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The Visegrad Group Countries Towards the War in Ukraine in 2022

Key words: war in Ukraine, Visegrad Group, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia

Abstract: The article aims to present the position of the Visegrad Group countries towards the war in Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022 with the attack of the Russian Federation on this country. On the one hand, the aim is to show the motivation and actions of the authorities of the four Visegrad Group countries towards Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as the forms and types of assistance provided to Ukraine by each country separately. On the other hand, the aim is to answer the question: how did Hungary's different position affect cooperation within the Visegrad Group? What are the reasons for Hungary's different approach to the war in Ukraine and Russia's policy? It can be observed that the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia presented a pro-Ukrainian position in their actions towards the war in Ukraine, while Hungary, unlike the other Visegrad countries, presented a pro-Russian position, which caused a crisis in cooperation within the Visegrad Group. Slovakia's attitude changed to a more pro-Russian one after the Smer party, headed by Robert Fico, came to power at the end of 2023. Now we can observe the division of the Visegrad Group into two camps: Polish-Czech and Slovak-Hungarian.

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Introduction

The Visegrad Group (V4) as a regional grouping was established in 1991, initially under the name of the Visegrad Triangle. After the breakup of Czechoslovakia, the name Visegrad Group, composed of the Czech Republic, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Hungary, came into use¹. The aim of the V4 was Western European integration and the promotion of Central Europe as a region in international relations focused on cooperation. When the integration goals were achieved and the four Visegrad countries became members of NATO and the European Union, it was decided to continue cooperation in the V4 format at the political, sectoral, and civic level with the support of the International Visegrad Fund². Annual rotating presidencies with their own program add dynamics to cooperation and ensure the continuity of the existence of this regional grouping³. National interests were represented within the Visegrad Group, which meant that the Group did not always speak with one voice on the European forum. Developing a common position has always depended on the specific issue and the political elite ruling in a given country, which influenced the negotiations at the V4 level. The Visegrad Group has repeatedly experienced crises and the end of cooperation within this format was predicted. The approach to Visegrad policy has changed fundamentally over the years. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, it was largely the result of the political forces that were in power at a given time, and common points were emphasized in European politics and those related to energy security and regional stability. For Poland and Hungary, the Group played an important role in regional policy. Over the years of its existence, the Visegrad Group has developed a mechanism for highlighting common issues and putting aside issues that divided individual member states. The partners differed in their approach to the Russian Federation and their position on the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which began in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea. The attitude of the V4 partners towards the Ukrainian crisis has gradually evolved. At the EU level, the V4 countries supported the sanctions imposed on Russia

¹ A. Tatarenko (ed.), *The Visegrad Group on its 30th anniversary: idea, history, cooperation*, Works of the Institute of Central Europe No. 10/2020, <https://ies.lublin.pl> (18.12.2023); A. Czyż, *Współpraca regionalna państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Doświadczenia i perspektywy*, Katowice 2018; M. Dangerfield, *The Visegrád Group in the Expanded European Union: From Preaccession to Postaccession Cooperation*, «East European Politics and Societies» 2002, No. 3, p. 655; M. Dangerfield, *Visegrad Group cooperation and "Europeanisation" of new EU member states*, Cambridge University Press 2014.

² <https://www.visegradfund.org/> (19.12.2023).

³ <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations;> <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs> (19.12.2023).

in connection with the annexation of Crimea and the separatist rebellion in eastern Ukraine, and supported, in various ways, internal reforms in Ukraine⁴. Over time, new threads emerged in national political discourses revealing fundamental differences in the assessment of the situation and proposed solutions. Dividing lines are being created regarding the assessment of the degree of threat from Russia, the effectiveness of sanctions and their further application, and methods of pursuing national economic interests, especially in the energy sphere⁵.

Initially, in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the Visegrad Group confirmed at the level of prime ministers its support for Ukraine in the context of the Russian invasion through humanitarian and financial assistance offered through the International Visegrad Fund⁶. In turn, at the level of parliamentary representatives, the V4 condemned Russia's actions, considering Russia directly responsible for the war against Ukraine⁷. However, the differences in approach to the war in Ukraine turned out to be so serious that no formal meeting of the V4 heads of government was organized in the period from March 8 to November 2022. The situation between the countries was so unfavorable that even the ceremonial handover of the presidency of the Visegrad Group to the Slovaks after the Hungarian presidency did not take place. It was only on October 11, 2022, that the presidents of the format countries met for the first time, and on November 24, 2022 – the prime ministers. The Visegrad format is being 'unfrozen' very carefully. At the same time, the division between Hungary and the other V4 members is clearly visible, although this slowly began to change after the parliamentary elections in Slovakia in 2023, in which the Smer party won and its leader Robert Fico became prime minister. Hungary's actions and attitude in the face of the war in Ukraine did not foster a good atmosphere within the format. There is no doubt that the differences in approach to the war in Ukraine, including Hungary's blocking of the financial aid package for Ukraine, constitute a fundamental rift in both the political and axiological dimensions between the Group's partners. At the same time, the Hungarian position towards EU

