



Dysfunctional advocates? analysis of the Visegrad Group positions on the enlargement policy of the EU (2014–2025)

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Abstract

The Visegrad Group (V4), a unique subregional cooperation within the European Union, has experienced a negative shift following the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The Russian aggression in Ukraine also triggered another development in the EU. Enlargement has been halted since 2013 and has become the centre of attention again. The official candidate status was granted swiftly to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which also put the Western Balkans' future in the spotlight. This article aims to interpret the four Visegrad states' positions on the EU's enlargement policy and alterations in these by looking for explanatory causes in the 2014–2025 period. Enlargement is of high relevance in the region, not only because of the V4 countries' accession to the EU twenty years ago and of its complex, sometimes conflictual interactions with the EU institutions since then but also because the candidate countries are located in the immediate neighbourhood of the V4 region, that brings the geopolitical aspects of the policy in the spotlight. After conceptualizing the V4, process tracing methodology is applied to answer the question of the V4 states' view and influence on the enlargement policy of the EU. This article aims not to determine the future perspectives of the European Union's overall enlargement policy but to focus solely on the Visegrad countries. Still, the conclusions of this article can contribute to the general understanding of the debates on the future of enlargement.

Keywords Visegrad Group · V4 · Visegrad cooperation · Enlargement · European Union

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Introduction

The Visegrad Group (V4)¹ in the European Union (EU) has been a visible actor for over a decade (Éltető-Szemplér 2023; Cabada-Waisova 2018). It is a “club” of four Member States within the big club of the European Union. It includes Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland, whose common positions and differing ideas are reflected occasionally in shaping the EU’s agenda and setting its policy objectives.

Opinions are divided on interpreting the role of V4 within the European Union. Is it a unique form of differentiated integration (Stubb 1996; De-Neve 2007; Dyson and Sepos 2010; Halmai 2019; Koller 2012 and 2019; Schimmelfennig et al. 2022), where members cooperate more closely in some policy areas and sometimes take a regional position on proposals coming from the EU institutions, as it was demonstrated in the unique answers provided to the 2015 migration crisis? Or is it instead a loose, non-institutionalized form of cooperation, with the very different interests of the four-member states where a common V4 position is only possible when the interests of all four Member States so require? There are arguments for both. What is clear, however, is that V4 is a “peculiar quartet” of states that joined the EU together twenty years ago, each leaving behind a communist past, with a distinct Central European identity and unique patterns of economic and social modernization but also with very different economic and social models (Arató et al. 2021).

After a long and controversial enlargement process, the V4 states arrived in the European Union in 2004, already “tired”. Moreover, as full members, they soon left behind the constraints of the accession conditions to participate in the EU’s policy-making processes with their own visions and national positions, sometimes going against the EU’s mainstream. The EU policy of the V4 member states after their accession was also a new experience for the old ones. At first, they experienced the bottom-up processes of Europeanization of the Visegrad states, and later, mainly in the case of Poland and Hungary, de-Europeanization tendencies and widespread scepticism came to the fore, often originating from the Visegrad region.

Previous research has examined the national positions of EU Member States on the EU’s enlargement policy, including some of the Visegrad states but not the V4 as a whole (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2020; Kaeding et al. 2023). After defining the nature of the Visegrad cooperation and a brief description of the process tracing methodology, this article tries to answer the question of what the V4 states’ view and influence on one of the most important EU policies of our time, the enlargement policy. V4 is a region for which enlargement is of high relevance. On the one hand, because of its experience of the enlargement process 20 years ago and its complex and often conflictual interaction with the EU institutions since then. On the other hand, the candidate countries are located in the immediate neighbourhood of the V4, highlighting the geopolitical factors of the policy in the region.

¹ In this article, the term Visegrad Group (V4) is used to describe a unique form of regional cooperation between four states: Hungary, Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia. “Visegrad cooperation” is used interchangeably for the V4 in the text.



This analysis focuses on 2014–2025. This is the decade in which no new members entered the EU, but enlargement has become a key challenge. The last enlargement took place in 2013 when Croatia joined the EU. After this accession, the focus of enlargement was put on the Western Balkans (WB). The Western Balkans is defined as the Western part of the Balkan peninsula, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Politically, WB includes all South-eastern states that seek membership in the European Union.² The EU documents consider this region as one despite the cultural, ethnic and religious heterogeneity, the different Europeanization patterns (Elbasani 2013; Musliu 2021) and the levels of preparedness for EU accession (Steinbach 2024). In the Western Balkan region, especially in the examined period, not only the European Union but other global players like Russia, China, Turkey, and the USA have also become active (Samokhvalov 2017; Bechev 2017; Rustemi et al. 2019; Bieber et al. 2020), which led to economic, political and social instability and resulted in significant security risks for Europe. As the V4 countries are geographically close to the Western Balkans, these risks are more pronounced. There are recent signs that the European Union has geopolitical ambitions and wants to become a real player in the “great power games” which could lead to more assertive foreign and security as well as enlargement policies (Marinova 2023). This would certainly be in the interest of the Visegrad Group.

