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**CAN THE VISEGRAD COOPERATION FUNCTION
INDEPENDENTLY OF POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE
GOVERNMENTS OF THE FOUR MEMBER STATES?**



Executive Summary

The Visegrad prime ministers' summit held in Budapest on 23 June 2026, concluding the Hungarian V4 Presidency of 2025–2026, has once again raised the question of whether the Visegrad Cooperation rests on foundations that extend beyond the current political relations among the participating states.

The V4 is not a political bloc characterised by a constant level of political alignment. Rather, it is a flexible coordination platform whose intensity varies over time. Although its functioning is influenced by the political cycles shaping the governments of the member states and by the state of bilateral relations, its continued existence and operational capacity are supported by factors that are largely independent of day-to-day politics.

These factors include geographical compactness, economic interconnectedness, the growing volume of intra-regional trade, a shared historical experience on the eastern frontier of Western civilisation, institutionalised cultural and scientific ties, particularly through the International Visegrad Fund, and the fact that the countries of the region are exposed in similar ways to the consequences of great-power competition. These conditions periodically create practical incentives for cooperation, particularly in the fields of security and agriculture.

The weakness resulting from the V4's limited institutionalisation is also one of its strengths. While cooperation may become less intensive during certain periods, the absence of rigid structures prevents political conflicts from tearing the format apart. The V4 can therefore only be properly understood if it is not expected to function as a permanent political alliance. Instead, attention should be directed toward identifying the areas in which it remains capable of active cooperation regardless of the current political climate.



Introduction

In recent years, the Visegrad Cooperation has experienced one of the most serious political crises in its history. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, launched in February 2022, triggered different responses from the governments of the four member states, creating lasting political tensions, particularly in Hungarian–Polish relations, which serves as the glue of the V4.

Numerous analyses appeared describing the V4 as being in deep crisis and predicting either its demise or at least its growing irrelevance.¹ Yet the cooperation itself did not cease to exist. Although the prime ministers' summit that traditionally constitutes the core mechanism of intergovernmental cooperation had become largely procedural by 2024 and was not held at all in 2025, the format itself endured.

This raises a fundamental question: what are the deeper structural factors that sustain cooperation even during periods of political conflict? Can these underlying conditions ensure the long-term survival of the V4, or will the format gradually lose significance if lasting political consensus fails to emerge? More fundamentally, under what circumstances can the V4 be considered functional, and what realistic expectations can be placed upon it?

1. The Operational Structure of the Visegrad Cooperation

The initiator of the Visegrad Cooperation, József Antall, Hungary's first democratically elected prime minister after the fall of communism, clearly sought from the outset to establish foundations upon which flexible forms of cooperation could be built in the future.

The Visegrad Declaration, signed on 15 February 1991 by Antall, Polish President Lech Wałęsa, and Václav Havel, President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, placed coordination and respect for national specificities at the centre of cooperation:

¹ See, for example: Robert Beck, "The Visegrád Four: From Troubled to Broken," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 3, 2024, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/04/visegrad-four-from-troubled-to-broken/>



"Coordination efforts – with respect for national peculiarities – increases the chances of attaining the desired goals and brings closer the realization of their objectives."²

From the very beginning, therefore, the V4 was conceived primarily as a coordination platform. The emphasis on respecting national specificities also implied that cooperation would never supersede the national interests articulated by the participating states.

The architects of the V4 consciously maintained a loosely institutionalised framework. On the one hand, this allows cooperation to be intensified whenever circumstances require it. On the other hand, it avoids creating binding structures that could be undermined by political disagreements.

This approach forms the basis of what may be described as a "V4 doctrine," reflected in a phrase frequently repeated at Visegrad events. While it may sound like a cliché, it captures a fundamental principle of the cooperation: the essence of the V4 lies in seeking those issues that unite the four countries rather than those that divide them.

Rotating Presidency, the International Visegrad Fund, and the Foreign Ministries

Two institutional or quasi-institutional pillars have emerged within the framework of Visegrad cooperation. The first is the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), headquartered in Bratislava, which constitutes the only permanent institution of the V4. The second is the annually rotating presidency, which, while not a formal institution, performs an institutional function within the cooperation framework. In both cases, the foreign ministries of the four member states play the central role. As a result, the operation of the V4 is embedded within the administrative systems of the participating countries through their respective diplomatic services.