⁴ D. Héjj, *Format wyszehradzki powoli się „odmraża”, «Komentarze IEŚ» 2022, No. 744, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/format-wyszehradzki-powoli-sie-odmraza/> (18.12.2023).*

⁵ A. Romanowska, *The Visegrad Group towards Russian aggression against Ukraine*, <https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/grupa-wyszehradzka-wobec-rosyjskiej-agresji-na-ukraine/> (2.01.2024).

⁶ *Joint Communiqué on Providing Joint V4 Assistance to Refugees from Ukraine*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/> (19.12.2023).

⁷ *Conclusions of the Meeting of European Affairs Committees of V4 Parliaments*, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/> (19.12.2023).

sanctions, energy policy, and relations with Russia was often different from the approach of other countries.

After February 24, 2022, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia decided to fully engage in supporting Ukraine, including the transfer of weapons. Hungary did not join this group. They also did not allow arms supplies to transit through their territory. According to the narrative in the Hungarian public media, the countries that transfer weapons to Ukraine are seeking to prolong the conflict and delay peace talks. The dominant view expressed by Hungarian experts sympathetic to the government is that countries that transfer weapons have 'one foot in a war' that Ukraine will not win. Hungary has not yet ratified the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to include Sweden⁸ and is also blocking the meetings of the NATO-Ukraine commission. According to the Hungarian side, unless Ukraine changes the law regarding national minorities, Hungary will not agree to formalize relations. Despite Hungary's opposition, the European Council decided in December 2023 at the European Council summit in Brussels to start accession negotiations with the authorities of Ukraine and Moldova. Viktor Orbán left the chamber to allow a unanimous decision but blocked a financial aid package from the European Union for Ukraine⁹.

Methodology

Russia's aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, became a breakthrough in time for the security architecture in Europe. The war in Ukraine (officially called a 'special military operation' in Russia), which was an escalation of the conflict that had been ongoing in the eastern part of Ukraine since 2014, became an important event for the shape of international relations, towards which individual states had to take a specific position. The aim's to present the position of the Visegrad Group countries towards the war in Ukraine from 2022. On the one hand, the aim is to show the motivation and actions of the authorities of the four Visegrad Group countries towards Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as the forms and types of assistance provided to Ukraine by each country separately. On the other hand, the aim is to answer the question: how did Hungary's different approach influence cooperation within the Visegrad Group? Several research questions were asked:

⁸ D. Héjj, *Format wyszehradzki...*

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-set-summit-showdown-ukraine-with-hungarys-orban-2023-12-13/> (2.01.2024).

1. Have the Visegrad Group countries taken a common position on Russia's attack on Ukraine?
2. Has the Visegrad Group, as a regional grouping, been involved in helping Ukraine and taken joint action in the face of Russian aggression?
3. What internal and external factors determined and determine the position and policy of individual Visegrad Group countries towards the war in Ukraine?
4. What are the reasons for Hungary's different approach to the war in Ukraine and Russia's policy?
5. How did Hungary's different approach affect cooperation within the Visegrad Group?

The main thesis is: after Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia presented a pro-Ukrainian position in their actions towards the war in Ukraine, while Hungary, unlike the other Visegrad countries, presented a pro-Russian position, which caused a crisis in cooperation within the Visegrad Group. Slovakia's attitude changed to a more pro-Russian one after the Smer party, headed by Robert Fico, came to power at the end of 2023. Now we can observe the division of the Visegrad Group into two camps: Polish-Czech and Slovak-Hungarian.

The study is based on the analysis of primary sources, documents such as declarations and official statements of the V4, presidency programs, statements by Viktor Orbán, reports, and press releases, as well as on the analysis of the literature on the subject. A comparative method was used, which allows to compare the approach of individual Visegrad countries to the war in Ukraine and to indicate similarities and differences in their official positions and actions.

From a theoretical perspective, regional cooperation¹⁰ within the Visegrad Triangle and then the Visegrad Group is a manifestation of the phenomenon of new regionalism as a concept that appeared in international relations thanks to researchers such as Björn Hettne, and Fredrik Söderbaum, Louise Fawcett, and Andrew Hurrell¹¹. New regionalism was a response to the changing sys-

¹⁰ B. Hettne, F. Söderbaum, *Regional cooperation: a tool for addressing regional and global Challenges*, Göteborg 2006, p. 184. <http://www.ucrm.org/uploads/media/GlobalTaskForce.pdf> (18.02.2024).