In the 2014–2025 period, the unique positions of the Visegrad countries and their dissent from the European mainstream have increasingly been reflected not only in the area of enlargement but in other EU’s policies and the solutions given to crises. The Visegrad Group had divergent opinions concerning the answers to be given to the migration challenge and contrary to mainstream EU positions presented the idea of “flexible solidarity” in this policy area (Joint Statement 2016).

In 2014, the president of the European Commission, Juncker, took an outright stance against enlargement (European Commission 2014), which he later slightly changed, ensuring the Western Balkan candidates of the completion of enlargement. Despite his successor, Von der Leyen’s general support for enlargement and the clear geopolitical arguments in favour of it (State of the Union 2023), no further enlargement has taken place in the last decade. Moreover, Brexit has led to a smaller European Union. At the same time, the EU’s enlargement policy has been gradually tightened over the past two decades. While the performance of the candidate countries has been constantly monitored by the European Commission, as was the practice in previous enlargement waves, in 2020, the Commission revised its enlargement methodology, and grouped the chapters in six clusters. While Chapters 23 and 24, including Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and Justice, Freedom and Security, were strict conditions in enlargement in earlier times, the new methodology by declaring the so-called “fundamentals” as the dictating vectors of the accession process put an extra emphasis on them. Enlargement negotiations shall

² Croatia is geographically part of the Balkans but not part of the Western Balkans. Despite this, it was often included in this region by political references and EU documents before 2013, when it was a candidate country of the European Union.



start and end with the completion of these obligations. As a result of this change, rule of law conditions became the “hard conditions” of accession to the EU (Hoxhaj 2021; Koller et al. 2023), significantly slowing down the already slow accession process. Even though the Western Balkans is a heterogeneous region with one country more prepared (e.g. Montenegro) than another (e.g. Bosnia-Herzegovina), these changes in the EU enlargement methodology put a significant burden on all of them. Another challenge to the future and credibility of the enlargement policy arose after the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian war, when Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia were granted candidate status, turning away from the previous merit-based approach of the policy. This political step disappointed the WB countries since they have been working on meeting the conditions of accession for a long time. The possibility of a fast-track entry of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia was, at first sight, a sign of the loss of credibility of the merit-based enlargement policy. Nevertheless, shortly, it also turned out that the war was pushing forward the process of accession of the Western Balkans, creating a new enlargement momentum for the region as well (Anghel et al. 2023). Albania and North Macedonia started accession negotiations in July 2022, and Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status in December 2022. Further, Albania opened the first cluster of accession negotiations in October 2024. All of these steps were also due to the fact that the geopolitical orientation of the enlargement policy has been intensifying (Petrovic et al. 2021; Dopchie et al. 2024).

In the analysis of the 2014–2025 period, the milestones when the V4 countries’ actions and performance in the EU affected enlargement policy are identified by looking for explanatory causes, such as the rule of law debates and conflicts with EU institutions. Furthermore, by analysing the Conclusions of the V4 Presidencies and examining selected government documents and political statements, this article aims to explain the changes and developments in the positions of the V4 countries regarding enlargement. Although this article does not aim to determine the future perspectives of the European Union’s overall enlargement policy and solely focuses on the Visegrad region, the conclusions can contribute to the debates on the future of the EU’s enlargement policy.

The peculiar quartet of V4: Two- or three-level game?

The Visegrad cooperation was born at the start of the lengthy “Europeanization process” (Ladrech 1994 2010; Börzel 1999, 2002; Radaelli 2003; Risse et al. 2001; Graziano and Vink 2008; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2008; Olsen 2002) of the Central and Eastern European states in 1991, was re-launched in 1999 but only became a visible platform in the 2000s. Consequently, the entire history of the Visegrad cooperation is connected to the European Union, starting with the “rap-prochement” of the V4 countries to the EU in the 1990s, continuing with membership candidacy and official accession negotiation processes, and then the entry into the EU in 2004, followed by the twenty years spent as member states in the EU. Therefore, understanding the V4 cannot be detached from interpreting it within the larger EU framework. Regarding the direction of Europeanization, it was also true



for the V4 countries that as long as the fulfilment of membership conditions was their number one foreign policy objective, and as candidate countries, they did everything to create a suitable fit with the EU's economy, and its legal and political system, Europeanization was a rather "top-down" process, i.e. the primary direction of it was to comply with the demands coming from the Commission. However, after entering the EU and elevating the accession-related constraints, they began to initiate their policy proposals, represent their national interest much stronger, and develop crisis management ideas that sometimes went against the EU's mainstream. The European Union started to experience the "bottom-up" direction of Europeanization only in the post-enlargement period of the V4 member states, which was not a conflict-free experience with a learning process on the side of the EU's institutions and the other member states either.

