukraine," *Scientific Bulletin of the National Forestry University of Ukraine*, at <https://epa.nltu.edu.ua/index.php/journal/article/view/79>

²⁹ Kucharczyk, Jacek and Mesežnikov, Grigorij (2015): *op. cit.*, pp. 195-206.



common defence against or solidarity with Russia.³⁰ However, opinion polls³¹ have revealed divergent attitudes among the populations, with the Czech Republic and Poland clearly supporting the provision of military assistance to Ukraine and others showing scepticism.³² The divergent attitudes of citizens and politicians have a direct impact on the exercise of power by governments in each country and can either strengthen or weaken V4 cooperation, making these attitudes and political choices key issues for the future of regional stability.³³

3.1 Strengthening or weakening unity and solidarity regarding Russian aggression towards Ukraine

After 1991, the V4 countries tried to strengthen their cooperation in order to face common challenges within the group (migration crises or gas crises). However, the current situation regarding Russia shows diverging positions that undermine their sense of unity and togetherness. For example, Hungary has adopted a pro-Russian stance, while Slovakia has actively supported Ukraine until 2023, suggesting a contradiction between solidarity and national interests. Thus, while there may be official solidarity within the V4, deep differences in political opinions and priorities tend to emerge in real life.³⁴ Politicians are often ambivalent about military assistance and involvement in the conflict, and about attitudes towards Russian influence.³⁵ This situation highlights the need for a new approach to identity and values that can strengthen the unity of the V4 countries in times of crisis.

In 2024, Russia's attack on Ukraine triggered significant shifts in perceptions of national identity and political values within the V4 countries - with Slovak and Hungarian political elites perceptually reinterpreting values such as collective security and sovereignty. For example, statements by Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán expressing scepticism about Western initiatives, such as sanctions against Russia, may indicate their respective shifts away from a pro-European orientation towards populist and pro-Russian narratives.³⁶ Opinion polls have shown that support for NATO and the EU remains strong in the Czech Republic and Poland, but is declining in Hungary and Slovakia (while pro-Russian support is rising).^{37,38} Such contradictory attitudes have a direct impact on the countries' domestic political situations and government policies on the one hand, and on the jointly promoted V4 foreign policy priorities on the other (i.e. the aggression has in many ways undermined V4 cohesion and unity).³⁹

³⁰ COMM D's Unit POM: *Public Opinion on Russia's War Against Ukraine and Its Impact in Europe*, European 23 February 2024, at

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2022/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine/en-public-opinion-on-the-war-against-ukraine-20240223.pdf>

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Thomson, Catarina P.; Mader, Matthias; Münchow, Felix et al. (2023): "European public opinion: united in supporting Ukraine, divided on the future of NATO," *International Affairs*, Vol.9, n°6 (November 2023), pp. 2485–2500, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad241>.

³³ Beck, Robert: "The Visegrad Four: From Troubled to Broken," 3 April 2024, Foreign Policy Research Institute, at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/04/visegrad-four-from-troubled-to-broken/>

³⁴ Mesežnikov, Grigorij, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-177.

³⁵ Kucharczyk, Jacek and Mesežnikov, Grigorij, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-206.

³⁶ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

³⁷ Bidochko, Lesia (2024): "Fico and Orbán's anti-Ukrainian consensus: How statements from Ukraine's neighbors align with Russian propaganda," *Detector Media*, 25 January 2024, at <https://en.detector.media/post/fico-and-orbans-anti-ukrainian-consensus-how-statements-from-ukraines-neighbors-align-with-russian-propaganda>

³⁸ GLOBSEC Trends 2024, at

<https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/GLOBSEC%20TRENDS%202024.pdf>; GLOBSEC Trends 2023, at <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>