The IVF primarily supports cultural, academic, and social projects. Its activities are more independent of current governments, largely because it possesses its own institutional

² Visegrad Group, "Visegrad Declaration 1991: Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration," February 15, 1991, accessed May 28, 2026, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2>



structure and governing bodies. By contrast, the rotating presidency responsible for coordinating V4 cooperation is considerably more political in nature.

"The Visegrad Group's operations are based solely on the principle of periodical meetings of the member states' representatives on all levels (prime ministers, heads of states, ministers, experts, etc.). Official prime ministerial summits take place on an annual basis. Between these official summits—usually in June each year—one of V4 countries holds presidency over the group."³

The activity of the presidency depends significantly on the political similarities and differences among the governments of the four countries. During periods of general political alignment, a single one-year presidency could include several prime ministers' summits, V4+ meetings, and ministerial consultations. During the Czech Presidency of 2015–2016, for example, three prime ministers' summits were held in Prague. When political harmony was lacking, activity declined considerably. Nevertheless, even during the years following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022—which posed perhaps the greatest challenge to the cohesion of the V4 in its history—prime ministers' summits did not disappear altogether.

The preparations for and conduct of the Prague summit in February 2024 demonstrated that after nearly a quarter century of operation, the rotating presidency had begun to acquire procedural characteristics that were partly independent of current political circumstances. Relations among the four governments, particularly between Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, were burdened by serious tensions. Prior to the summit, Tusk faced considerable domestic political pressure to approach the meeting with maximum distance and scepticism. Ultimately, he too publicly questioned the relevance of the Visegrad Group itself:

"After returning from Prague, I will tell you whether the Visegrad Group still makes sense."⁴

³ Visegrad Group, "Presidency Programs," accessed May 28, 2026, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/presidency-programs/presidency-programs>

⁴ TVN24, "Donald Tusk: wróć z Pragi i powiem, czy Grupa Wyszehradzka ma jeszcze sens," February 26, 2024, accessed May 28, 2026, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/grupa-wyszehradzka-donald-tusk-wroce-z-pragi-i-powiem-czy-v4-ma-jeszcze-sens-st7792041>



In the end, Tusk answered his own question positively. Four months later, Poland assumed the presidency under the slogan "Back to Basics."⁵ In this case, the significance of the Prague meeting did not lie in any tangible political achievement but rather in maintaining continuity. The summit became primarily a symbolic and procedural act confirming that Visegrad cooperation continues to function even during periods of political conflict.

At the same time, Tusk did not organise a prime ministers' summit during the Polish Presidency beginning in the summer of 2025, and his successor in the rotating chairmanship, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, acted similarly. Both experienced politicians openly linked the V4 to contemporary political struggles. Orbán repeatedly portrayed Donald Tusk as someone who did not represent the V4. "Poland has already half returned to the V4," he stated on several occasions while commenting on the 2025 presidential election victory of Karol Nawrocki, one of Tusk's principal domestic political opponents. In contrast to Tusk, Orbán referred to Nawrocki as a representative of the V4. Tusk, for his part, made a number of disparaging remarks about his Hungarian counterpart while Orbán remained in office.⁶ Following the electoral defeat of Fidesz-KDNP in April 2026, however, Tusk fundamentally changed his position regarding the V4. During his meeting in Warsaw with Hungary's new prime minister, Péter Magyar, he spoke positively about participating in the Budapest V4 summit.⁷

It may reasonably be assumed that both the Polish Presidency of 2024–2025 and the subsequent Hungarian Presidency were influenced by intense electoral campaigns in the two countries. This likely explains why Tusk in 2024–2025 and Orbán in 2025–2026 were reluctant to meet political allies of their domestic rivals from neighbouring V4 states.