However, how can the V4 be interpreted in the European Union? What is this peculiar quartet? Putnam's "two-level game" framework could be suitable for understanding the V4's actorness within the EU. He argued that there is a two-level game in international relations and the European Union as well, "where each political leader appears at both game boards" (Putnam 1988: 434), trying to maximize the policy outcomes of their interest and minimize sacrifices and losses at negotiations both in international fora and in domestic politics. Putnam's model can be extended with an extra third layer with the Visegrad Group to understand a smaller geographical club within the EU. Namely, the V4 states may play their games at three tables: the EU and the V4 and in domestic politics. Although other EU member states, such as the Nordic–Baltic states or the Iberian states, are also separate regional groups (Cooper-Fabbrini 2021; Braun 2021), within the Union, V4 cooperation is unique among them in that its quasi-institutionalized form allows for political and policy cooperation in a flexible way. Consequently, the V4 Cooperation can be interpreted as one extra political arena in a three-level game (Arató and Koller 2018). It can be helpful in coalition building, finding partners and uniting forces to be more effective at EU-level negotiations.

Nevertheless, if the V4 members have different national interests, there is also a possibility to leave the V4 framework behind. Since the Visegrad cooperation is a loose, originally non, but still definitely much less institutionalized club than the EU, members can choose anytime to go back to the two-level game and act as an individual member state within the European Union. The "intentionally maintained non-institutional character of the V4 group makes this option available at any time" (Arató and Koller 2018: 93). We argue that when the V4 can act together in EU policies, we can observe the three-level game—this was the case in a number of policy areas in the mid-2010s. However, when cooperation fades—and this has been the case since the end of the 2010s—V4 is politically non-existent, and members are permanently back to the two-level game paradigm.

V4 is also a peculiar quartet because unique political, policy, and polity characteristics can be identified in its operation (Pennings et al. 1999). Various labels were given to describing the Visegrad Group as a "microcosm", a "regional cooperation", "intergovernmental platform", "subregional entity" (Schweiger 2013; Dangerfield 2008; Fawn 2013; Törő et al. 2014). The ambiguity in naming it is also because Visegrad Group, which was initially non-institutionalized by design, became



somewhat institutionalized after 1999. The regular meetings of the prime and foreign ministers, the rotating presidency, the high-level working groups, and the International Visegrad Fund are key pillars of the institutionalized nature of the V4 “polity”. The “policy scope” of the V4 includes a wide range of policies, including transport, infrastructure, energy, migration, security and defence, trade, digitalization and neighbourhood policies, and educational, science and cultural cooperation. However, the intensity of the cooperation has been different in the various periods of its history. This policy-level cooperation has been ongoing even in times of crisis, has been based on ministry-level administrative support and is mainly invisible to the public. The “politics aspect” is the most controversial angle of the Visegrad Group. Even though the Visegrad Group is one of the most important and closest communities for all V4 members, with numerous shared interests, it is in politics, especially foreign policy, where the main fault lines between the V4 members have emerged.

Methodology—process tracing

In this article, the process tracing research methodology is applied, which is most suitable for the qualitative approach and is widely applied in international relations and European studies (Schimmelfennig 2015). The democracy backsliding processes are identified in three of the four Visegrad countries as independent variables (Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) (Szymanski 2023; Anghel-Jones 2024, Mesheznikov, Gyárfásová 2018). This article aims to explore how connected these processes can be to the fallback of the intensity of cooperation within the V4 and the paradox approaches to the further enlargement of European Union (dependent variables). Out of the three generally identified objectives of process tracing (to build theories, test theories, and explain the outcomes of individual cases (Bennett and Checkel 2015), process tracing is applied to explain the outcomes of individual cases. We use the “usual” process tracing sources such as documents (especially of V4 presidencies—programmes and EU Council Presidency documents), statements of and interviews with politicians, and other European Union (enlargement) documents in the analysis.

