

# Is the Visegrad Group disintegrating? A case study on the diversification of the Visegrad states' EU enlargement policy since 2014

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## Abstract

*This contribution asks to which extent it is correct to say that Visegrad Four (V4) states' governments today have a more differentiated approach to the enlargement of the European Union (EU) compared to ten years ago. An older story of V4 functioning as a role-model concerning transformation and integration is still present in the framework and appearance in the regional format Visegrad Group. The various crises of the 2010s contributed to the fact that in parallel, considerable ad-hoc group or individual action is also prevalent. A qualitative method will be applied, based on the analysis of primary documents and on an initial review of the research literature on the subject. Research on V4 and Western Balkans (WB) states will be presented along three levels of governance: (1) the regional level as expressed in the V4 format; (2) Visegrad member states in coalition (alternative regional formats, ad-hoc/thematic coalitions within and beyond the region); (3) individual action of a V4 government. The conclusion reflects critically on the possible consequences of changes happening at all three levels involved. In particular, the ongoing war of Russia against Ukraine is currently dividing the Visegrad states and could lead to further disintegration of the Visegrad Group.*

**Keywords:** EU enlargement, Visegrad Group, Central Europe, regional cooperation, minilateralism

## Introduction: the liberal order and its discontents in East Central Europe

A long-standing discourse about East Central Europe (ECE) deals with the successful transformation to democracy and a competitive market economy, a process that led to a full integration into Euro-Atlantic structures within roughly fifteen years, starting with the peaceful revolutions of 1989. The goal of membership, first in the US-led defence alliance North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and then in the

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European Union (EU) became a reality by 1999 and 2004 for the Visegrad Four states (V4): Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, as well for the three Baltic states Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and for Slovenia. Romania and Bulgaria could integrate in 2004 (NATO) and 2007 (EU), likewise Croatia (2009 and 2013, respectively). The achievement is outstanding because of the high conditionalities set by the EU, which the applicants could fulfil. The record of EU integration is mixed in the Bulgarian and Romanian cases. The two states were forced to constantly undergo an EU “Cooperation and Verification Mechanism” ever since joining the EU club. Overall, the then new member states were seen as “role-models” of integration. The proximity of Central Europe and the Balkans and discourses on the identities of ECE and Southeast Europe reinforce this notion (Cabada, 2020, pp. 48-54; Balazs, 2020, pp. 13-14; Seebass, 2022, pp. 2-3). Studies of the early years of ECE membership show the new EU members continued to adjust and adhered in most instances to a rather passive role as decision-takers in the EU. Very rarely they stood out as decision-shapers or even agenda-setters nor were they adopting roles as veto-players.

The “transformation” narrative, however, has slowly faded with the everyday routine of membership of V4 states in the EU during the 2010s. A turning point in V4 discourse happened around 2014 and being full-fledged EU members for ten years by then, the V4 states did not want to be labelled as “new member-states” any more. The change of self-perception opened up avenues for more self-conscious and courageous roles in decision-making. Since 2015, one can observe far more often edges and corners in the approaches of the Visegrad Four states, which is due to three factors.

First, full membership in the EU and NATO provided essential external stabilisation. This proved paramount. Populist rhetoric and action in V4 countries is by now exempt from severe conditionalities that applied earlier when the country was an applicant. Second, the multiple crises of the 2010s contributed as a facilitating factor for the more self-confident roles and coming to power of populist politicians, who seriously question the post-war consensus of a rules-based liberal international order. As to V4 governments, it was clearly the refugee crisis of 2015 that acted as the most important single facilitator of the primacy of national interests (see Griessler, 2020b, pp. 296-298). The inability of the EU to protect its external borders and the rifts between EU member states on a compulsory relocation scheme of recognized refugees dominated the political discourse and soon the judges of the European Court of Justice. Orbán’s Hungary and Fico’s Slovakia lost their cases in the judiciary, but remained victorious politically, along with the two other V4 governments, with successful blockades against further Europeanisation of this policy area. As a consequence, an EU wide “Common European Asylum System” has not become a reality ever since. Third, a very lenient posture and delayed action of the EU Commission (and of member states) concerning the enforcement of the EU Rule of Law mechanism in the cases of Hungary and Poland has led to an ambiguous situation in EU politics and governance. Despite steady and strong criticism of the European Parliament (e.g. the Tavares and Sargentini Reports, 2013

and 2018, respectively) and of civil rights groups, the EU has continually assisted in co-financing the steady growth of illiberal semi-authoritarian regimes through generous financial support in the frame of EU cohesion funding, which furnishes annual budgets of Visegrad states with four to five percent of their spending's.

