

V4 in challenging times of war: how to preserve assistance to Ukraine

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In December 2022, the Slovak Republic marked half of its one-year Visegrád Group (V4) presidency (July 2022-June 2023). Despite low expectations for the joint position of four members on the Russian war against Ukraine, some positive developments occurred with official Bratislava stirring up the group. The high-level political dialogue was activated in the fall of 2022, and important political decisions were taken regarding assistance to Ukraine. But in many respects, the Hungarian posture remains a core roadblock for a joint coordinated effort of the Visegrád Group.

The Hungarian test to the V4

The start of the full-scale Russian military incursion into Ukraine in February 2022 occurred during Hungary's presidency of the regional initiative, the V4. As three out of the four members share a border with Ukraine, it was a matter of national interest to deliver all types of support to Kyiv in its fight against the aggressor. Some political steps were adopted in the first half of 2022. In early March 2022, in the **Joint Communiqué** on Providing Joint V4 Assistance to Refugees from Ukraine, the four prime ministers committed to providing financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and assistance to refugees from Ukraine. The V4 members agreed on a joint support package of 1 million euros to help Ukraine via the International Visegrád Fund. Moreover, in the **Joint leaders' statement** by the UK and the Visegrád Group, the parties condemned Russia's aggression on Ukraine and expressed full support to the government and people of Ukraine in their fight for sovereignty and territorial integrity. The statement also points to coordination efforts in response to Russia, including sanctions, referral to the International Crime Court to address Russia's war crimes, and support for refugees.

However, despite political declarations, since February 24, the Hungarian presidency has put the V4 on the verge of political death. Budapest's official position in the EU over energy sanctions policy

and other destructive steps has produced a lot of discontent in relations with the other three members of the group. Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia have heavily **criticized Hungary** and blocked some high-level meetings on the level of the Visegrád Group with participation of representatives of official Budapest. Specifically, the Hungarian stance towards cooperation with Russia led to the **cancellation of the V4 defence ministers' meetings** in March 2022 as Polish and Czech ministers withdrew their participation confirmations. Moreover, Hungarian authorities have been accused of **misusing V4 cooperation** to put forward their own interests.

The Slovak half-term in Visegrád Group

On July 1, Slovakia took the baton of rotational V4 presidency from Hungary against the backdrop of ongoing full-scale aggression in Ukraine.

In the **Program** of the V4 Slovak Presidency, the word "Ukraine" appears 18 times, mainly as a description of aggravated geopolitical circumstances that the Visegrád Group must navigate. On the level of specific ideas, within the "Interconnections" priority, Bratislava mentions the development of capacities for freight transport from Ukraine and the expansion of cooperation in the defence field with Ukraine. Slovakia also proposed joint activities for the V4 in demining territories in Ukraine. In the "People" priority, the Slovak Presidency is ready to share the

experience of social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees and their integration into the labour market.

Provided differences between V4 members on the Russian war against Ukraine, Bratislava took the deliberate decision to scale down the V4 presence in foreign policy issues on the regional level. Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivan Korčok, mentioned plans to “significantly **mute the foreign policy dimension**” of the V4 during the presidency. Instead, Bratislava proposed to focus on the internal reflection on the V4’s role in the changing environment. Cooperation priorities in the program for the presidency included transport and energy issues, as well as green and digital transformations, to name a few.

But, as the Visegrád Group was previously very active on the level of the European Union and, in some cases, proved to be effective, three members of the group had to find a way to come to terms with Hungary and its specific political standing. In September, Polish PM Morawiecki proposed **to devise a formula** for taking joint steps with Hungary when it corresponds to shared interests and values while clearly indicating points of disagreement on matters connected to Russian aggression.

Several high-level meetings and summits took place during the Slovak presidency. And the Russian war against Ukraine has always been an indispensable part of these V4 discussions.

In September 2022, after the meeting of the V4 defence ministers, the Slovak representative declared that all four members of the Visegrád Group stand for Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Yet three of them are ready to continue delivering military assistance to Ukraine. At the same time, the group is prepared to devote more attention to the **demining of deoccupied territory**, maintenance of damaged military equipment, and medical help to Ukrainian military personnel wounded in action.

In October, the first **summit of presidents** since Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine took place in Bratislava. Within the agenda, the heads of the states discussed energy-related issues and the financial and economic **consequences of the war**. Although Russian aggression was also high among discussion priorities, Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová mentioned differences over Ukraine and military assistance during a press conference.