¹¹ B. Hettne, F. Söderbaum, *Theorising the Rise of Regionness*, «New Political Economy» 2000, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 465, <http://gup.ub.gu.se/records/fulltext/191487/191487.pdf> (2.03.2024); F. Söderbaum, *Introduction: Theories of New Regionalism*, [in:] F. Söderbaum, T.M. Shaw (eds.), *Theories of New Regionalism*, New York 2003, p. 4, <http://www.palgraveconnect.com/pc/doi/finder/view/10.1057/9781403938794> (6.03.2024); L. Fawcett, *Regionalism in World Politics: Past and Present*, [in:] A. Kössler, M. Zimmek (eds.), *Elements of Regional Integration. A Multidimensional Approach*, Baden 2008, p. 5, http://www.academia.edu/2082898/Regionalism_in_World_Politics_Past_and_Present (8.03.2024); L. Fawcett, A. Hurrell, *Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order*,

tem of international relations after the end of the Cold War, it is related to the disappearance of the bipolar division of the world – it developed in the conditions of a multipolar and globalizing world. New regionalism was expressed by establishing cooperation between the countries of the Central and Eastern European region and creating regional groupings. The motive for establishing these structures was the need to use existing historical, cultural, political, economic, and social similarities, as well as natural geographical proximity, which facilitated contacts and joint ventures in various areas of cooperation. The Visegrad Group is sometimes identified by some researchers with the concept of Central Europe as a region. Determining the borders of the Central European region is a very difficult and controversial process because, from a historical point of view, the borders have been subject to many changes, culturally and politically. In some scientific publications, Central Europe is treated as a synonym for the Visegrad Group, presenting a narrow approach¹².

The issue undertaken results from the author's many years of interest in cooperation within the Visegrad Group, and the recent events related to the war in Ukraine are an indicator of changes in the architecture of security and international relations in Europe. This prompts reflection on the current policies of individual Visegrad countries and their consequences for regional cooperation in Central Europe and their position in the European Union. The novelty of the topic lies in the current approach and attempts to explain the reasons for the different approaches of Viktor Orbán's Hungary to the war in Ukraine.

Reactions and motivation of the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia to Russia's attack on Ukraine

All Visegrad Group countries decided to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine in response to the Russian attack in February 2022. According to UN data from December 6, 2022, over 8 million Ukrainian citizens crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border. Over 1.5 million have applied for international aid in Poland. Over 985,000 people crossed the border of Slovakia. people, and 102 thousand applied for the right of residence. In turn, in the Czech Republic, 466,000 people applied for such assistance. In the case of Hungary, 1.8 million

Oxford 1995; A. Hurrell, *Explaining the Resurgence of Regionalism in World Politics*, «Review of International Studies» 1995, Vol. 21, No. 4, p. 336.

¹² L.R. Johnson, *Central Europe. Enemies, neighbors, friends*, New York–Oxford 2002; T. Kisielewski, *Europa Środkowa – zakres pojęcia*, Lublin 1992; R. Zenderowski (ed.), *Europa Środkowa: wspólnota czy zbiorowość?*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 2004; S. Śkrabec, *Geografia wyobrażona. Koncepcja Europy Środkowej w XX wieku*, Kraków 2013.

people crossed the border and 32,000 people applied for help. This means that the percentage of people applying for aid in Hungary was less than 2%. This was mostly related to the fact that Hungary was treated as a transit country and that a high percentage of refugees were Transcarpathian Hungarians who had Hungarian citizenship and therefore did not need to apply for help¹³.

The position of the government of the Czech Republic towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was part of the long-standing narrative of all government coalition groups and reflected the program declaration of the government of Petr Fiala, which emphasized the need to revise relations with the Russian Federation. At the same time, the symbolic gestures of the government of the Czech Republic towards Ukraine confirmed the declared increase in the state's involvement in the activities of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. The actions that the government of the Czech Republic is taking for Ukraine also prove that Petr Fiala's cabinet is more focused on eastern issues and presents the Czech Republic as an important partner within the Visegrad Group and a significant ally of Poland in the matter of eastern policy¹⁴.

The Czech Republic has become one of the most important – next to Poland – countries of refuge for Ukrainian refugees. A large number of them headed there, due to the large community of economic migrants from Ukraine on the Czech labor market (approx. 150,000 before the Russian invasion). Even though the Czech Republic is not the main refugee destination in response to Russian aggression, in an act of solidarity, the government of the Czech Republic declared full solidarity with Ukraine, also offering several aid measures. Refugee assistance centers were established in the Czech Republic, which, in addition to mandatory registration, provided refugees with, among others: accommodation and humanitarian aid¹⁵. An important step taken by Petr Fiala's government was the preparation of a package of laws called 'Lex Ukrajina', intended to regulate the rules of residence and employment of refugees, health insurance, the use of social benefits and education, and thus aimed at managing the crisis as best as possible¹⁶.