⁵ Visegrad Group, "V4: Back to Basics—Polish Presidency in the Visegrad Group 2024–2025," July 1, 2024, accessed May 28, 2026, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/v4-back-to-basicspolish>

⁶ For example: "Even Orbán—of whom I cannot say anything positive, my former friend—understood that it makes no sense to keep paying after the Germans, the French, the Belgians, the Dutch, and the Swedes." Author's translation. Donald Tusk, "Spotkanie otwarte w Sopocie," *Donald Tusk – kanał oficjalny* (YouTube video), accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHZ9hxl6u6A>

⁷ Polska Agencja Prasowa, "Premierzy Polski i Węgier w Warszawie o współpracy w ramach Grupy Wyszehradzkiej, energetyce i Ukrainie," accessed May 28, 2026, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/premier-zwyciestwo-petera-magyar-na-wegrzech-znak-dla-wielu-ze-rzady-prawa-nie-sa>



The continued operation of both institutional pillars—the rotating presidency and the International Visegrad Fund—since their establishment demonstrates the resilience of the Visegrad Cooperation. At the same time, the Orbán–Tusk confrontation and the experience of Hungarian–Polish intergovernmental tensions between 2022 and 2026 show that the rotating presidency remains vulnerable to domestic political developments. This is particularly evident when the foreign relations of the government holding the presidency are complicated by bilateral tensions with another V4 member state.

2. Criteria of Functionality: Prosperity, Well-Being, Security, and Political Influence

This paper proposes that an intergovernmental cooperation platform should be considered functional if the expected benefits of collective action for participating states exceed those of acting independently. In the case of the Visegrad Cooperation, this can be assessed in three principal areas:

1. The enhancement of citizens' prosperity and well-being through cooperation, particularly in economic and cultural terms;
2. The management of security challenges;
3. The strengthening of political influence through coordinated action.

(Furthermore, a cooperation framework may be regarded not merely as functional but as successful if it generates benefits that exceed not only those available through unilateral action but also those offered by alternative regional cooperation arrangements. This study focuses on functionality rather than comparative success.)

The key question is therefore whether the benefits arising from economic, cultural, and security cooperation persist even when political cooperation among the governments of the four states weakens.

Citizens' prosperity and well-being are influenced by more than economic indicators alone. Expanding trade, rising investment, job creation, and infrastructure development all directly affect prosperity. Well-being is an even broader category, encompassing cultural opportunities, regional self-confidence, strengthened historical and civilisational identity, and



the awareness that one's country acts not in isolation but as part of a broader Central European community.

The security dimension is more direct. If an intergovernmental framework contributes to strengthening the defence, military, energy, food security, or border protection interests of its member states, it can be considered functional in a meaningful sense. This is particularly important in the case of the V4, as the region simultaneously constitutes a security space composed of NATO members situated on the eastern frontier of the European Union and a geographical zone located at the epicentre of great-power geopolitical competition.

Political cooperation, as a third dimension, can partially serve the first two objectives. Joint action may increase the room for manoeuvre of member states in European and international forums, strengthen their negotiating positions, and enable governments to pursue selected domestic and foreign policy objectives with greater weight and visibility.

The V4 should be compared neither to a model of deep integration nor to a mere diplomatic club. It should be understood on its own terms: as a flexible, low-institutionalisation Central European coordination platform whose intensity varies over time.

3. Mutual Trade and Investment Among the V4 Countries

Trade

One of the most measurable dimensions of the functionality of the Visegrad Cooperation is the development of economic relations. This study proceeds from the assumption that the importance of international trade in the global economy has been increasing over the long term: the share of world exports in global GDP has risen from approximately 13 percent in the early 1960s to nearly 30 percent today.⁸ All four Visegrad countries possess export-oriented economies that are deeply integrated into European industrial and service supply chains.

Trade with neighbouring or geographically proximate countries enjoys a number of natural advantages: shorter transport distances, potentially lower logistics costs, and greater

⁸ World Bank, "Exports of Goods and Services (% of GDP)," *World Development Indicators* database, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.EXP.GNFS.ZS>



opportunities to build business relationships through direct personal contacts. In the case of the V4, these advantages are reinforced by the European Union's customs union and single market, which eliminate tariffs on trade among member states and reduce administrative barriers to regional commerce.

Although maritime transport is considerably cheaper than land transport, the global COVID-19 pandemic, followed by disruptions affecting the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz, demonstrated the vulnerability of key nodes in global supply chains. In such an environment, compact regional supply networks capable of operating largely overland gain additional importance.