## **1. Research question, hypotheses, line of argument**

This contribution asks to which extent it is correct to say V4 states' governments today have a more differentiated approach to EU enlargement compared to ten years ago. Since the EU accession of the Visegrad states nearly twenty years ago, the four countries were capable of rightfully generating a story of serving as a role-model concerning transformation and integration. Hence, the V4 tailored their cooperation scheme, "Visegrad Group," along these lines. However, in parallel, considerable ad-hoc group or individual action can be observed since the mid-2010s. In this contribution, the V4 shift from role-model to more individual policies will be demonstrated concerning V4 governments' advocacy for the Western Balkans (WB) applicant countries. I will employ a qualitative method which analyses primary documents and reviews research literature.

The first hypothesis is that V4 governments continue to act as an eager advocate of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, in particular through the co-ordination of their policies in the Visegrad Group format. Recently newer elements of performance can be observed. These point to more differentiation within the group and partial disintegration of V4. So the second hypothesis is that ad-hoc group action has increased. This applies mainly to Czech Republic and Slovakia, but also to Poland; such ad-hoc group action often includes non-V4 states. The third hypothesis says that a distinct individual approach by one V4 member, which is Hungary's Orbán regime, adds additional flavour. Can Orbán's approach be seen as an alternative role-model for the EU integration of current applicant states?

Research on V4 and WB is conducted along three levels of governance: (1) the regional level as expressed in the Visegrad Group cooperation format; (2) Visegrad member states in coalition (alternative regional formats, ad-hoc/thematic coalitions within and beyond the region); (3) individual action of a V4 government; and (4) a preliminary conclusion on the impact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine on V4-WB relations (as of late April 2022, when this article was submitted). The conclusions reflect critically on the possible consequences of changes happening at all three levels involved.

## **2. The regional level: the Visegrad group**

The four Visegrad members are highly committed to cooperate with each other on EU enlargement. This is based on the geographical proximity of the four countries, a shared history of the Central and Southeast European regions, and

economic interests. An outstanding positive feature is, despite the many and strong contacts the two regions have, that the V4 and WB states have little to no conflict issues with each other. In addition, the economic weight of V4 is not overwhelming. The two previously mentioned factors combined put V4 states and their governments in the beneficial position to be often seen as impartial advocates for issues and interests of the six Western Balkan (WB-6) states.

The short historical overview of V4 activities in this paragraph highlights the continuity and strength region-by-region co-operation can provide. The Visegrad Group format is the level on which continuity of an existing practice of co-ordination and co-operation is exercised ever since the EU accession of the V4 countries and the 2004 Visegrad Declaration, which from this document onwards declares the pronounced V4 commitment to the EU approximation of the Western Balkans (Visegrad Declaration, 2004). The V4 institutional highlight is that V4 has a regular annual meeting with WB-6 states at the level of prime ministers. This is an important channel of communication for WB-6 in two ways: first, WB-6 can together (but also individually on such occasions) lobby V4 partners in order to make their voices heard. V4 on their part can serve as a transmitter to reach out to more enlargement sceptical EU governments. In this respect V4 has a regular practice of coordination before European Council meetings and thus, communicates the common V4 position into EU institutions (see e.g. Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group, 2021a, pp. 4-5). Second, V4 has, after thirty years of cooperation, an established net of V4+ formats, which means that often more countries than the “Four” are involved. The “Plus” countries are usually neighbours like Croatia and Slovenia, but also Austria and the Baltic states are often included.

The Visegrad Group has a growing agenda of sectoral policies which the four coordinate, and they reach out to WB partners in these sectors as well. For example, the two most recent V4 presidency programs display a dense calendar of joint meetings of respective V4 partners in various sector policies: general affairs, energy, commerce and industry, youth and joint projects (Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group, 2020-21, pp. 28-29). As to sectoral co-operation among V4 partners, defence and security is a good case in point concerning Southeast Europe. V4 co-ordinates itself with the United States and European partners in UN- and EU-led missions on security and defence issues in Southeast Europe (Griessler, 2018, pp. 147-153; Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group, 2020-21, pp. 28-29).

V4 cooperation can be seen as beneficial for the individual Visegrad state and partner they meet. On the Visegrad state side, the inclusion of the other three partners creates an identity of togetherness which is practised on a regular, if not intensive basis. In particular, for the three smaller V4 countries such coordination adds to the importance of the partners: the single V4 state as a participant and the V4 group collectively as a facilitator in order to meet the threshold of being recognized at all, in particular when it comes to political and/or economic heavyweights. Representatives from South Korea, Japan or the United States, but also within the

EU - from Germany or France are much easier to be reached and heard through a joint V4 initiative. In V4 internally, such co-ordination also simplifies administrative processes (Walsch, 2015, pp. 432-434). The negotiation partner also profits and feels esteemed: a meeting/motion can be classified as more important because they can include representatives of all four countries together at one event.