¹³ D. Héjj, *Format wyszehradzki...*

¹⁴ Sz. Czarnecki, *Republika Czeska wobec konfliktu rosyjsko-ukraińskiego*, «Komentarze IeŚ» 2022, No. 521, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/republika-czeska-wobec-konfliktu-rosyjsko-ukrainskiego/> (16.02.2022).

¹⁵ M. Wasiuta, *Czechy wobec uchodźców z Ukrainy – krajowe mechanizmy relokacji*, «Analizy OSW», 28.03.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-03-28/czechy-wobec-uchodzcow-z-ukrainy-krajowe-mechanizmy-relokacji> (8.09.2023).

¹⁶ Sz. Czarnecki, *Republika Czeska: pomoc uchodźcom i zmiany legislacyjne*, «Komentarz IeŚ» 2022, No. 554, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/republika-czeska-pomoc-uchodzcom-i-zmiany-legislacyjne/> (11.03.2022).

The Czech Republic provided military assistance to Ukraine through the supply of weapons and military equipment, fuel supplies, the transfer of troops from other NATO countries through the country's territory, and provided the necessary logistics services. Russia's aggression has been denied by both the government, opposition parties, and the president of the Czech Republic – Miloš Zeman, as well as his successor in this position, Petr Pavel (he became president after the elections in 2023). Political support for Ukraine is complemented by large-scale social mobilization¹⁷.

In Poland, since Russia's attack on Ukraine, one could observe the unity of society and political elites towards the attacked Ukraine, both the ruling Law and Justice party and the opposition parties, including Civic Platform. Poland was in the vanguard of humanitarian aid and support for Ukrainian refugees, who arrived in Poland in the largest numbers and could count on huge social mobilization, and support from non-governmental organizations and Polish authorities, which created reception points and offered financial and material assistance. It is worth noting that this support was largely grassroots social initiatives, relying on the involvement of individual citizens, social groups, and non-governmental organizations. Their activity was an essential element of the refugee aid system, co-organized by local authorities and government administration¹⁸.

In 2022 alone, Polish aid to Ukraine amounted to approximately 1% of Poland's GDP¹⁹. Poland was also one of the first countries to start providing military aid to the fighting Ukraine on a large scale. In the first weeks and months of the war, some countries, especially Germany, did not want to provide Ukraine with more advanced weapons so as not to irritate Russia. According to data from 2023, the value of Polish military assistance to Ukraine reached EUR 3 billion²⁰. Poland plays an important role as a logistics center for Ukraine and a strategic partner within NATO on the eastern flank of the Alliance. The Polish government of Mateusz Morawiecki, and then the government of Donald Tusk (after the parliamentary elections in 2023), has been declaring political support for Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale

¹⁷ Sz. Czarniecki, *Republika Czeska: pomoc i solidarność z Ukrainą*, «Komentarze IEŚ» 2022, No. 541, <https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ies-komentarze-541-53-2022.pdf> (1.03.2022).

¹⁸ S. Grabowska, A. Pięta-Szawara, *Wsparcie Polski na rzecz uchodźców z Ukrainy w obliczu wojny w 2022 r. – wybrane aspekty*, «Journal of Modern Science» 2023, Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 388, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13166/jms/161538> (26.11.2023).

¹⁹ <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art38178361-ile-polska-wydala-na-pomoc-ukrainie-rzad-morawieckiego-podal-szacunkowe-dane> (3.01.2024).

²⁰ <https://defence24.pl/wojna-na-ukrainie-raport-specjalny-defence24/wiemy-ile-polska-przeznaczyla-na-pomoc-wojskowa-dla-ukrainy-defence24-news> (3.01.2024).

war in Ukraine, unequivocally condemning Russia for its attacks on Ukraine. Poland was and remains one of the most important partners and advocates of Ukraine's interests, providing multi-dimensional assistance, although cracks in mutual relations have also appeared in the form of a grain and transport crisis around carriers protesting at the border²¹.

From the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Slovakia was in the vanguard of countries providing military assistance to Ukraine. This was directly related to the strong involvement of the Slovak authorities in political, diplomatic, and humanitarian support for Kyiv. The Slovak authorities have presented a clear position since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. They defined Russia as an aggressor that had committed an illegal military invasion of its neighbor. Slovakia is one of the EU countries most dependent on Russian hydrocarbons: in 2020, their share in crude oil imports was 100% (the only such case in the EU), and in the case of natural gas – 85% (fourth place in the EU). In total, as much as 57% of Slovakia's energy needs were met by imports from this direction, which also puts it at the forefront of the EU countries most dependent on Russian energy. During the years of Fico's previous government (he ruled in 2006–2010 and 2012–2018), economic considerations had a significant impact on shaping Slovakia's policy towards Russia²².