In November, V4 heads of government met in the Slovak city of Košice, the first summit in over six

months. Prior to this meeting, some V4 leaders cast doubts about the efficacy of the Visegrád Four, provided the uncooperative role of Hungary. But Prime Ministers have reached **a common position** on helping and supporting Ukraine, despite differences of opinion. Indeed, government leaders acknowledged the importance of the V4 platform, especially in the defence and energy areas. Polish PM Morawiecki also mentioned that the region had become a crucial part of the **European security architecture**. Possible ways of cooperation were discussed in anticipation of a potential new wave of refugees from Ukraine.

One of the positive moments of the Slovak presidency in the first half of the term was the decision of foreign ministers to earmark some additional financial resources of the International Visegrád Fund to cover Ukrainian projects in humanitarian assistance, civil society, and media support.

It is important to mention that the public acknowledgement of the split of V4 opinions over Russia was commonplace at all of these high-level events. However, it did not prevent some political démarches from happening. For instance, a severe political blow hit the V4 format when the leaders of parliaments’ meeting was cancelled due to the refusal of heads of Czech parliamentary chambers to participate in the joint V4 meeting with the Hungarian counterpart.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Russian war against Ukraine has raised tensions between partners within the Visegrád Group. The challenge to preserve the format has been chasing the member states since the start of full-scale aggression in February 2022. Only in the autumn of 2022 did member states show interest in restarting the political level of cooperation, although constantly stressing disagreement with Hungary on war-related issues. Half of the Slovak presidency passed with an emphasis on internal discussions and less attention devoted to the previously notorious foreign policy track of the Visegrád Group. At this moment, it is clear that due to inconsistency in the position of V4 members, further relations with Ukraine will be pursued on a bilateral level.

Recent statements delivered under the V4 umbrella witness joint support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and tackle less controversial areas of cooperation. While military assistance was addressed

mainly on a bilateral level between Ukraine and each Visegrád Group member state, the common interest of the four states was pinned to the issues of assistance to refugees, demining of polluted territories, and military medical assistance.

The International Visegrád Fund will remain one of the effective tools for supporting Ukraine, especially in delivering assistance to non-governmental organizations and at the municipal level.

For the second part of the Slovak presidency and the first period of the following Czech V4 presidency, it makes sense to focus on the following areas of cooperation with Ukraine:

1. V4+Ukraine format may be reinvigorated via joint consultations on its participation in Ukraine's recovery and rebuilding process. V4 states may find it interesting to share areas of responsibility and investment projects in Ukraine, both on a fast recovery track and long-term investments. The Slovak Republic may demonstrate some leadership in mapping national interests in rebuilding investment projects in Ukraine.
2. Defence cooperation between V4 member states is considered one of the pillars of the regional grouping. Under the Slovak presidency, the Framework for an Enhanced Visegrád Group Defense Planning Cooperation was adopted. V4 members launched the biggest joint military drills in Poland in November 2022. Ukrainian experience in fighting Russian aggression may provide practical insights about Russian military strategy and quantitative parameters of the armed forces and military equipment necessary to prevent and repel any aggressive incursion. It is in the common interest the members of the group to engage Ukraine in the existing defence cooperation formats in the EU. Members of V4 may advocate for a more inclusive approach when it comes to procedures for such cooperation initiatives, like the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defense Fund, and the European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP).
3. In 2023, yet another V4+ format might be brought back to life. Provided that the Czech Republic, under its presidency in the EU Council from July to December 2022, paid attention to preserving the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy, a V4+EaP meeting may be summoned in Bratislava

or Prague this year. The agenda of the meeting may be devoted to revisiting current tools and programs available for partner states under the five priorities of the Eastern Partnership, presented in the Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit from December 2021.

4. In 2023, Ukraine expects to receive clear indications from the EU about the terms and next steps in the accession process. The V4 may present a joint political advocacy endeavour on the level of the European institutions for a more swift reply from the EU in regard to Ukrainian aspirations. At the same time, the International Visegrád Fund financing may also be dedicated to transferring the positive accession experience of the Central European states to prepare the Ukrainian public and non-governmental sector for future negotiations with the EU.
5. The V4 and Ukraine have to step up cooperation on energy security issues. Given the risks of complete oil and gas flow disruptions, all countries would benefit if they agreed on joint solidarity cooperation. The countries may also cooperate by implementing the implementation and development of medium to long-term decarbonization strategies by integrated energy and climate plants.