In the argument elaborated in this analysis, we use the inverse causation to what Frank Schimmelfennig applied in his 2003 book on the Eastern enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union and the Council of Europe. There, he argues—also applying the method of process tracing—that rationalist institutionalism can only partly explain the Eastern enlargement of these institutions—Central and Eastern European countries were economically not very relevant, their accession raised concerns about trade and budget competition, and the number of new members diluted old members’ voting powers. On the other hand, enlargement still happened—and it can only be explained in a constructivist frame. Schimmelfennig argues that (liberal) democracy (newly established in East Central Europe) could be identified as the most relevant factor for enlargement (Schimmelfennig 2003, 2015, Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2020).



This article intends to reverse the reasoning but apply a similar constructivist approach—we argue that while there would be geopolitical reasons to boost the enlargement process, especially after the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, precisely the decline of liberal democracy in many of the V4 states and also in the applicant countries halt further enlargement of the European Union and at the same time contribute to the decline of the V4.

However, it should be noted that the link between democracy decline in V4 and the weakening of their cooperation and enlargement challenges in the EU is not exclusive. Several other factors contribute to the two latter phenomena—geopolitical factors like the transformation of the global order, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the growing role of China, Russia and other external powers in the region, just to mention some. However, it is still argued that the effect of democracy decline in most V4 countries plays a crucial role in the slowdown of the EU enlargement process and the decline of their internal cooperation—leading to the breakdown of the “three-level game.”

Analysis: democracy decline, the intensity of V4 cooperation and approaches to enlargement

In the post-accession period after 2004, the importance of the V4 group gradually increased within the Union, although the four countries did not agree on several issues. Poland and Hungary, for example, have had opposite positions on EU-Russian relations. The Eurozone member Slovakia was more interested in developing a genuine Economic and Monetary Union than the other V4 countries. They started to use the V4 cooperation as a platform to express their arguments in areas where they could find a common platform.

The last enlargement of the European Union to date was the accession of Croatia in 2013. In the accession process, the role of the Visegrad Group was crucial—the negotiations were closed in June 2011, literally on the last day of the Hungarian EU Council Presidency, while the accession treaty was signed later that year, during the Polish EU Council Presidency. Symbolically, the involvement of two Visegrad countries in an enlargement towards the Western Balkans indicates the region's significance for the V4.

The EU's enlargement policy was closing the doors for new applicants at the time. Juncker, president of the European Commission 2014 to 2019, made a strong statement about the halt of the enlargement process:

In the next five years, no new members will be joining us in the European Union. As things now stand, it is inconceivable that any of the candidate countries with whom we are now negotiating will be able to meet all the membership criteria down to every detail by 2019. However, the negotiations will continue, and other European nations and European countries need a credible and honest European perspective. This applies especially to the Western Balkans. This tragic European region needs a European perspective. Otherwise, the old demons of the past will reawaken. (Juncker 2014)



Contrary to this, further enlargement of the European Union remained a high-priority issue for the V4 after the Croatian accession. The main reason for supporting further enlargement, especially in the Western Balkans, was geopolitical: their geographic proximity to the region, as well as economic relations and also their different level of involvement in international peacebuilding missions (KFOR, EUFOR, etc.) (Griessler 2018; Belloni 2020). V4 countries have intended to share their experience and best practices regarding developing and implementing sector-specific policies related to their transition and Euro-Atlantic integration. While the V4 support for the EU enlargement has been inevitable, there were differences among the four countries regarding intensity and geographical scope. Hungary, which has borders with the region, has been the most enthusiastic supporter of admitting the Western Balkans. Apart from a political friendship between Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán and Serbian President Vucic, Serbia's accession is important for Hungary because of the migration route and energy security (Czina et al. 2023). Hungary also played a key role in Eastern enlargement as the Hungarian Commissioner Várhelyi was responsible for EU enlargement policy in 2019–2024 von der Leyen Commission. Czechia has supported the EU accession of the Western Balkans and Ukraine for geopolitical reasons and to prevent other powers from gaining positions in the region but never came up with new initiatives (Sychra et al. 2024). Slovakia has been characterized by its “strategic passivity” concerning EU enlargement in the 2010s—the country supported the accession of the Western Balkans, but not so vehemently as Hungary. After the Russian attack on Ukraine, Slovakia actively supported Ukraine's EU candidacy (Navrátil et al. 2023). In the case of Poland, enlargement was supported by expressing solidarity with the applicant countries throughout the 2010s. After the war broke out in its neighbourhood, Poland advocated for Ukraine's EU membership and pushed for more support as an EU member of geostrategic position (Styczynska 2023).