Slovakia declared solidarity with Ukrainians and political, humanitarian, and military support for Kyiv²³. However, after the September 2023 parliamentary elections, which were won by the Smer party, Slovakia's position changed, which was announced by the leader of the winning party, Robert Fico, during the election campaign. This change involves suspending military support for Kyiv while emphasizing the maintenance of commercial cooperation²⁴.

²¹ <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/byl-kryzys-zbozowy-jest-transportowy-wrze-na-granicy-polsko-ukrainskiej-6965206734981888a.html> (3.01.2024).

²² G. Mesežnikov, *Slovakia and Russian Aggression against Ukraine: Domestic Political Context*, [in:] G. Mesežnikov, Z. Bútorová (eds.), *Russia's war against Ukraine. A view from Slovakia*, Bratislava: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2022, p. 19, https://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/publikacie/subory/Russia_war_against_Ukraine_2022.pdf (4.03.2024).

²³ Ł. Lewkowicz, *Słowacja wobec pierwszej fazy konfliktu na Ukrainie*, «Komentarze IEŚ» 2022, No. 545, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/slowacja-wobec-pierwszej-fazy-konfliktu-na-ukrainie/> (4.03.2022); Ł. Lewkowicz, „V4 Future”: *prezydencja Słowacji w Grupie Wyszehradzkiej w cieniu wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej*, «Komentarze IEŚ» 662, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/v4-future-prezydencja-slowacji-w-grupie-wyszehradzkiej-w-cieniu-wojny-rosyjsko-ukrainskiej/> (2.02.2024).

²⁴ A. Wilk, P. Żochowski, *Słowacja wstrzymuje wsparcie wojskowe dla Ukrainy. 623. dzień wojny*, «Analizy OSW», 9.11.2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-11-09/slowacja-wstrzymuje-wsparcie-wojskowe-dla-ukrainy-623-dzien-wojny> (18.12.2023).

The outbreak of the war showed the division of the Slovak political scene into two extreme camps. On the one hand, these are pro-democratic and pro-Western political parties that have sided with Ukraine. On the other hand, in Slovakia, there are active political parties whose rhetoric focuses on national egoism, extreme nationalism, lack of trust in the West, and sympathies towards undemocratic regimes. Representatives of these political forces did not support Ukraine and more or less openly sided with Russia. The current policy of supporting Ukraine has been limited as a result of early parliamentary elections. The vote of no confidence in Eduard Heger's government in December 2022 and the resulting political instability led to early elections, as a result of which a coalition of Hlas-SD, Smer-SD, and the Slovak National Party (SNS) took power²⁵.

Hungary's reactions and motivation to Russia's attack

The Hungarian reaction to Russian aggression in Ukraine was and still is the most controversial. On the one hand, Viktor Orbán's government supported EU sanctions against the Russian Federation, but on the other hand, it neither supports Ukraine with arms supplies nor agrees to the transit of weapons through its territory, and has not loosened ties with Russia and declares no support for EU actions aimed at the Russian energy sector. The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has not influenced Hungary's energy policy adjustment. Consistent dependence on Russian hydrocarbons is justified by their attractive price, as well as the slogan of protecting Hungarian families from the consequences of war²⁶. The position of the Hungarian government was clearly against introducing an embargo on Russian oil. The Hungarian side has negotiated a transitional period that will allow it to still buy this raw material cheaper. From the beginning of the war, the Hungarian authorities emphasized that they would not agree to sanctions targeting the energy sector, because it would lead to an increase in prices in Hungary – both for gas (if the contract with Gazprom was terminated) and electricity (if the Paks 2 project implemented by Rosatom was abandoned). This is accompanied by the slogan 'Hungarians cannot pay the price of war'. Hungarian Prime Minister Vik-

²⁵ K. Dębiec, *Słowacja: strategiczne dylematy po rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę*, «Komentarze OSW», 10.05.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2022-05-10/slowacja-strategiczne-dylematy-po-rosyjskiej-inwazji-na> (8.09.2023).

²⁶ D. Héjj, *Sto gyélaty? Węgry konsekwentnie uzależniają się od rosyjskich źródeł energii*, «Komentarze IES» 664, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/sto-gyelaty-wegry-konsekwentnie-uzalezniaja-sie-od-rosyjskich-zrodel-energii/> (25.11.2023).

tor Orbán noted in one of his interviews that destroying relations with Russia is not in the interest of Hungarians, cooperation must continue because the war will end one day²⁷.