Particularly significant is the fact that trade among the V4 countries has not only expanded in nominal terms but has also increased its share within total exports and imports in several bilateral relationships. The evolution of Hungarian–Polish trade relations provides a particularly illustrative example. While political relations between the two governments deteriorated after 2022, Poland steadily advanced in the ranking of Hungary's trading partners and has now become Hungary's third most important partner in both exports and imports,⁹ despite not having been among the top five only a few years earlier.

This suggests that once economic relations reach a certain level of depth, they become at least partially detached from the state of intergovernmental political relations.

Chambers of Commerce

A qualitative indicator of the growing convergence among economic actors within the V4 is the establishment of bilateral chambers of commerce in all bilateral relationships over the past decades. The sole exception is the Czech–Slovak economic relationship, which, owing to its uniquely deep historical, linguistic, and interpersonal embeddedness, has not required such an institution. The most recent chamber to be established was the Polish–Hungarian Chamber of Commerce in 2020.

⁹ Trading Economics, "Hungary Imports by Country," *United Nations COMTRADE Database*, accessed May 28, 2026, <https://tradingeconomics.com/hungary/imports-by-country>



Of the five chambers currently operating within the V4 framework, only the Hungarian–Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry is inactive. The others are active organisations that regularly organise events and large-scale conferences, engage their members, and expect more than merely symbolic participation.¹⁰ These are therefore not merely formal business platforms but institutions that satisfy genuine economic needs.

From the perspective of trade among the V4 countries, the completion of the Polish–Slovak–Hungarian section of the Via Carpathia transport corridor connecting the Baltic region with the Black Sea is of particular importance. The project seeks to strengthen north–south connectivity, which has historically been far less developed in Central Europe than east–west links.

The slow progress of the Slovak section, regardless of governmental declarations and political intentions, also demonstrates that even in matters of strategic regional importance, the existence of a favourable political environment alone is insufficient to guarantee the completion of major infrastructure projects.

Foreign Direct Investment

Alongside the growth of trade volumes, the strengthening of mutual foreign direct investment can also contribute to economic growth and job creation. Empirical observations suggest that capital flows within the V4 appear to be more sensitive to political relations than trade flows, although further research would be required to confirm this conclusion.

Background discussions conducted during the preparation of this study repeatedly indicated that companies and financial actors consider not only economic indicators when making investment decisions but also perceptions concerning a country's strategic political direction and international reputation.

¹⁰ The Polish–Hungarian Chamber of Commerce e.g. held its annual General Assembly on June 10, 2026, during the preparation of this study. Polsko-Węgierska Izba Gospodarcza, "General Assembly Meeting / Walne Zgromadzenie / Taggyűlés 2026," accessed June 16, 2026, <https://plhucc.glueup.com/event/general-assembly-meeting-walne-zgromadzenie-taggy%C5%B1%C3%A9s-2026-178822>



For example, during a background discussion with a business figure connected to major Polish entrepreneurial circles, it emerged that several potential investors linked their decision to enter the Hungarian market to the outcome of the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary election. The announcement by Poland's PKO Bank of its intention to enter the Hungarian market shortly after the election further suggests a close relationship between political developments and capital flows.¹¹

The contrast between trade and investment patterns reveals much about the functioning of the V4 as a whole. Structural factors continue to sustain the economic rationale for cooperation, but the intensity of cooperation and the level of economic confidence remain closely connected to political developments.

4. Shared Historical Experience, Civilisational Embeddedness, Regional Pride, and Cultural Cooperation

An important question is whether an intergovernmental framework can influence citizens' well-being at all, particularly in those dimensions of quality of life that are not directly linked to material prosperity, such as national pride, the social foundations of a European way of life, or cultural opportunities.

One of the most important shared historical experiences of the four Visegrad countries is liberation from the Soviet-Russian sphere of influence, followed by the experience of formally returning to Western civilisation through accession to NATO and the European Union. In all four countries, key elements of national identity are connected to resistance against the previous political system: the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, resistance to the military intervention of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, and the memory of the Solidarity movement in Poland all form part of a common historical experience of opposition to Soviet domination.