³⁹ Beck, Robert, *op. cit.*



3.2 Different reactions to Russian aggression towards V4 countries

The different political responses to Russia's aggression against Ukraine reveal significant divisions within the V4 countries, and the views of political elites and government policies are heavily influenced by populist narratives. For example, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico have publicly questioned the legitimacy of providing military aid to Ukraine and advocated concessions to Moscow, undermining the institutional values of the EU and NATO.⁴⁰ However, the Czech Republic and Poland have expressed strong support for Ukraine, and even Poland has played a proactive role in defending European values, as evidenced by Polish government actions in support of Ukraine and opinion polls showing continued support for military action in Kiev.⁴¹ These differences suggest that Russia's aggression has not only provoked conflicting political approaches, with some countries increasing their integration with the West and others tending to pursue their own interests.⁴²

As a result, the political responses of the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Hungary to Russian aggression differ significantly, with major implications for the V4's internal and external positions. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has adopted an à la carte policy towards the EU and NATO, is openly sceptical about providing military assistance to Ukraine and prefers to negotiate with Moscow, undermining regional unity on security initiatives.⁴³ On the same side of the spectrum, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico has adopted an ambivalent stance, reflecting populist tendencies in Slovakia, while at the same time expressing a hard-nosed pragmatism about European cooperation and support for European activities.⁴⁴ Opinion polls suggest that while most of the Slovak public supports EU and NATO membership, the Hungarian population is more cautious about providing military aid to Ukraine, creating a divide between pro-European and pro-Russian sentiments in both countries.⁴⁵ These differences in attitudes are reflected in the V4's specific national policy choices, which can either strengthen or weaken cooperation within the V4 and have long-term consequences for the future integration and stability of the European region.⁴⁶

Unity and solidarity, as well as the background of V4 values, are important concepts for examining Poland's and the Czech Republic's support for Ukraine in the context of Russian aggression. Both countries appear to be in favour of deepening European integration and ties with NATO, although their political elites and government policies often emphasise the need for collective defence and the protection of democratic values.⁴⁷ Equally significant, opinion polls show that citizens in the Czech Republic and Poland generally support the provision of military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine; in Poland, 94% of respondents strongly supported NATO membership, and this view was also widespread in the Czech Republic.^{48,49} However, these differences in attitudes and values suggest that while the Czech Republic and Poland appear to be strong supporters of Ukraine, Orbán's Hungary and Fico's Slovakia often express

⁴⁰ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*

⁴² Ehl, Martin: "Walking the tightrope: Orbán, Fico, and the future of central European diplomacy," European Council on Foreign Relations, 9 January 2024, at <https://ecfr.eu/article/walking-the-tightrope-orban-fico-and-the-future-of-central-european-diplomacy/>

⁴³ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Ehl, Martin, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Krastev, Ivan and Leonard, Mark: *The Meaning of Sovereignty: Ukrainian and European Views of Russia's War on Ukraine*, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2024, at <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/The-meaning-of-sovereignty-ukrainian-and-european-views-of-russias-war-on-ukraine-v2.pdf>

⁴⁷ Thomson, Catarina P.; Mader, Matthias; Münchow, Felix et al., *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Krastev, Ivan and Leonard, Mark (2024): *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Beck, Robert, *op. cit.*



an aggression that undermines V4 cohesion and complicates responses to Russian military actions.^{50, 51} These divergent approaches may have lasting consequences for future cooperation between the V4 countries, forcing them to rethink their common policy towards external threats.

3.3 The impact of public opinion on national policies regarding Russia

Public opinion plays an important role in shaping government policy in modern states. Politicians try to adapt to the mood of society, but they also influence it. Recently, it has been shown⁵² that fluctuating public attitudes can significantly influence government responses to foreign crises and security issues, such as Russian aggression against Ukraine. Various surveys have shown⁵³ that support for Ukraine has become an important issue for V4 citizens, with a significant proportion of the population in countries such as Slovakia and Poland willing to help. Nevertheless, public opinion is not always united; the different historical and cultural contexts of V4 countries are evident in their responses to the refugee crisis,⁵⁴ highlighting how internal tensions and divergent views between countries can affect consensus-driven policy-making processes and strengthen or weaken the V4 countries' sense of unity and belonging.