Both Fidesz leaders and the Hungarian pro-government media remain very reserved towards Russian aggression, for example, they do not mention war victims at all²⁸. The war in Ukraine broke out less than a month and a half before the parliamentary elections in Hungary, which took place on April 3, 2022, in which Orbán's Fidesz party fought for another victory²⁹. One of the reasons for the decisive electoral success of this group, even obtaining the best result in history, was the situation around the war. The Fidesz-KDNP coalition has shown itself as the one that wants and is able to ensure security for Hungary. On the other side remained the opposition, which, according to members of the government coalition and the media sympathizing with this political environment, even tried to 'draw Hungary into the war' and thus posed a threat to Hungarian society³⁰.

The dominant narrative in Hungary about the war in Ukraine boils down to two slogans: the need to 'stay away from the war' and to prevent anyone from 'drawing Hungary into this war' in any way³¹. The Hungarian approach to the war in Ukraine was also based on the belief that Ukraine would not win the war, and that the beneficiaries of the new geopolitical order would be those countries that would not break off relations with the Russian Federation, but would arrange them anew³². The different Hungarian rhetoric towards the war in Ukraine also resulted in the deterioration of Polish-Hungarian relations. Orbán said: 'We see the war as a conflict of two Slavic nations, which we do not want to join, and Poles see it as their war, which they are almost fighting themselves'. Given this discrepancy, 'we must try to preserve as much as possible of the Hungarian-Polish friendship and strategic alliance for the period after the war'³³.

²⁷ Ł. Lewkowicz, S. Czarniecki, D. Héjji, *(Nie)jedność państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej wobec agresji rosyjskiej na Ukrainę*, «Komentarze IEŚ» No. 567, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/niejednoscpanstw-grupy-wyszehradzkiej-wobec-agresji-rosyjskiej-na-ukraine/> (26.09.2023).

²⁸ D. Héjji, *Węgry wobec wojny w Ukrainie*, «Komentarze IEŚ» 2022, No. 544, <https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ies-komentarze-544-56-2022.pdf> (30.11.2023).

²⁹ V. Orbán rządzi na Węgrzech od 2010 roku.

³⁰ F. Akgül Durakçay, *Hungary's position on the Russia-Ukraine war and its implications for cooperation in the Visegrad Group*, «Eurasian Research Journal» 2023, No. 5(4), p. 15, <https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2023.4-01> (26.11.2023).

³¹ D. Héjji, *Polityka Węgier wobec rosyjskiej agresji na Ukrainę*, «Prace IEŚ» 2022, No. 10, <https://ies.lublin.pl/prace/2022-010/> (26.11.2023).

³² Ibidem.

³³ A. Sadecki, *Wystąpienie programowe Orbána w Siedmiogrodzie*, «Analizy OSW», 2.08.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-08-02/wystapienie-programowe-orbana-w-siedmiogrodzie> (11.09.2023).

Hungary provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine. According to UNHCR data from March 23, 2022, approximately 330,000 people crossed the Hungarian-Ukrainian border. However, the Hungarian authorities provide a number that is more than twice as high, which results from adding up the number of people crossing the border of Hungary from Ukraine, but also from Romania, which is unjustified. No statistics are showing what percentage of refugees remain in Hungary. It can be assumed with a high degree of probability that this is the Hungarian minority from Transcarpathia, and a large part of the remaining refugees from Ukraine are moving either to the west of Europe (Austria, Germany) or north, towards Poland³⁴. The humanitarian operation was called 'Transcarpathian Bridge', which suggests that most of the aid goes to the border areas where Transcarpathian Hungarians live.

The main motives for Hungary's different position towards the war in Ukraine are Hungarian-Russian relations and Hungarian-Ukrainian relations against the background of the situation of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. Since the Fidesz party came to power in 2010, the foreign policy of the Orbán government has been implementing the concept of 'opening to the East'. It covers the area from Russia and Belarus to China and the East Asian region and is manifested in the intensification of economic cooperation with non-EU countries. Ensuring relatively low gas prices for individual customers thanks to a favorable contract with Russia, along with social transfers and anti-inflation measures constitute the basis of the internal policy of the ruling Fidesz party in Hungary³⁵. For Orbán's government, the economic benefits of cooperation with the Russian Federation in exchange for geopolitical neutrality and acceptance of Russian neo-imperial policy are important³⁶. The anti-EU rhetoric of the Hungarian government fits into this scenario – Budapest has repeatedly questioned the effectiveness of EU sanctions against Russia, but ultimately supported their introduction³⁷. The government's main message included criticism of EU sanctions against Russia and contesting the support provided to Ukraine by the West. Viktor Orbán emphasized

³⁴ Ł. Lewkowicz, S. Czarnecki, D. Héjj, *(Nie)jedność państw...*

³⁵ R. Rajczyk, *Wschodnia dyplomacja Budapesztu*, «Komentarze IeŚ» 2022, No. 524, https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ies-komentarze-524-36-2022_rr.pdf (15.12.2023).