National pride associated with those who participated in the struggle to regain and preserve sovereignty can easily expand into a broader regional, Central European, or Visegrad identity.

¹¹ Zsanett Oláh, "Magyarországon tervez fióktelepet nyitni a legnagyobb lengyel bank," *Index*, April 14, 2026, accessed May 28, 2026, <https://index.hu/gazdasag/2026/04/14/pko-bank-polski-lengyelorszag-varso-magyarorszag-terjeszkedes/>



This tendency is reinforced by the fact that nowhere else in Central Europe did democratic transformation occur within such a similar timeframe and along such comparable developmental trajectories. In retrospect, the political transformations of 1989–1991 provided historical validation for the objectives represented by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the reform movements of 1968, and the Polish Solidarity movement.

Moreover, the national communities of the four countries actively participated in one another's struggles. Polish blood donations sent to Hungary during the 1956 Revolution, protests in Budapest against the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak interest in the Polish Solidarity movement all contribute to a shared regional memory.

The V4 is therefore not merely a form of intergovernmental cooperation but also a concept that helps societies understand themselves not as isolated peripheral actors but as members of a historically interconnected Central European community belonging to the West while possessing its own distinctive experiences.

This process of awareness-building is supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

The International Visegrad Fund

The International Visegrad Fund (IVF), headquartered in Bratislava, is the only permanent institution of the Visegrad Cooperation. Its mission is to support cultural, academic, and educational cooperation, youth exchanges, cross-border initiatives, and tourism.¹²

The order of these objectives itself suggests that the founders placed particular confidence in the long-term potential of cultural and societal cooperation. During its first two decades of operation, the IVF distributed nearly EUR 100 million through approximately 6,000 projects, 2,000 scholarships, and 500 artist residencies. In 2020, the success rate of grant applications

¹² International Visegrad Fund, *Agreement Concerning the Establishment of the International Visegrad Fund*, Arts. 1–2, June 9, 2000, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.visegradfund.org/about-us/the-fund/agreement-on-the-establishment-of-the-international-visegrad-fund/>



was below 30 percent, indicating that demand for V4-related artistic, academic, cultural, and civic cooperation remains far from fully exhausted.¹³

A similar pattern can be observed in the grant programmes of the Wacław Felczak Foundation, which promotes Polish–Hungarian friendship. In some years, the number of successful applications for book and music publishing projects represented only a fraction of overall demand.¹⁴ This demonstrates that interest in regional cultural cooperation is not merely the result of political intentions but rests upon genuine societal demand and an existing intellectual foundation.

The continuity of the International Visegrad Fund and its growing budget provide further evidence of the viability of cultural cooperation within the V4 framework. Although withdrawal from the Fund is formally possible and the founders even established procedures for its potential dissolution,¹⁵ no serious proposal to terminate its activities emerged even during the political conflicts of recent years.

This suggests that the “soft” dimension of Visegrad cooperation is considerably more stable than cooperation at the highest political level.

5. Security: Defence Cooperation and Tangible Results

If one accepts the central premise of this study—that one indicator of the functionality of an intergovernmental framework is whether it enhances the security of both states and citizens—then the results of V4 defence cooperation clearly demonstrate that the format functions effectively.

One of the most tangible achievements of this cooperation is the V4 EU Battlegroup, a rapid-reaction military formation that has been placed on standby on several occasions during the

¹³ Tamás Orbán, *The International Visegrad Fund in 30 Years of the V4* (Budapest: Danube Institute, 2021), 70.

¹⁴ Wacław Felczak Foundation, “Hatalmas érdeklődés, dupla annyi nyertes,” accessed June 19, 2026, <https://wfa.hu/aktualitasok/hatalmas-erdeklodes-dupla-annyi-nyertes>

¹⁵ *Agreement Concerning the Establishment of the International Visegrad Fund*, June 9, 2000, accessed May 28, 2026, https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/uploads.mangoweb.org/shared-prod/visegradfund.org/uploads/2018/12/IVF_statute.pdf



past decade.¹⁶ Defence cooperation is supported by a well-structured governing body known as the Senior Body, composed of deputy defence ministers or state secretaries for defence from the four member states.¹⁷ The existence of this mechanism goes beyond occasional political consultations and demonstrates that in certain areas the V4 has developed forms of regular coordination that display elements of institutionalisation.