European integration and NATO membership are now becoming important aspects of the V4 countries' identity development, especially in the context of Russia's aggressive behaviour. Politicians in Central Europe, including the Slovak and Hungarian governments, stress the importance of embedding unity and values in European and transatlantic structures, thus helping to increase resilience against external threats.⁵⁵ On the one hand, opinion polls show growing support for NATO and its defence mechanisms (although there are signs of declining support in Slovakia and Poland, for example), with an emphasis on solidarity with Ukraine.⁵⁶ On the other hand, conflicting attitudes towards Russia and disinformation campaigns tend to undermine the internal cohesion of the V4 countries, with leaders such as Robert Fico and Viktor Orbán promoting pro-Kremlin narratives and raising concerns about the preservation of the EU's value base.⁵⁷ The question of whether V4 cooperation should be based on shared values or pragmatic interests will be a key consideration for the future direction of regional policy.⁵⁸

Despite this unified position on European action, the V4 countries have shown considerable differences in their assessments of the threat posed by Russia and their respective policy responses. Foreign policy statements by politicians, especially in Hungary and Slovakia, suggest pragmatic nationalist (rather than integrationist) approaches, with the apparent primary aim of minimising confrontation with Moscow, even at the cost of reducing support for Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic structures.⁵⁹ Public opinion polls have shown that while strong support for NATO and the EU prevails in the Czech Republic and Poland, sceptical views are emerging in Hungary and Slovakia and have been reflected in these countries' political choices.⁶⁰ These

⁵⁰ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

⁵² GLOBSEC (2024), *op. cit.*

⁵³ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

GLOBSEC (2023), *op. cit.*

GLOBSEC (2024), *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Kapsa, Izabela; Lubik-Reczek, Natasza; and Ušiak, Jaroslav, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-287.

⁵⁵ Benson, Robert: "Hungary's Democratic Backsliding Threatens the Trans-Atlantic Security Order," Center for American Progress, 22 January 2024, at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/hungarys-democratic-backsliding-threatens-the-trans-atlantic-security-order/>

⁵⁶ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Ehl, Martin, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*



diverse attitudes have limited cooperation within V4 countries, while Russian aggression continues to cause tensions within the V4 coalition.⁶¹

The apparent vulnerability of the V4 countries to external threats, especially in the context of Russian aggression, underlines the need to strengthen cooperation and integration within NATO. Political elites in Poland and the Czech Republic emphasise collective defence and solidarity, which are valued not only in terms of security but also in terms of the identity of the peoples of the region. In Hungary and Slovakia, however, there is scepticism about military support for Ukraine and NATO, which undermines the unity of the V4.^{62,63} Opinion polls have shown that solidarity with Ukraine is more pronounced in the Czech Republic (79%) and Poland (94%), while negative attitudes towards Ukraine prevail in Hungary and Slovakia.⁶⁴ These divergent responses to Russia's aggression suggest that political and public opinion is often influenced by populist narratives and disinformation campaigns (and vice versa), which also affect the strategic choices of V4 governments and thus the values that their citizens and governments hold with regard to European integration and NATO membership.^{65,66}

In recent years, public debate within the V4 countries has focused on various substantive issues related to Russian aggression, with the attitudes of political leaders proving to be a significant factor influencing cooperation on collective security. Politicians such as the Prime Minister of Hungary and the Prime Minister of Slovakia have openly questioned pro-European initiatives and emphasised the need for a 'balanced' foreign policy or a policy covering all four cardinal points, thereby reinforcing scepticism towards NATO and the EU.⁶⁷ In contrast, the Czech Republic and Poland support military assistance and a joint EU-NATO response to Russian aggression. This is also reflected in public opinion polls, which show a strong consensus on the need to support Ukraine.⁶⁸ These contradictions between the values and actual actions of individual V4 countries also undermine unity within NATO and the EU, leading to the risk that Russian aggression will deepen existing divisions and threaten future V4 cooperation.⁶⁹

Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 affected the collective identity of the V4 - its understanding of itself. This event not only exposed the fractured relations between the V4 countries. Although some countries, such as Slovakia and Poland, have shown solidarity with Ukraine, Hungary has adopted an ambivalent stance, further exacerbating the existing internal tensions within the V4.⁷⁰ As a result, the identities of individual V4 countries may diversify, with shifts in policy preferences and public opinion leading to a weakening of V4 collectivism. How countries balance their national interests with their collective commitments to the alliances of which they are members will also be crucial.⁷¹ If the V4 countries' identities cannot provide a strong basis for cooperation, the group risks facing an uncertain future with limited relevance on the international stage.

⁶¹ Beck, Robert, *op. cit.*

⁶² COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Beck, Robert, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ Ehl, Martin, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Thomson, Catarina P.; Mader, Matthias; Münchow, Felix et al., *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ Benson, Robert, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ Beck, Robert, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ Mesežnikov, Grigorij, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-177.

⁷¹ O'Hanlon, Michael E., *op. cit.*



3.4 The impact of historical and contemporary narratives on contemporary values and identities

The historical context highlights the importance of civil society in the process of shaping public values in the V4 countries. In times of great change and crisis, such as the current Russian war with Ukraine, civil society and civil society organisations act as important channels for mobilising the public and facilitating the expression of collective values such as solidarity and empathy. Their actions contribute to the transformation of perceived identity, thereby strengthening democratic principles and promoting active citizenship.⁷² In addition, civil society creates a space for dialogue that allows reflection on value preferences and ultimately contributes to deepening shared commitments to overcoming external threats.⁷³ This lays the basis for consensus-based solutions, which are essential for the further development of cooperation between V4 countries.

In the context of the future development of the V4, it is important to consider how societal values are changing in response to current geopolitical challenges, including Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Based on historical traumas and group attitudes, the V4 countries are gradually coming into conflict as they seek to strengthen their collective identity at a time when strong internal and external factors, such as nationalism and pro-Russian narratives, are at work, undermining their overall sense of unity. As Kovalchuk⁷⁴ and Connor⁷⁵ argue, these states' identity formation is based not only on historical hardships but also on contemporary geopolitical issues, suggesting that internal rivalries and external threats will continue to influence the countries' national consciousness and perceptions of collective identity. Maintaining cooperation and a collective identity means that the V4 countries will have to adapt to dynamic changes in an ever-changing European and global environment. It may be that collective security difficulties will reinforce existing shared values of collective defence and mutual solidarity among the V4 countries. However, internal disagreements over migration, energy and relations with Russia could lead to further polarisation, weakening the V4's ability to act in unison.

4. Future scenarios for the V4

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has had a profound impact on political discourses within the V4 countries, provoking different reactions and value divisions. Although some leaders, such as Viktor Orbán and the current Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, have expressed scepticism about supporting Ukraine and have spoken out inappropriately against pro-Western values, countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic have remained firmly anchored in the transatlantic relationship and the provision of military support to Kiev.⁷⁶ Opinion polls have shown growing support for NATO and the EU among V4 citizens,⁷⁷ but there are contradictions., as evidenced by declining support for military assistance in Slovakia and Hungary. Shared values such as security and sovereignty have become subject to political manipulation, with Russian aggression undermining the perceived unity and increasing tensions between the V4 countries.⁷⁸ These dynamics have weakened cooperation at the regional level,

⁷² Mesežnikov, Grigorij, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-177.