³⁶ W. Rodkiewicz, K. Popławski, *Orbán w Moskwie – wyzwanie dla solidarności sojuszniczej*, «Analizy OSW», 2.02.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-02-02/orban-w-moskwie-wyzwanie-dla-solidarnosci-sojuszniczej> (8.09.2023).

³⁷ A. Sadecki, *Węgry wobec embarga na rosyjską ropę*, «Analizy OSW», 13.05.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-05-13/wegry-wobec-embarga-na-rosyjska-rope> (8.09.2023).

that ‘while Hungary is for peace, Europe is on the side of war’³⁸. He accused the West of having caused a ‘local armed conflict to turn into a global economic war’. The addressees of Orbán’s political offensive are mainly domestic recipients, and its aim is to blame Brussels and its sanctions policy for Hungary’s growing economic and political problems (including isolation in the EU, difficulties in balancing the budget, energy dependence on Russia resulting from negligence in terms of diversification). This distracts attention from the ruling party’s responsibility for them. Orbán’s actions using a veto on matters relating to Ukraine are aimed at putting pressure on EU partners on other issues (including blocked EU funds and the National Reconstruction Plan), and at the same time are an instrument of pressure on Kyiv in the intensifying disputes between it and Budapest. These moves, which at least delay EU decisions, are beneficial for Russia, with which Hungary – as the only country in the region – still maintains close relations³⁹.

Hungarian-Ukrainian relations have remained tense for several years, and the situation of the approximately 100,000-strong Hungarian minority living in the Zakarpattia Oblast remains a controversial issue in Budapest’s relations with Kyiv. Kyiv views Budapest’s cooperation with Moscow with distrust. He criticized the new Hungarian-Russian gas contract concluded in September 2021 for 15 years, which provides for supplies of raw material to Hungary, bypassing the territory of Ukraine (until recently, 80% of gas was supplied there via this route)⁴⁰. In turn, Budapest criticizes Kyiv’s policy towards national minorities, especially subsequent changes in regulations regarding education and the minority language. When the war broke out in 2022, Hungarian-Ukrainian relations remained cold and distrustful – there were tensions around Ukrainian legal acts: the law on education, on the state language, and around the Hungarian citizenship granted by the Hungarian authorities to Hungarians from Transcarpathia (according to data from 2011 there were approximately 145,000 Hungarians in Ukraine, although the Hungarian authorities said as many as 200,000 Hungarians). Each of the actions taken by the Hungarian gov-

³⁸ A. Sadecki, *Kampania Węgier przeciw polityce Zachodu wobec Rosji*, «Analizy OSW», 28.09.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-09-28/kampania-wegier-przeciw-polityce-zachodu-wobec-rosji> (11.09.2023).

³⁹ I. Gizińska, *Kolejne węgierskie weto wymierzone w Ukrainę*, «Analizy OSW», 23.05.2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-05-23/kolejne-wegierskie-weto-wymierzone-w-ukraine> (11.09.2023); I. Gizińska, F. Rudnik, A. Sadecki, *Szjijártó w Moskwie: podtrzymanie współpracy energetycznej z Rosją*, «Analizy OSW», 14.04.2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-04-14/szjijarto-w-moskwie-podtrzymanie-wspolpracy-energetycznej-z-rosja> (11.09.2023).

⁴⁰ K. Nieczytor, A. Sadecki, *Ukraińsko-węgierski spór o podwójne obywatelstwo*, «Analizy OSW», 13.01.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-01-13/ukrainsko-wegierski-spor-o-podwojne-obywatelstwo> (8.09.2023).

ernment was aimed at forcing the Ukrainian side to withdraw from the adopted legislation and enabling the Hungarian minority to function unrestricted (even autonomously) in Ukraine⁴¹. This attitude of Budapest also hinders the development of Ukraine's relations with the European Union and NATO (e.g. Hungary blocking the meetings of the NATO-Ukraine Commission)⁴².

Conclusions

The authorities of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia have adopted a clear and unequivocal position on the conflict since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, strongly condemning the Russian side, fully signing up to EU sanctions, and strongly supporting the Ukrainian side, which is fighting for its independence. Thanks to their great involvement, these countries found themselves in the vanguard of European countries supporting Kyiv politically, humanely and militarily. Slovakia's attitude changed after the Smer party, headed by Robert Fico, came to power at the end of 2023. The Slovak government withdrew from providing military aid to fighting Ukraine.