Concerning the EU approximation of WB countries, V4 saw themselves in a role-model function for transformation and regional integration. Two examples can demonstrate this. First, the free trade zone between WB countries has been modelled after the Central European Free Trade Agreement<sup>1</sup> and is being developed into a common regional market (see CEFTA, n. d.). Second, the regional Western Balkans Fund was modelled after the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) (see Visegrad Group, Joint Statement, 2021b). The IVF has existed for more than twenty years and over the years gained a reputation of supporting and facilitating people-to-people contacts between the four Visegrad countries. Similar to the IVF, it is the aim of the Western Balkans Fund to strengthen civil society beyond WB borders by supporting joint projects.

As to the regular procedures of assistance, the term “role model” does not appear anymore in official documents (on the role-model function, see Walsch, 2014, pp. 7-10). Controversies over EU policies of all four Visegrad states and, in particular, the two that are struggling with year-long EU rule of law procedures have left their imprint. This is why the role of the V4 is formulated more modestly in newer documents. They rather stress the sharing or exchanging of experience between V4 and WB: “[A]n important task for V4 is to exchange V4’s experience with the WB countries on the EU accession process and the first years of EU membership and motivate them to carry out necessary reforms” can be read in the 2020-21 Polish V4 Presidency Programme (p. 6). Then Polish Foreign Minister, Jacek Czaputowicz, formulated in this respect: “It is easier for us to reach with some message and suggestion of reforms – we know the starting point better than some Western countries, that’s why our knowledge and experience can be valuable” (as cited in Gniazdowski, 2020, p. 73).

In conclusion, the Visegrad Group is a firm supporter of the Western Balkans’ approximation to the European Union. Over the 2010s, V4 has intensified co-operation in an array of policy areas. V4 partners use the Visegrad Group platform in their activities towards the WB countries. In parallel, also other regional formats exist in which V4 countries are involved. They will be examined in the following section before turning to initiatives of V4 states in ad-hoc formats as well as individual action of a V4 government.

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<sup>1</sup> Central European Free Trade Agreement (n.d.), Common Regional Market 2021-2024, Brussels (retrieved from <https://cefta.int/legal-documents/#1547242710019-3175e916-494a456>).

### 3. Alternative regional organisations with Visegrad Four states' participation

The participation of V4 states in alternative regional organisations is remarkable because it reveals several deficiencies of the Visegrad Group proper as an institution. Four deficiencies are mentioned here that help explain why selected V4 states also seek operating in alternative regional settings. The first deficiency is the non-importance of the Visegrad Group within the EU. This is why Poland engages in the politically more relevant Berlin Process<sup>2</sup> and in the Weimar Triangle<sup>3</sup>. A second issue is that the Visegrad Group does not entirely satisfy the intra-European power aspirations of its by far biggest member, Poland. Establishing and leading the Three Seas Initiative<sup>4</sup> (next to participating in the Berlin Process and Weimar Triangle) serves as a valve of the role Poland wishes to play. Third, individual V4 members – the evidence points to Czechia and Slovakia – see their interests better advocated in additional alternative formats that include other neighbours, in particular Austria. This can explain the establishment of the Slavkov Triangle. A variation of this may be the “Central Five” (discussed under 4.2. in this text), which includes Austria and Slovenia, but excludes Poland. Central Five may be read as an obsession of a bigger role Austria wishes to play in the region (for many observers drawing on notions of the historical legacies of the Habsburg past); one may also read Central Five as evidence of a grouping of small member states *versus* big ones. A fourth and last reason for alternative settings is the efficient concentration on one theme: the Salzburg Forum<sup>5</sup> is a good and relevant example (more thematic coalitions, often ad-hoc ones, under 4.2. and 4.3.).

The selection given here is presented under the imperative of these four issues surrounding the Visegrad Group and alternatives that come into play. One needs to ask about the importance of the alternative format in general, its importance concerning the EU enlargement process, and whether the alternative institution could function as a competitor to the Visegrad co-operation format. Hence, this section covers three regional organisations of which Poland is a member, then a regional organisation with a thematic focus (Salzburg Forum), and finally the Slavkov Triangle, which is considered by some as an alternative to the Visegrad Group.

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<sup>2</sup> Berlin Process (n.d.), About Berlin Process, (retrieved from <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/about-berlin-process>).

<sup>3</sup> Weimar Triangle, Poland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n. d.), Weimar Triangle, (retrieved from <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/weimar-triangle>).

<sup>4</sup> Three Seas Initiative (n.d.), Objectives (retrieved from <https://3seas.eu/about/objectives>).

<sup>5</sup> Salzburg Forum (n.d.), Levels and Fields of Cooperation (retrieved from [http://www.salzburgforum.org/Who\\_are\\_we/Levels\\_and\\_Fields\\_of\\_Cooperation.html](http://www.salzburgforum.org/Who_are_we/Levels_and_Fields_of_Cooperation.html)).