A high priority of enlargement was expressed in V4 presidency programmes and reports in the years after 2013. They emphasize supporting the Western Balkans EU accession to strengthen stability in the South-Eastern part of Europe. They stress that EU enlargement can facilitate a more efficient representation of Central Europe's interests and increase the region's importance within the EU. Thus, the mutual interest of the two regions was underlined (Hungarian V4 presidency programme 2013–14). Apart from EU membership, V4 countries expressed their commitment to assisting Western Balkans countries in accessing NATO. Besides their political support, the V4 countries also declared that they would help the process by actively sharing their experience of Euro-Atlantic integration (Joint Statement 2013).

The tools applied to assist further EU enlargements were manifold. The V4 assisted the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund—based on the model of the International Visegrad Fund—to support projects in culture, science and education, encourage cross-border cooperation and facilitate the exchange of experiences among countries in the region. Twinning projects like the European Commission initiatives, financed through IPA I, II and III were supported by the countries of the V4 (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance Regulations). Additionally, the V4 countries supported other initiatives which aim to foster and strengthen regional



cooperation in the Western Balkans. The Berlin Process launched by Germany in 2014 was referred to in the 2019 Joint Declaration of the Visegrad Group. The Open Balkan Initiative launched in 2019 by Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia was appreciated in political statements of the V4 prime ministers and foreign ministers (Czaputowicz 2020; Orbán 2021; Petříček 2021; Lajčák 2016) as well as by the Joint V4 Statement in 2021.

Relations between the Western Balkans and the V4 were facilitated on political and technical levels. V4 countries played a pivotal role in securing continuous political dialogue between applicant countries of the Western Balkans, the European Commission, and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Joint Statement 2014). On the other hand, several technical level meetings were organized by the V4—at times V4+, including Slovenia and Croatia (Czech presidency programme 2015–16) and other EU member states. Sectors for cooperation included areas where the Western Balkans countries' accession could be supported (environment, judicial training, capacity building of civil servants, economic cooperation, etc.) and areas of shared challenges (e.g. migration, energy security, hybrid threats, and organized crime). There were also special initiatives by presidencies like the “Enlargement Academy” of the Polish presidency (Presidency report 2016–17) and the thematic “Western Balkans Diplomatic Days” programme in Budapest during the Hungarian presidency (Hungarian presidency programme 2017–18).

According to the V4 presidency documents, the geographical scope of further enlargement was, first and foremost, the Western Balkan region in the analysed period. While already in the mid-2010s, the member states of the Visegrad Cooperation were divided about the EU sanctions against Russia (because of the annexation of Crimea in 2014), the V4 countries were very active in supporting Ukraine (Rácz 2014). While Ukraine already participated in an economic forum during the Polish Presidency (Presidency Report 2016–17), the association agreement between the EU and Ukraine was operational, full membership was not (yet) on the agenda.

As shown in Table 1, the Visegrad cooperation was highly operational in the 2010s—due to its under-institutionalized structures, cooperation was based on pragmatism and flexibility, and divergent national interests generally did not harm the overall cooperation (Strnad 2022). V4 acted as a group when the migration crisis (Molnár et al. 2021) broke out in 2015—the Visegrad countries, in campaigning for better protection of the EU's external borders, went against the open-door policy of Germany and other Western European States (Hokovsky 2016). This alternative approach to migration put the group at the centre of political and academic attention (Schweiger and Visvizi 2018), and they became “shapers or makers” (Nič 2016) of EU policies instead of playing the role of a “taker” as in the pre-accession period. While the details of V4 responses to the migration crisis show that there were specific internal differences among them concerning migration policy responses, the general perception identified the group as a unified (and negative) actor in European policymaking, devolving “from best pupils of European integration to les enfants terribles” (Visvizi 2018).

While the cooperation within the Visegrad Group was intensive in the 2010s, they were very supportive of the continuation of the enlargement of the EU; they



Table 1 Features of enlargement policy in V4 presidency programmes and reports 2013–2025

Year	V4 presidency country	Features of enlargement policy in V4 presidency documents	Context
2013/14	Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU accession of the Western Balkans as a highlighted political message • Plans for setting up a common V4 policy for WB EU accession • Expert meetings, including WB experts, to facilitate the accession process • Fostering twinning programmes with WB countries • WB and V4 foreign ministers' meeting • Preparations for setting up a Western Balkans Fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU accession of Croatia • Joint article of V4 foreign ministers celebrating the 10th anniversary of their EU accession • Strong enlargement commitment during the presidency
2014/15	Slovakia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme highlights continuing support for the EU and NATO accession of WB countries • Supporting pre-accession assistance (IIPA and ODA) • V4 sharing their experiences with WB countries (V4 and WB political directors' consultations) • Western Balkans Expert Network Initiative • Continuing setting up the Western Balkans Fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Common Foreign and Security Policy is at the centre of the programme (crisis in the Crimea) • Strong enlargement commitment during the presidency
2015/16	Czechia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU accession of the WB region is at the centre of the presidency • Formal establishment of the Western Balkans Fund • V4 and Western Balkans foreign ministers discussed the challenges of the Western Balkans migration route (also EU accession and regional cooperation) • The importance of Eastern partnership and European Neighbourhood Policy is also highlighted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The breakout of the migration crisis set the scene for the presidency • V4 meetings for foreign ministers and ministers of interior—they managed to find a common language despite criticisms