⁷³ Kucharczyk, Jacek and Mesežnikov, Grigorij (eds.), *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ Kovalchuk, Vitaliy: "Ukrainian constitutionalism in the conditions of war: the struggle for values, rights and identity," *Visnik Nacional'nogo universitetu «Lvivska politehnika»*. *Seria: Uridicni nauki*, Vol. 10, n° 3(39) (2023), pp. 250-258, at <https://science.lpnu.ua/law/all-volumes-and-issues/volume-10-number-3-39-2023/ukrainian-constitutionalism-conditions-war>

⁷⁵ Connor, Walker (1994): *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, Princeton, Princeton University Press

⁷⁶ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Beck, Robert, *op. cit.*



resulting in a split between a pro-Ukrainian bloc and a more sceptical grouping, highlighting the fragility of unity in the face of external threats.⁷⁹

4.1 Implications for future V4 cooperation and European and transatlantic security

In the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is becoming increasingly clear that political statements in the V4 countries reveal inconsistencies in the countries' value systems and attitudes towards European integration and the transatlantic relationship. For example, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and his Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orbán have openly expressed their distrust of the West's support for Ukraine and its goal of peace, undermining the acceptance of shared EU and NATO values.⁸⁰ Opinion polls have shown declining support for military and financial aid to Ukraine, particularly in Hungary, where views on continuing such aid are extremely negative.⁸¹ These divergent responses to Russian aggression not only undermine the unity of the V4 countries, but also make future cooperation on European security more difficult. Increasing polarisation could weaken coalition capabilities against external threats, which is a particularly serious problem for Western-oriented countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland.⁸² If the V4 were to transform into a looser community, the countries would probably begin to focus on ad hoc forms of cooperation, creating a de facto fragmented regional political scene.

4.2 Scenario 1: Increased unity, solidarity, and cooperation

As noted above, the common history of the V4 countries over more than a century has provided the basis for strengthening unity and integration, especially with regard to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Following the Russian President's visit to Hungary in 2023, relations between the V4 countries appeared to be polarised; however, an assessment of the V4 countries' reactions and support for NATO and EU activities suggests that the common threat of Russian expansionism could serve as a catalyst for deeper cooperation. Shared historical experiences, including similar challenges in the recent past, can stimulate both political and economic integration and create a stronger bloc against external threats. If the V4 can organise itself effectively, overcome differences in the values of individual governments and coordinate its military initiatives, it will not only strengthen its regional position but also contribute to stability within the EU. However, the current situation shows that this scenario is not being realised in practice.

4.3 Scenario 2: Weakened unity and solidarity—greater divergence and disintegration

In recent years, mutual support among the V4 countries has weakened, mainly due to diverging political priorities and publicly stated positions. After the Russian attack on Ukraine, the V4 countries reacted differently to the situation, leading to growing tensions and misunderstandings among them. In the case of the Slovak Republic (after the 2023 elections), there were visible signs of a turn towards bland rhetoric directed at Hungary, revealing deep divisions in foreign policy perceptions. Due to these dynamics, it seems that the degree of cooperation and political solidarity within the V4 may be weakened and reshaped, taking into account separate national interests. Thus, the specificities and divergent political attitudes of the V4 countries, together with the public opinion of their citizens, appear to be obstacles to effective collective decision-making and stability within the community, thus undermining its ability to respond to common challenges and threats. This tendency appears to be fundamental

⁷⁹ Ehl, Martin, *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ COMM D's Unit POM, *op. cit.*

⁸¹ Bidochko, Lesia, *op. cit.*

⁸² Beck, Robert, *op. cit.*



and is currently shared by two antagonistic blocs (the Czech Republic and Poland vs. Slovakia and Hungary).

4.4 Scenario 3: Even looser V4 cooperation—confirmation of the status quo

In this scenario, the visible divergence within the V4 has the potential to transform the V4 into a somewhat looser coalition, allowing individual states to pursue their own national interests and priorities without strict commitments. It should be borne in mind, however, that the V4's form of cooperation is non-institutionalised and already provides scope for cooperation only in areas where there is common agreement.⁸³ As experts have pointed out, differences in the assessment of security threats and different responses to the energy crisis support this concept of a looser grouping that emphasises cooperation in specific areas, such as economic, energy or environmental initiatives.⁸⁴ A looser grouping would not only adapt to current geopolitical realities, but would also enhance the possibilities for strengthening regional identities within looser cooperation structures. The second scenario, involving a suspension of cooperation (as has happened in the past), would make it difficult to increase solidarity and unity within the V4, except through renewed commitment. If such a commitment emerges, unity may still be possible.