Defence represents a policy area in which recurring, structured, and professional forms of cooperation have emerged. Unlike many political initiatives that fluctuate according to electoral cycles, defence cooperation tends to be driven by long-term strategic interests and practical requirements.

6. Common or Similar Political Objectives

The most active phase of political cooperation within the V4 during the past decade occurred between 2017 and 2020.

At that time, Poland was governed by Law and Justice (represented in the European Parliament by the European Conservatives and Reformists Group), Hungary by Fidesz–KDNP (then affiliated with the European People's Party), Slovakia by coalition governments dominated first by Robert Fico and later Peter Pellegrini's Smer party (then aligned with the Socialists and Democrats), and the Czech Republic by Andrej Babiš's ANO movement (then affiliated with ALDE).

The parties of the four prime ministers belonged to four different European political families, demonstrating that the political functioning of the V4 is not closely linked to European party politics.

The most visible form of joint political action was opposition to illegal migration and mandatory migrant relocation quotas. However, cooperation extended well beyond this issue. Meetings among V4 prime ministers became a regular feature before European Council

¹⁶ Visegrad Group, "V4 EU Battlegroup," accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/military-cooperation/v4-eu-battlegroup>.

¹⁷ Visegrad Group, "Defence Cooperation Structure," accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/defence>



summits, and the period also witnessed the highest number of V4+ meetings. The value of these gatherings lay in the fact that the four countries were able to represent not only the interests of the region but also their own national interests with greater weight than would have been possible individually.

Political cooperation was not confined to the level of prime ministers and ministers. It also filtered down into the lower levels of diplomacy and foreign policy.

According to background discussions conducted with diplomats representing V4 countries in major powers, joint requests for meetings submitted on behalf of all four states often received faster and more favourable responses from ministers and senior officials than requests submitted separately.

External challenges later proved capable of "forcing" V4 cooperation even when political harmony among the four governments had largely disappeared. One example was the issue of low-cost Ukrainian grain flooding regional markets during 2023–2024.

A more recent example of substantial, though not complete, political alignment was the decision of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary not to participate in the European Union's defence loan programme established for Ukraine.

These developments suggest that despite potentially significant strategic differences regarding geopolitical challenges, the countries of the region remain exposed to the consequences of great-power competition in broadly similar ways. This periodically reveals common interests and creates either incentives or necessities for coordinated action, regardless of the prevailing political climate.



7. Factors Strengthening the Functionality of the V4

The preceding analysis highlights several factors that support the functioning of the Visegrad Cooperation independently of the current level of political alignment among the participating governments:

- geographical compactness;
- a shared civilisational frontier and common historical experience;

Furthermore:

- a limited number of member states;
- the growing relevance of ad hoc intergovernmental formats.

Geographical Compactness

The Visegrad region constitutes an exceptionally compact geographical area. The combined territory of the four countries is smaller than either Texas or France and only slightly larger than Spain. The distance between the two most distant capitals, Budapest and Warsaw, is shorter than the distance between Los Angeles and San Francisco in California or between Paris and Marseille in France.

Geographical compactness alone does not guarantee successful cooperation, but it significantly reduces costs and technical barriers. Shorter distances facilitate faster logistical connections, denser business and political interactions, and more easily integrated infrastructure networks.

A Shared Civilisational Frontier and Common Historical Experience

The countries of the V4 occupy the same side of a major civilisational frontier, a reality closely linked to the shared historical experiences discussed above. The four Visegrad countries have historically been located on the eastern frontier of Western civilisation, bordering both the Orthodox and Muslim worlds.



This frontier status manifests itself not only in religious terms but also across broader social and cultural dimensions. One example is the so-called Trieste–St. Petersburg line, which runs near the eastern borders of the V4 region and separates different family structures and social models. Such civilisational fault lines have historically also functioned as zones of great-power competition.

The attempt undertaken by Moscow during the second half of the twentieth century to integrate the region permanently into its sphere of influence ultimately failed. Neither Orthodox civilisation, nor earlier Muslim civilisation, nor communism succeeded in becoming the dominant civilisational framework of the region.