Table 1 (continued)

Year	V4 presidency country	Features of enlargement policy in V4 presidency documents	Context
2016/17	Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • V4 and WB foreign ministers' meeting with the participation of the EU High Representative for CFSP • Accession negotiation and migration are highlighted • Baltic and Nordic cooperation (integrity of borders and security and energy challenges discussed) • Meeting of V4 and Eastern Partnership deputy foreign ministers was held in Minsk • Enlargement Academy for WB candidate countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migration crisis is a major challenge • Ukraine is included in the events—due to their geopolitical importance for Poland
2017/18	Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General statements about supporting the WB countries in their Euro-Atlantic integration • Western Balkans Fund • Western Balkans and V4 foreign ministers meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU neighbourhood policy countries are in focus • The presidency report is very short and is in leaflet format • Art. 7 procedure was initiated in the cases of Hungary and Poland
2018/19	Slovakia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only general political messages about the importance of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries • V4 and WB foreign ministers meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The presidency report document is a 2-pager document few concrete statements about the developments of the presidency
2019/20	Czechia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General political statements about the importance of WB EU accession • Emphasis on the sustainability of the Western Balkans Fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years of the COVID-19 pandemic • More emphasis on other more technical policy areas • The presidency report is a 2-pager document

Table 1 (continued)

Year	V4 presidency country	Features of enlargement policy in V4 presidency documents	Context
2020/21	Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The challenges of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans noted • The presidency programme includes remarks on the necessity to motivate WB countries to carry out reforms necessary for EU accession • V4 and WB foreign ministers' meeting: called for the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia • Cooperation with EU Eastern Partnership countries • Request of V4 and Austria towards EU institutions to include WB countries in the Conference on the Future of Europe • Sustaining V4 and V4 + consultation with WB countries in order to support their EU accession • Supporting their NATO accession 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed report published • 30th anniversary of the Visegrad Cooperation Jubilee Declaration • Joint statements of the V4 prime ministers on the poisoning of Navalny and the sabotage at an ammunition depot in the Czechia
2021/22	Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting V4 and V4 + consultation with WB countries in order to support their EU accession • Supporting their NATO accession 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lot of different policy areas of cooperation • 4 pager leaflet as presidency report • Joint statement on the Russian aggression against Ukraine • March 2022 V4 defence ministers meeting cancelled after Poland and Czechia refused to participate because of the Hungarian approach towards the war
2022/23	Slovakia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WB accession is on the political agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian crisis in the Ukraine—the International Visegrad Fund projects to support refugees from the Ukraine • Involvement of the Western Balkan countries in energy and defence cooperation
2023/24	Czechia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting EU Eastern enlargement includes the Western Balkans as well as the Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parallel EU Council Presidency with the V4 Presidency • Security, infrastructure, energy connectivity, and other EU policies on the agenda
2024/25	Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans and Eastern Trio countries is mentioned in the programme • Continuation of the International Visegrad Fund's assistance to Ukrainian society and its involvement in the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan partners 	

Source V4 Presidency Programmes and Reports 2013–24, Authors' compilation



had little influence on enhancing the process. They could not push other EU members to move the enlargement process further due to their size, even as a group and due to the emerging criticism they received because of migration policy and democracy backsliding among their members.

While the V4 had big ambitions but little effect on Eastern EU enlargement when they could act together, even this unity started to deteriorate after the 2017–18 Hungarian V4 Presidency, as demonstrated in Table 1. Populism and the emergence of illiberal regimes in two V4 countries have led their foreign policy into a specialized path since the mid-2010s (Visnovitz-Jenne 2021; Hettyey 2021). As the V4 included two illiberal regimes, Poland and Hungary, sharing their definition of democracy, this process's political consequences led to an open conflict with European institutions to the extent of having Article 7 initiated in 2017 and 2018, respectively (Strnad 2022). This was a significant change in EU policy as the European Union's initial approach to the problem was a non-response (Emmons et al. 2021) that resulted in an "unexpectedly low sanctioning record" (Closa 2021), it was not until the 2020s that EU policy shifted to more material sanctions with the introduction of the budget conditionality regulation (Blauberger et al. 2024). At the same time, Czechia and Slovakia showed much more pro-European attitudes.