5. Conclusion

It is evident that the geopolitical orientations of the V4 countries are under constant reassessment, with historically rooted differences and acute threats shaping their strategies towards the outside world. The results of this research suggest that the massive Russian offensive against Ukraine since February 2022 has struck at the heart of the V4 countries' commonality. Cooperation, which could be at the forefront of shaping regional responses to crisis situations, has come under pressure from the contradictory aspects of each country's foreign policy.⁸⁵ The pressure to strengthen energy security and to deal with the challenges of Russian expansion logically requires greater unity and cooperative action among the V4 countries, especially in relation to NATO and the EU.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, contrasting approaches to sanctions against Russia and not only military support for Ukraine show that the V4 is experiencing internal tensions that could reduce its future effectiveness in the international arena.⁸⁷

Historical experience and current analysis suggest that Russia's aggression has had a profound effect on the collective identity and sense of belonging of the V4 countries. Differences in the countries' political stances and strategic priorities have significantly weakened their ability to act as a single entity on the international stage. Although support is divided in Hungary and Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland have sided strongly with Ukraine, exacerbating existing tensions within the V4. The factors behind these differences among the V4 countries stem from historical traumas and different geopolitical orientations and values, which are the hallmarks of diversity.⁸⁸ It follows that the future of the V4 will depend on the ability of the V4 countries to overcome these contradictions and conceive a new, strengthened identity that is resilient to external threats.

⁸³ Ušiak, Jaroslav, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-16.

⁸⁴ Kapsa, Izabela; Lubik-Reczek, Natasza; and Ušiak, Jaroslav, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-287.

⁸⁵ Mesežnikov, Grigorij, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-177.

⁸⁶ Nguyen, Huan Huu; Nguyen, Phuc Van; Ngo, Vu Minh: "Energy security and the shift to renewable resources: the case of Russia-Ukraine war," *The Extractive Industries and Society*, Vol.17 (March 2024) Article 101442, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2024.101442>.

⁸⁷ Alexandra Gritz. "Gas and energy security in Germany and central and eastern Europe." *Energy Policy*, 2023, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301421523004706>

⁸⁸ Kapsa, Izabela; Lubik-Reczek, Natasza; and Ušiak, Jaroslav, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-287.



The complex dynamics within and between the V4 countries are clearly reflected in the current geopolitical challenges posed by Russia's aggressive actions. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has opened up opportunities for deeper discussions about identity and belonging among the V4 countries - a situation that aptly illustrates not only common concerns but also existing tensions in the countries' relations with each other. The different responses to the military conflict have highlighted the risks of fragmentation, even of the traditionally strong cooperation between the V4 countries. What was once a stabiliser is becoming a source of controversy over energy security and migration, as illustrated by divisions over the reception of Ukrainian refugees.⁸⁹ The consequence of this division is a weakening of policy coherence in the region within the V4 countries, with increasingly divergent approaches to European integration and defence commitments.⁹⁰ If the V4 countries fail to deal adequately with this crisis, it could have serious implications for their future and for the overall stability of Central Europe.⁹¹ At the same time, new initiatives are emerging in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Three Seas Project, which has the potential to create a dynamically changing context that will require the V4 to review and adapt their long-term strategies.⁹² In conclusion, it will be necessary to develop new frameworks for cooperation among the V4 countries that take into account the complexity of the current challenges and make effective use of the synergies among the V4 countries.

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⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-287.

⁹⁰ Cameron, Ian (2024): *op. cit.*

⁹¹ Mesežnikov, Grigorij (2023): *op. cit.*, pp. 139-177.

⁹² Kucharczyk, Jacek and Mesežnikov, Grigorij (eds.) (2015): *op. cit.*



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