Today, the countries of the V4 are also characterised by particularly lively debates regarding new social and cultural trends emerging in Western Europe.

All of this suggests that political disagreements within the region occur within a shared civilisational framework whose fundamental characteristics have not been permanently altered either by external imperial ambitions or by the major ideological projects of the twentieth century, nor—at least so far—by those of the twenty-first century.

A Limited Number of Member States

The regional initiative most frequently presented as an alternative or competitor to the V4 is the Three Seas Initiative.

When comparing the two formats, one of the V4's most significant advantages is its small number of member states. While the Visegrad Cooperation consists of four countries, the Three Seas Initiative brings together thirteen full member states and includes additional partner participants.

At the level of heads of state and government, logistical challenges such as accommodation, interpretation, and organisational coordination are manageable even within the Three Seas framework. However, at ministerial, expert, analytical, and civil-society levels, the difference between a four-member and a much larger format becomes substantial.



V4 events can be organised relatively easily and at comparatively low cost. This manageability resulting from scale strongly favours practical cooperation.

The Growing Importance of Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Formats

Widespread dissatisfaction with the functioning of European Union institutions, regardless of political orientation, the perceived slowness of EU decision-making, and the intensification of great-power competition all favour flexible cooperation frameworks that avoid building extensive bureaucratic structures while remaining capable of rapid political coordination.

8. Factors Weakening the Functionality of the V4

Excessive Expectations

The Visegrad Cooperation should not be understood as a model of deep integration, a common foreign policy bloc, or an independent geopolitical pole.

Whenever such expectations are imposed upon it, it becomes almost inevitable that observers will identify areas in which the format appears unable to fulfil those ambitions. The V4 functions best when it is expected to perform the role for which it was originally established: coordination, consultation, occasional joint action, and sectoral cooperation.

The Impact of Domestic Political Cycles

The tensions in Hungarian–Polish intergovernmental relations between 2022 and 2026 demonstrated how the deterioration of one of the most important bilateral relationships within the V4 can affect the functioning of the entire format.

When a political actor governing one V4 member state becomes a clearly identifiable domestic political opponent in another member state, institutional cooperation may also suffer.

This is particularly visible in the case of the rotating presidency. Under such circumstances, summits, events, and declarations organised by the presidency may cease to function solely as instruments of regional cooperation and instead become reflections of domestic political conflicts within the member states.



9. Institutionalisation as a Mixed Factor

Institutionalisation represents both a strength and a weakness for the V4.

On the one hand, low levels of institutionalisation increase flexibility because they prevent the emergence of rigid structures that could be torn apart by political disagreements.

On the other hand, limited institutionalisation weakens the format by reducing the number of mechanisms capable of encouraging member states to engage in systematic collective action.

The stable operation of the International Visegrad Fund demonstrates that in certain areas deeper sectoral institutionalisation may be beneficial. Based on recent experience, such an approach may be worth considering in fields such as defence, agriculture, and migration.

Conclusion

The Visegrad Cooperation cannot be understood either as a continuously deepening integration project or as a permanent political alliance. The intensity of its operation rises and falls in cyclical patterns.

Although this intensity depends to a significant extent on the degree of political alignment among the governments of the participating states, the continued existence of the format is supported by structural factors that extend beyond current political relations.

Geographical compactness, economic interconnectedness, shared historical experiences, cultural ties, and common security and agricultural interests continue to generate incentives for cooperation even when political conflicts place pressure on the framework.

The distinctive characteristic of the Visegrad Cooperation lies precisely in the fact that its low level of institutionalisation simultaneously limits its capabilities while also stabilising its operation through the flexibility that this institutional lightness provides.

The future of the V4 is therefore unlikely to point toward deeper Central European integration. Rather, it is likely to remain a flexible coordination framework capable, in selected areas, of



aligning the positions of its member states, organising joint action, and occasionally facilitating political convergence.

The paradox of the V4's endurance is that its low level of institutionalisation makes deep integration difficult, yet the very same flexibility makes it resilient in the face of political conflicts. The Visegrad Cooperation has survived for more than three decades not because it was strong in every period, but because it was able to survive periods of weakness as well.