The presidency documents indicate those changes—there were significantly fewer everyday activities in every field of cooperation, including EU enlargement after 2018. While before, there were several everyday actions, invitations from EU officials to push further EU enlargement, and targeted programmes for the Western Balkans, after 2018, there were only some general statements about the importance of the process.

While the intensity of the V4 cooperation in general was already falling, the real cracks were obvious after Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war against the Ukraine, in the immediate neighbourhood of the European Union, the EU member neighbours of the attacked Ukraine are Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania—triggered immediate action from the EU. Apart from sanctions (from the part of the EU and member states) against the aggressor Russia and its allies, responses included humanitarian aid, reception of refugees, military support, energy policy responses, etc. However, within the V4, an unreconcilable split occurred concerning those responses. During the Hungarian V4 Presidency of 2021–22, Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia heavily criticized Hungary and blocked some high-level meetings on the level of the Visegrad. The Hungarian position towards Russia was a hostage-taking strategy towards Common Foreign and Security Policy for the benefit of Russia (Müller et al. 2024). This led to the cancellation of the V4 defence ministers' meetings in March 2022 as Polish and Czech ministers withdrew their participation. The following Slovak Presidency of the V4 tried to restore cooperation by "muting" the foreign policy dimensions (Maksak 2023). Tusk formed a new government in Poland in 2023, and in the same year, Fico in Slovakia. While the government changes altered the dynamics of cooperation within the Visegrad Group, the Hungarian position towards Russia, Ukraine and the EU still seems to prevent the group from common action.

The fallback of the intensity of the V4 can be detected in both the content and the format of V4 Presidency documents, and the salience of the issue of EU enlargement



also dropped significantly. Since the 2017–18 Hungarian V4 Presidency, most reports were published in short formats (Presidency Report 2017–18, 2018–19, 2019–20, 2021–22) with just general statements and weaker commitments for enlargement. The 2020/21 Polish Presidency was an exception in this trend, providing a detailed report that included celebratory messages on the 30th anniversary of the Visegrad Group. The breakout of the war in Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally changed the context for Visegrad cooperation and widened the geographical scope of further developments. While the Russian aggression against Ukraine put the issue of enlargement on the agenda in general in the EU, the split within the V4 prevented the group from having a unified policy.

The V4 positions on the EU's enlargement policy can also be examined in the programmes of the V4 Member States holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union (See Table 2). Slovakia was in this position from July to December 2016, Czechia from July to December 2022, Hungary from July to December 2024, and Poland from January to July 2025. Examining these Presidency programmes and outcomes could also contribute to a better understanding of the Member State's position on enlargement in the European Union. As can be seen from the table below, enlargement policy has been a priority in all four Council Presidency Programmes, in different contexts and with varying degrees of emphasis and different results.

The 2014 crisis in Ukraine already, and later the Russian–Ukrainian war that broke out in 2022, has deepened the political fractures between the V4 countries. At present, the foreign policy strategies of the members towards Russia limit the intensity of cooperation as a whole to a minimum. The estrangement between the members at the political level is evident, foremost between Hungary (Koller 2022) and the other three Visegrad states. However, to some extent, Slovakia is in a slightly similar position. This estrangement can also be seen in their different views on the enlargement of the Western Balkans and the accession of the three Eastern candidate countries (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia). While V4 support for the accession of the Western Balkans has remained salient, and some progress has been made for credibility and geopolitical reasons, the Visegrad Group is now divided on the membership of Eastern Trio, mostly on the status of Ukraine. Hungary and Slovakia have been strongly opposing Ukraine's accession to the EU, which is often articulated by Prime Minister Orbán and Fico as well. Poland has been actively pushing the process forward, while Czechia has been expressing a moderately supportive opinion for the enlargement of the EU with the three Eastern candidates.

This is why it can be concluded that in the context of the European Union, the Visegrad cooperation is back to the two-level game for the time being—there is no sign of a common strategy in the most pressing areas of the Russian–Ukrainian war, and importantly, for this analysis, the related further enlargement of the EU.

Conclusions

While the Visegrad Group is geopolitically important in EU enlargement policy, after 2017/18—at the time of the start of Article 7 procedures against Poland and Hungary—and especially after 2022 (the Russian invasion of Ukraine), it finds itself in a situation where it is losing influence over the process.