### 3.1. Poland and the Berlin Process, the Weimar Triangle, and the Three Seas Initiative

It was the initiative of German chancellor Merkel to reinvigorate the EU enlargement process in 2014 (see The Berlin Process). The attempt encompassed EU states which were important or enlargement-committed or both: Germany, Great Britain, France, Italy, Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia, and the EU Commission (for an overview see Griessler, 2020a; and The Berlin Process). Only later, in 2017 and at the invitation of Germany, it was Poland that joined the group (Gniazdowski, 2020, p. 74). Poland fits very well in the process of the country's shared vision with the Western European partners on the future of the Western Balkans (Domaradzki *et al.*, 2018, pp. 27-41). The Berlin Process is operating with a rotating presidency. The 2019 Polish presidency put the topics economy, connectivity, civil society/youth, and security into the focus. Poland could transfer this thematic agenda into the Polish Visegrad Group presidency of 2020-21. Poland used the institutional interconnection in order to combine V4/V4+ with the WB countries in this respect (Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group, 2020-21, p. 6). Thematically, a particular focus was between cities and regions in cross-border co-operation (Gniazdowski, 2020, p. 77). Poland could profit from its expertise in cross-border co-operation as developed in the Berlin Process format and developed the matter further during the presidency of the Visegrad Group. Examples of such co-operation cases are: facilitating the crossing of the border; the elimination of infrastructure bottlenecks, better public transport connections; reconstruction of energy networks; trans-border ecological problems: air and water quality, water scarcity, and trans-border problems related to crisis management (especially floods). Strengthening cross-border co-operation is often the only chance for a developmental impulse for peripheral regions and thus gave an important impulse for development and integration (Gniazdowski, 2020, p. 77).

Poland and France and Germany are partners in the Weimar Triangle, which is a loose security co-operation scheme. The Weimar Triangle scheme gives Poland privileged access to the two most important EU member states. In particular, in combination with the Berlin Process, the Weimar Triangle encourages and obliges partners to consult and coordinate each other on strategy and security issues (Marciacq and Żornaczuk, 2021, p. 13). Hence, Poland is at the core of European decision-making concerning the long-term interests of influential European states in the Balkans. Poland plays an important part in UN and EU missions in the Balkans (KFOR, EULEX in Mitrovica, EUFOR Althea in BiH). Poland is considered as an "honest broker" (Gniazdowski, 2020, p. 70) in the region and can assure European interests in the regions are not only exercised by West European EU member states.

At its own initiative (although formally to have initially Croatia as a joint leader on board), Poland has created another regional organisation, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which encompasses eastern EU member states: the Baltic states, V4, Romania and Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria. The aim is to boost economic

development in the eastern regions of the EU (see Three Seas Initiative). Poland has been leading this initiative so far and the format is beneficial for the Balkans region because it may also function as a sort of “friends of the EU cohesion” group, which has been actively lobbying for a robust EU budget beginning in the early 2010s. By the mid-2020s an upcoming budget of the EU (2028-2034) will be discussed. As all twelve 3SI-involved member states have a moderate (Baltics) or profound (all other) interest in the WB involvement in the EU, this format may well activate itself as lobbyist in the likely future.

### **3.2. The Salzburg Forum**

The Salzburg Forum is a regional format with a clear thematic focus. Historically, it has had a history of Austria to be in the lead position concerning the integration of the then new EU member states in inner affairs, namely facilitating the accession of ECE states to the Schengen zone (see Salzburg Forum). The Salzburg Forum contributed to this achievement: ECE EU states (with the exception of Romania and Bulgaria) could join Schengen by the end of 2007. Further developments concerned dense co-operation in cross-border issues with joint memoranda of understanding; and since 2015 closer cooperation in illegal migration issues, which also included the EU applicant states of the Western Balkans. Thus, there is a context that also points to EU enlargement. It is a joint interest of existing and applicant EU states to cooperate in inner affairs in order to avoid bottlenecks in legal migration and to track illegal migration. The official documents, however, remain silent about the individual participating states’ national measures concerning national border controls in the aftermath of the refugee crisis and concerning national measures to combat the spread of Covid-19.

### **3.3. The Slavkov Triangle: Czechia, Slovakia, Austria**

The initial reasons of co-operation between these three countries were twofold: one was the nationalist orientation of the governments of Hungary (since 2010) and Poland (since 2015) which isolated both, the other was the coincidence of social democrats as prime ministers in the three countries in 2015, when they were the primary actors to found the “Slavkov Triangle” (Cabada, 2018, pp. 285-286). Slavkov is a very pragmatic scheme based on common interest and may disquiet V4 cooperation depending on further developments in Hungary and Poland (more generally, in all five countries). The three Slavkov states’ governments have undergone profound changes since 2015: the social democratic party is no longer in power in either of the three states, and in Czechia it has even failed to reach representation in parliament in the recent 2021 elections. The simple fact that Slavkov cooperation still exists by 2022 is thus noteworthy. Is Slavkov a rival to V4? Definitely not in the EU enlargement policy area. Austria’s position very much

converges with the positions of V4 countries, independent of the government of either of the five Central European states.