Hungary's policy towards the war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on the country's relations with the international environment. The consequence of Hungarian policy towards Ukraine was a crisis in the functioning of the Visegrad Group, in a situation when Hungary held the V4 presidency until the end of June 2022. There was also a significant cooling of relations with Poland. It was intensified when Prime Minister Orbán, during his speech in Transylvania in July 2022, suggested that Poland was almost participating in the war in Ukraine, which is a consequence of Warsaw's too strong involvement (including emotional) in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The war in Ukraine highlighted fundamental differences between Poland and Hungary in the perception of both Russia and the Russian threat, as well as the way of providing support to the Ukrainian side. As a consequence, Hungarian-Polish relations cooled and the Visegrad format, which was an extremely important platform for cooperation in the Central European region, was virtually completely frozen. A longer break in activities at the political level affected the image of the Visegrad Group in Europe and caused the Czech Republic and Slovakia in particular to turn their attention to other formats of cooperation, e.g. the Slavkov Triangle. In 2023, a slow unfreezing of cooperation within the Visegrad Group could be observed, as several joint meetings of representatives of the

⁴¹ D. Héjj, *Polityka Węgier wobec...*

⁴² K. Nieczytor, A. Sadecki, *Ukraińsko-węgierski spór...*

Visegrad countries at various levels were organized. Politicians decided that it was necessary to continue the proven model of cooperation, which involves focusing on what unites and putting aside what divides. However, this will not change the fact that the attitude towards the East is and will remain one of the main differences and obstacles in cooperation between the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary⁴³. The conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014 already highlighted the discord between the Visegrad Group countries, which were unable to develop a common position towards the events in Ukraine, especially the annexation of Crimea or Russia's support for separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk reserves⁴⁴. Hungary's different policy also regarding Russia's aggression in 2022 did not allow the Visegrad Group to speak with 'one voice' towards the war in Ukraine.

Compared to the other Visegrad Group countries, Hungary presents a different vision of security policy. After February 24, 2022, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia decided to fully engage in supporting Ukraine, including the transfer of weapons. Hungary did not join this group. Hungary's approach to the war has remained unchanged since the beginning of the conflict. It comes down to statements such as 'this is not our war' or Hungary 'must stay away from the war'. In the narrative of the Hungarian authorities, arms supplies carried out jointly by the West are prolonging the conflict and contributing to an increase in the number of victims. The most important differences in the approach of the V4 countries and Hungary to security issues include the following:

- in the opinion of the Hungarian authorities, the collective West is co-responsible for the outbreak of the war,
- in the opinion of the Hungarian authorities, Russia does not pose a real threat to security,
- Hungary is the only European Union member state that has not yet passed the laws necessary to expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to include Sweden,
- the Hungarian delegation noted with satisfaction that Ukraine was not invited to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization at the summit in Vilnius in July 2023. In the opinion of representatives of the Hungarian authorities, this is a manifestation of NATO's responsibility and non-escalation of the conflict,

⁴³ A. Rácz, *The Visegrad Cooperation: Central Europe divided over Russia*, «L'Europe en Formation» 2014, 4(374), p. 68, <https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.374.0061> (26.11.2023).

⁴⁴ J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov, *The V4 in comparative perspective. Diverging voices, converging policies*, [in:] J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds.), *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Warsaw 2015, p. 79; B. Feledy, *Hungarian foreign policy and the crisis in Ukraine*, [in:] J. Kucharczyk, G. Mesežnikov (eds.), *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Warsaw 2015, p. 77.

- Hungarian decision-makers at various levels have repeatedly emphasized that it is not true that Ukraine is fighting for something more than its own lands and independence. In Hungary, the narrative regarding the obligation to support Ukraine was not accepted due to its defensive war also being waged for the freedom of Europe,
- Hungary has been blocking the meetings of the EU-Ukraine and NATO-Ukraine commissions from the beginning due to the Hungarian-Ukrainian conflict regarding the Hungarian minority in the Zakarpattia region⁴⁵.

The main thesis was confirmed in the course of the analysis. After Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia presented a pro-Ukrainian position in their actions towards the war in Ukraine, while Hungary, unlike the other Visegrad countries, presented a pro-Russian position, which destabilized cooperation within the Visegrad Group. Slovakia's attitude changed to a more pro-Russian one after the Smer party, headed by Robert Fico, came to power at the end of 2023. Now we can observe the division of the Visegrad Group into two camps: Polish-Czech and Slovak-Hungarian.

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⁴⁵ D. Héjji, *Węgierska obecność na szczycie B9 w Warszawie*, «Komentarze IEŚ» 794, <https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ies-komentarze-794-42-2023.pdf> (22.11.2023).

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