**Table 2** Features of enlargement policy in EU council presidency programmes 2014–2025

EU council presidency period	Country	Program	Results	Context
2016 July–December	Slovakia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlargement is included in the priority “Globally engaged Europe”; • Enlargement is presented as crucial for the consolidation of political and economic stability in Europe and for the stabilization of democracy in the enlargement countries (Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs 2016). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU–Serbia Intergovernmental conference; • EU–Montenegro Intergovernmental Conference; • No consensus on including specific results in the presidency conclusions (Eumonitor 2016). 	<p>Priorities (Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs 2016):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economically strong Europe; • Modern single market; • Sustainable migration and asylum policies; • Globally engaged Europe (incl. enlargement policy) <p>Year of Brexit referendum; Peak of the migration crisis</p>
2022 July–December	Czechia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlargement is not among the presidency priorities; • Short reference on the topic—EU enlargement being a crucial strategic instrument of the EU for maintaining peace, stability and prosperity in Europe; • In light of the Russian aggression both granting of candidate status to Ukraine and to Moldova and confirming the European perspective of Georgia; • Czech presidency supports the EU enlargement negotiations and supports the Western Balkan countries in their integration. (Programme 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launching accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia; • Granting candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina; • Continued commitment to the integration of the Western Balkans 	<p>Priorities (Programme 2022)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing the refugee crisis and Ukraine’s post-war recovery; • Energy security; • Strengthening Europe’s defence capabilities and cyberspace security; • Strategic resilience of the European economy; • Resilience of democratic institutions <p>2022 was the year of the start of the Russian attack against the Ukraine</p>

Table 2 (continued)

EU council presidency period	Country	Program	Results	Context
2024 July—December	Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enlargement is among the main priorities;• Highlight the importance of the inclusion of the Western Balkans (initiating the EU-Western Balkans Summit and their inclusion to the European Political Community);• No mention of the accession of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. (Programme 2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Council (2024) separate conclusions on enlargement indicate the top position of the subject;• General support for the accession of the Western Balkans countries, even Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, even Turkey;• Separate evaluation on all candidate countries;• Stress on the merit-based approach to enlargement	<p>Priorities (Programme 2024)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• New European competitiveness deal;• Reinforcement of European defence policy;• Consistent and merit-based enlargement policy;• Stemming illegal migration;• Shaping the future of cohesion policy;• A farmer-oriented EU agricultural policy;• Addressing demographic challenges <p>Priorities (Programme, 2025)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Defence and security;• Protection of people and borders;• Resistance to foreign interference and disinformation;• Ensuring security and freedom of business;• Energy transition• Competitive and resilient agriculture;• Health security
2025 January—June	Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enlargement is not among the top presidency priorities;• In the text of the programme the merit-based nature of enlargement is stressed;• The accession of the Western Balkans is highlighted	<p>N/A</p>	

Source EU Council Presidency Programmes and Conclusions 2014–25, Authors' compilation



Democracy backsliding plays a leading role in this phenomenon for three reasons. First, within the Visegrád Group, the intensity of cooperation has started to diminish precisely for this reason—Czechia and Slovakia (before Fico won the elections in 2023) started to move away from the other two V4 members who were becoming politically unpleasant allies because of their illiberal political regimes. This meant that, while in the 2010s, there was a chance to influence EU policy and enter a “three-level game” strengthening V4 country positions in an allied manner, with this serious cleavage (and also the three against one position towards Russia), they are back to the “two-level game”. Second, the enlargement policy of the European Union changed in 2020 not independently of the democracy backsliding processes within the EU, and precisely, in the V4 countries to prevent new members from becoming soon problematic from the democratic point of view like Poland and Hungary. Third, the democracy backsliding process in V4 countries has its regional effect—candidate countries are problematic from this point of view, and these processes are not unrelated to EU member states’ developments.

Connected to Schimmelfennig’s argument (Schimmelfennig 2003) who argued that liberal democracy was the most relevant factor in the Big Bang enlargement of the European Union, it can be concluded that it is still the most relevant factor, however, the lack of it. It causes significant delays in the enlargement process, while the post-2022 new geopolitical situation would require the fastening of the process. It should also be said, however, that the Visegrad countries have different attitudes towards the EU’s enlargement to the Western Balkans and the three Eastern countries. The latter is particularly divisive among the V4, as neither Hungary nor Slovakia supports Ukraine’s accession.

From the V4 point of view, there is a paradox in the examined period. In the post-2014 years, there was unity among V4 members in most political and policy areas where the cooperation was active, including enlargement; their unified position, however, could not push the enlargement process as the commission and other member states were not prioritizing it. On the other hand, when EU enlargement was gaining momentum in the post-2022 period, the Visegrad cooperation became dysfunctional, and thus, could not influence enlargement as a bloc. Returning to the “two-level game” thus contributes to the diminishing effect of the region on EU enlargement decisions—and indeed in other policy areas.

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Declarations

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