#### **4. Visegrad Four states in ad-hoc (or thematic) formats**

The text now turns to ad-hoc coalitions of the past ten years which can be seen as representative concerning the EU enlargement. In terms of typology, this section moves from co-operation within V4 to co-operation of selected V4 states with regional partners, and finally to a third category, selected V4 states lining up with EU partners from the region and beyond.

##### **4.1. Thematic coalitions within Visegrad Four**

The case study of Czechia and Slovakia will be presented in this section. The two V4 states stood up and rejected the fact that Bulgaria imposes additional conditions on North Macedonia. In December 2020, the German Council presidency drafted the European Council conclusions which indicated a compromise between Bulgaria and North Macedonia concerning the past (the best account on the conflict between the two is Jordanova and Kacarska, 2020). The pragmatic stance of the German presidency was to find a compromise formula in order to open enlargement negotiations. The governments of Czechia and Slovakia objected and stated:

The text as it stands contained elements including the notion of falsifying history that in our view would be hugely detrimental to the enlargement process and could potentially bring about further complications down the road. [...] We will not allow that the Union be the judge of our shared history, how we identify ourselves or the language we use. These issues belong to the parties concerned and we are here to support them with the experience of our own healing processes (Czechia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 December 2020).

According to analyst Erwan Fouéré, the suggested compromise wording of “misinterpretation of history” can be read as an intention of the European Council to side with Bulgaria’s one-sided stance against a candidate country (Fouéré, 2021). This is what the Czech and Slovak governments objected to. They see this as an attempt of “falsifying history.” It is certainly correct to state that interpretations of history are not part of the EU *acquis communautaire*, and the two states thus correctly stood up against the Bulgarian attempt. On the other hand, it is clear that this move has again postponed the beginning of EU enlargement negotiations with North Macedonia for more than a year by spring 2022. From the 2020, the German EU presidency perspective the compromise formula was most likely seen as a half sentence on a piece of paper that soon will have disappeared in the EU archives. The expectation was to get away with this odd theme in a face-saving way and to turn to

what really counts: the opening of EU accession negotiations. For the Czech and Slovak initiative, the issue was running against EU principles, independent of the fact whether the half-sentence would have been buried soon or, on the contrary, would have complicated matters. From their perspective, clearly, the insertion of interpretations of history “could potentially bring about further complications down the road” (Czechia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 December 2020).

More thematic coalition cases within V4 could be mentioned, in particular the cases of the nationalist regimes of Poland and Hungary to protect each other within the EU. Although the issue and related veto-power is of importance (in particular in the European Council format), this does not have an impact on the V4’s positioning on EU enlargement. V4 disagreements are far too small in this topic in order to become politically relevant.

#### **4.2. Thematic coalitions of one or more Visegrad Four state with regional partners**

Thematic coalitions of one or more V4 states with regional partners is often happening on an ad-hoc basis. The involved EU countries in the region are like-minded when it comes to EU enlargement. One often takes the initiative and colleagues simply join because in a world of so many differences it may simply be a good sign to cooperate.

A case in point is a joint visit of the foreign ministers of Czechia, Slovenia, and Austria to encourage in this case North Macedonia and Albania to stay firm with their EU accession ambitions (Czechia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 May 2021). The joint visit of the three foreign ministers (Kulháněk of Czechia, Logar of Slovenia, and Schallenberg of Austria) was a good-will tour because of the many disappointments the two candidate countries have experienced from the EU side in the recent past.

Based on common themes, selected V4 states and regional partners quite often cooperate. It is difficult to state whether this is to become a more institutionalised or regular format. The Salzburg Forum gives proof of this and has been dealt with above. However, ad-hoc groups with regional partners are established. e.g. “The Central Five”: an initiative of Austria to bring together the country with its four neighbours Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Slovenia. Two “Central Five” meetings were held after the Covid lockdowns ended in the summer of 2020. The aim was to facilitate cross-border co-operation because all participating countries pursued individual border closing policies during the lockdown. “The Central Five” wish to remedy this and intensify “neighbourly exchange.” (Central Five, Austria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 July 2020).

### 4.3. Thematic coalitions with EU states from and beyond the Central European region

In October of 2019, France stood out at a European Council meeting and vetoed the start of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia. This decision was highly criticised by many. In response, France published the non-paper “Reforming the European Union accession process” in November 2019.<sup>6</sup> A group of EU states originating mainly in the Central European region but including the Mediterranean EU members reacted to this in December 2019. Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland and Slovenia drafted the proposal titled “Elements for enhanced enlargement process and sustained and accelerated integration of the Western Balkans” (European Western Balkans, 11 December 2019). According to one source it was Austria, Italy, Poland, and Slovenia that took the lead, and the other joined eventually (Barigazzi, 13 December 2019). The issues brought up in both documents had their impact on the European Commission’s revised enlargement strategy and methodology, first published in February 2020 (European Commission, 2020a; European Commission, 2020b; for an overview and comparison of the three documents see Eisl, 2020).

Focusing in this analysis on national vetoes and on coalition-making among member states in order to surpass national vetoes, one can reach three conclusions. First, the French veto was followed by a constructive proposal originating from the same country. So, there was a serious attempt of the French government to further handle the enlargement process. Second, a group of members across the EU could coordinate themselves, react constructively to the French proposal and submit their common position. This was important from the perspective of pro enlargement member states. They could reach two aims: one was on the sequencing of different stages of negotiations. The nine are in favour that various groups of chapters could be negotiated in parallel, i.e. giving more flexibility, instead of one chapter that may be opened after for the previous chapter is closed. The second and more important aim was that the group supported the idea of a simultaneous process of reforming the enlargement strategy and maintaining (or initiating) concrete negotiations. The French proposal advocated a reform of the enlargement strategy first, i.e. getting better prepared from the EU side. Only when this will have been realised, concrete negotiations shall start. The European Commission reacted quickly. Only six weeks later, in February 2020, the “Enhancing the accession process” communication was published. The third conclusion is that both points, the French and the selected member states’ group position, co-shaped the European Commission’s readiness to reform the EU accession process and also left a deep imprint on the contents. Within

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<sup>6</sup> France (2019), Non-Paper. Reforming the European Union accession process, November, (retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>).

a short time, a new enlargement strategy was developed to which all participants agreed. In sum, all three actors – the national one, the group of member states, and the European Commission – showed commitment to leave the impasse behind.

## **5. Individual action of a Visegrad Four state: Orbán's Hungary**

Orbán's Hungary is an interesting test case to which extent a single V4 and EU member state pursues individual policies. As most of this text dealt with coordination between friends and group action, one may as a first step observe the presence or absence of Hungary in such action. Going along the typology of this article, the following can be stated: Hungary functions as a normal member of V4 and is a member of other regional organisations. Hungary is, however, not a member of the most important format, the Berlin Process. Hungary led by Orbán is also the reason why alternative regional organisations in Central Europe exist, notably, the Slavkov Triangle. The Orbán regime also shows little will to align with partners in thematic or ad-hoc initiatives. As a matter of fact, Hungary's long-standing commitments in international missions like KFOR and EUFOR Althea prove the integration-oriented continuities of its policies. Hungarian diplomatic representatives on the ground share experience and coordinate themselves with V4 partners (Walsch, 2015). In parallel, profiled individual action of Hungary, which is not coordinated with Visegrad, regional, and other EU partners, is clearly observable.

The most obvious individual action of the Orbán regime concerns the relations with Serbia. Serbia is a neighbouring country and is inhabited by a Hungarian minority (most live close to the Hungarian-Serbian border). For these two reasons all Hungarian governments in the past have likewise supported democratic Serbia. In present times, it is rather the ideological overlap of the two governments that brings them together. Similar to prime minister Orbán, president Vučić transformed Serbia into a semi-authoritarian state ever since coming to power (Bíró-Nagy and Hare, 2020). Proximity to Russia's Putin and few ideological differences concerning refugee policies also play a role. From the Orbán regime's perspective, the trade-off is on balance mainly grounded on Serbia's treatment of the Hungarian minority, and secondly on economic opportunities which privileged relations can enable. The better these two issues are dealt with in Belgrade, the more Budapest will support Serbian EU ambitions.

One obvious parallel must be underlined in the relations between the two semi-authoritarian regimes, which is the ongoing EU rule of law procedure on Hungary. The obvious interest of Orbán's Hungary is to slowly neglect or lower the rule of law accession criteria for the applicant countries and to enlarge the zone of illiberalism in the EU. That would mean a triple gain for the Orbán regime: club membership of a neighbouring country, inclusion of another semi-authoritarian led country and ideological ally, and a long-term fading legitimacy of EU rule-of-law procedure in general and on Hungary in particular (Elek and Griessler, 2021, p. 7).

A second eye-catching issue is the relations of the Orbán regime with the political leader of the entity Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For many years, Dodik has been isolated from Western politicians, even more so in situations when Dodik made one of his many moves to further destabilise the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Orbán saw this as an opportunity and was capable of filling this gap. On a visit to Banja Luka in November 2021, Orbán brought his entourage of Hungarian businesspersons who are dependent on state-channelled orders and could secure good relations for the vested interests of both parties (Balogh, 2021).

A third and likewise eye-catching relation is the one of Orbán's regime with former Macedonian prime minister Gruevski. Facing a judicial trial in his country, Orbán decided to illegally help Gruevski to escape from his country and to grant him asylum in Hungary. Moreover, this action happened simultaneously when Orbán initiated waves of negative campaigns against asylum seekers in Hungary. Tomasz Żornaczuk concludes that Orbán's action ran counter the intentions and policies of Visegrad Group partner Poland which held the presidency in the Berlin Process briefly after (Żornaczuk, 2018, p. 2). However, it must also be stressed that the relations between Hungary and North Macedonian governments after Gruevski, led since 2017 by the social democrats Zoran Zaev and Dimitar Kovachevski (i.e. the opposing political camp) remained cordial, despite the Hungarian government's support for representatives of media enterprises close to Gruevski's party VMRO-DPMNE ever since.

The fourth and final point is linked to Orbán because it was him – and as with nearly all his decisions, solely him, without any previous debate within his party or with the public – who nominated the European commissioner who is in charge of EU enlargement. The hand-picked diplomat (and not politician, which the Commissioners' profession usually is) Olivér Várhelyi has within a short time gained a reputation of being controversial within his own Commission bureaucracy. Disputes with Commission's public servants have become so intense that much lead personnel left. By autumn 2021, an acting director-general was in charge, and the positions of two acting directors within the department were vacant (Barigazzi, 2021). The application of a new director-general, a diplomat from Poland close to the ruling Law and Justice party and a friend of Várhelyi, has again raised concerns about the impartialness of the administrative wing of the Commission (Barigazzi, 2022a). On a more general political take, Commissioner Várhelyi destroyed the image of the Commission to be an impartial, non-partisan actor. He received much criticism of neglecting shortcomings of rule of law conditions of Serbia, he seemed to have intervened in the Commission's 2021 progress report concerning Serbia by urging authors to submit a benevolent evaluation of the country, in particular concerning the state of the art of the rule of law situation (Barigazzi, 2021). This accusation is of weight because critics correctly point to the parallels of Hungary's stance on Serbia. Furthermore, in late 2021 and early 2022, information leaked about secret deals between Várhelyi and Dodik on how to move on in the precarious issue

of the relations between the entity and the state (Wölfl, 2021; 2022). So, it is fair to ask whether Várhelyi is Orbán's Trojan horse in Brussels. In light of this, it is questionable whether this commissioner is capable of leading a complex multilateral agenda for a supranational organisation. The evidence available so far does not speak in his favour.

## **6. Russia's war against Ukraine: the impact on EU enlargement and on the Visegrad Group**

This text was conceptualised and written before the invasion of Russia in Ukraine, starting 24 February 2022. Submitting this article two months into the war, one can observe a profound impact on two aspects: the EU enlargement as such and the importance of the Visegrad Group as a regional organisation. As to the EU enlargement, the immediate impact is that the eastern partners Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia took a distinct stance and applied for EU membership. The EU will have to deal with these requests in a serious way. The current applicants in the Western Balkans also need to consider consequences: Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo are in line with the EU sanctions against Russia. The old and new Serbian president and government (Vučić and his party secured election victories on 3 April 2022) and Milorad Dodik of Republika Srpska have not distanced themselves from Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The same applies to Bosnia and Herzegovina, but this may change due to elections held later in 2022 and due to EU pressure.

The Visegrad Group as such faces a division as well: currently Hungary stands alone vis-à-vis Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia in this matter. Two months into the conflict and following a victory in parliamentary elections (3 April 2022), Orbán's Hungary demonstrates a double posture. Orbán did not veto the first five EU sanctions packages and did not object to Putin's and Russia's condemnation in the European Council conclusions which state that Russia commits "war crimes" and that "[t]hose responsible, and their accomplices, will be held to account in accordance with international law" (European Council, 2022). On the other hand, state television and the many media outlets in Hungary that are controlled by the spirit of Orbán's party Fidesz steer a Ukraine-critical and pro-Russian line (Barigazzi, 2022b; Dragomir, 2022). Ukrainian president Zelenskyy publicly shamed Orbán for this ambiguity during the European Council summit on 24 March 2022 (Brzozowski, 2022).

## **Conclusions**

Conclusions on the EU enlargement policies of the Visegrad states over the previous ten years can be made along the categories of continuity and change. There

is evidence for both. Clearly, a distinct diversification of policies has occurred over the past ten years.

The Visegrad Group cooperation format has proven to be, by far, the most reliable actor when it comes to continuity. An overwhelming commitment to EU enlargement has been an aim of the group ever since the four states joined the European Union in 2004. Over the last one and a half decades this commitment has shown in regular meetings of top government officials. More importantly, it has by now trickled down into a number of sector policies. The brand “Visegrad” has gained in importance over this period. The sheer fact it has existed for more than thirty years and has never had any change in membership is a clear sign of continuity. Thanks to this steady mutual commitment, the V4 weight in international and European politics has grown: V4 has access to major European governments and international political leaders as long as they co-ordinate themselves and act together; e.g. meetings with French president Macron in December 2021 or British prime minister Johnson in March 2022 would hardly have taken place only by initiatives of individual V4 prime ministers.

Under the label of continuity and change one can subsume the V4 countries participation in other regional groupings or thematic coalitions. Whatever the constellation, one may state that Visegrad states clearly advocate a pro-EU enlargement stance also in these settings (continuity). Rather new is the format and scope of its influence. This can encompass the participation or lead in a regional format in the case of Poland (e.g. Berlin Process, e.g. Three Seas Initiative) or ad-hoc thematic coalitions in various compositions: between Visegrad partners only, or Visegrad and regional partners, or even Visegrad and whatever useful EU partner. A conclusion that can be drawn is that parallel to a nationalisation of EU enlargement policies, V4 states became more courageous and, unlike the first ten years of membership, dared to show more edges. Czechia’s and Slovakia’s positioning *versus* Bulgaria’s attempt of “falsifying” (Czechia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 December 2020) the history of North Macedonia gives proof of this. By the same token, V4 states with the exception of Orbán’s Hungary participate in ad-hoc groupings that proactively advocate an exit strategy out of a deadlock. A 2019 initiative of France *versus* North Macedonia proves this.

Finally, a change that was analysed along Hungary as a case study, were very distinct national policies that were not co-ordinated neither with V4 partners nor with other regional partners nor with the EU in general. Ever since Orbán’s party, Fidesz, isolated itself in the European People’s Party, the self-conscious Orbán regime has aligned itself with like-minded partners, be it hard Eurosceptics such as Matteo Salvini and his party Lega or somewhat softer ones like Marine Le Pen and her party Rassemblement National. The outreach to presidents Vučić of Serbia or Dodik of Republika Srpska goes along the same lines, thereby heightening the legitimacy of populist rulers with obvious autocratic inclinations. Orbán’s policies encompass Hungarian assistance to the illegal escape of former Macedonian prime minister and

judicial convict, Nikola Gruevski, who received refugee status in Hungary in 2018, the year when Orbán decided to campaign for the parliament elections with a one-issue anti refugee discourse. EU enlargement commissioner Várhelyi, a person who was hand-picked by Orbán, has likewise gained a reputation of implicitly supporting the authoritarian leaders Vučić and Dodik. Várhelyi is the first EU commissioner for enlargement who put the reputation of an EU representative to act in non-partisan impartial ways at risk. Observers, who relate the rule of law deficits of Hungary and Poland to the cases of the Western Balkans, see the “ECE role-model” story of integration as a story of the past. By today, ECE is too diversified to serve as a role-model. Below the surface there are also many ruptures within the Visegrad Group. It is fair to say that the Orbán-type regime may serve as a semi-authoritarian counter role-model for the EU applicants. Whether such a model will become mainstream remains to be seen. Currently Hungary remains often isolated in the Council of the EU and Orbán experiences being a lonely man at European Council meetings.

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## Appendix

### Table of a typology of group, ad-hoc group, and individual performance of Visegrad states concerning EU enlargement

#### Group performance

<i>who of V4</i>	<i>format</i>
PL, CZ, SK, H	Visegrad Group (PL-CZ-SK-H)
V4 + selected ECE	Visegrad Plus format (V4 and selected ECE states)
V4 + selected ECE	Salzburg Forum (V4, AT, SL, CR, RO, BG)
PL	Weimar Triangle (FR-GE-PL)
	Berlin Process (WB6-GE-FR-GB-IT-AT-SL-CR-PL-EU Commission)
	Three Seas Initiative (PL-LI-LV-ES-CZ-SK-HU-AT-SL-CR-RO-BG)
CZ, SK	Slavkov Triangle (CZ-SK-AT)
CZ, SK, H	Central Five (AT-SLO-CZ-SK-H)

#### Ad-hoc group performance

<i>who</i>	<i>example</i>
individual V4 states	CZ-SK on Bulgaria-North Macedonia
V4 states and regional partners	CZ-AT-SLO to visit North Macedonia and Albania
V4 states, regional partners and beyond	“Enhanced enlargement initiative” of AT-CZ-ES-IT-LV-LT-MLT-PL-SL

#### Individual performance (case study Hungary)

<i>who</i>	<i>example</i>
Hungary	relations with Vučić’s Serbia
	relations with Republika Srpska (BiH) and Milorad Dodik
	relations with former PM Gruevski (North Macedonia)
	relations with enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi

*Source:* Author’s representation