



## Visegrad and Ukraine since Maidan 2013–2014 and the Russian Invasion of 2022

Rick Fawn & Iuliia Drobysh

To cite this article: Rick Fawn & Iuliia Drobysh (2023): Visegrad and Ukraine since Maidan 2013–2014 and the Russian Invasion of 2022, Europe-Asia Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09668136.2023.2197180](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2197180)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2197180>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Jul 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 148



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Visegrad and Ukraine since Maidan 2013–2014 and the Russian Invasion of 2022

RICK FAWN & IULIIA DROBYSH

## *Abstract*

Visegrad and Ukraine matter to each other. That relationship offers mutual lessons on wider affairs, especially after revolution, war and territorial occupation that Ukraine has endured since 2014. This article examines why and how Ukraine came to place great confidence in Visegrad and identifies five ways in which Visegrad gave Ukraine vital political, material and even existential support. Nevertheless, a separate five gaps are identified in perceptions and expectations that reveal changes in Ukrainian understandings of Visegrad's capacity and willingness to support it. The salience of those lessons extends beyond this important if overlooked European security relationship.

FROM POPULAR PROTEST, ARGUABLY UNPRECEDENTED, demanding the signing of the Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union (EU), to Russia's seizure of Crimea and 'hybrid warfare' in Donbas, Ukraine became the site of pivotal European security issues during 2013–2014. The Russian Federation's subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched on 24 February 2022 produced Europe's greatest mass violence since World War II.

Long before 2022 and then because of Russian aggression after 2014, Ukrainian governments sought allies. The United States, major European states, the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) unsurprisingly feature. Ukraine also placed expectations on a less likely, less familiar actor: the three-decade-old, four-member Visegrad Group, known also as Visegrad or the V4, comprising Czechia, Hungary, Poland

Research for this article was carried out while Iuliia Drobysch was a student at the University of St Andrews, and was funded by the St Andrews Research Internship Scheme. We are also grateful for the refereeing and editorial feedback provided by *Europe-Asia Studies*.

Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2197180>

and Slovakia.<sup>1</sup> Ukraine sought partnerships with and even membership of Visegrad from its inception in 1991, irrespective of the foreign policy orientations of Ukrainian governments. Visegrad member states are more than geographical neighbours; especially after 2013, Ukraine took their individual and collective successes in domestic reform and Euro-Atlantic integration as exemplars for itself. Since the Revolution of Dignity or Maidan,<sup>2</sup> both sides have used their shared historical experiences of Soviet (read as Russian) domination as part of the basis for closer cooperation and advocacy of Ukrainian interests in the West.<sup>3</sup>

This article assesses why Ukraine assigned expectations to Visegrad, what Ukraine sought, and the provisions Visegrad offered. It then accounts for shortfalls, that is, Ukraine's misplaced expectations. Mismatches between expectations and outcomes produced a learning curve in Ukrainian foreign policy analyses and behaviour. Those lessons have informed both parties in this dynamic relationship as well as other stakeholders in wider European security who engage with both parties. Visegrad has had foreign policy ambitions of its own and as part of the European Union toward adjacent post-Soviet states and particularly Ukraine as the geographically and demographically largest. Many Ukrainian governments assigned prominence to relations with the Visegrad Group. Analysing Ukraine's expectations and the lessons it learned in those engagements illuminates an understudied dimension of European foreign policy and security relations in the run-up to what would become the continent's largest incidence of violence and population displacement since World War II.<sup>4</sup> Visegrad-Ukrainian relations were directly affected by and responded to Russian aggression against Ukraine after 2014. Early and distinctive Visegrad support for Ukraine, both declarative and practical, sought to bring Ukraine closer to Euro-Atlantic institutions, but could not ultimately fulfil Ukrainian expectations.

The emphasis in this article therefore is on accounting for Visegrad's collective policy outputs, that is, its actions as a Group. The term Visegrad is not used to mean the individual foreign policies of its four members. Rather, national policies are analysed solely in so far as they pertain to Visegrad's capacities and to its eventual immobilisation regarding Ukraine as Russia's military build-up on three sides of Ukraine intensified in early 2022. The national priorities of individual Visegrad states feature when they expound Visegrad's actions and inactions, and as part of Ukraine's learning curve regarding the group.

Although the focus is on Visegrad-Ukrainian relations from the Maidan protests of 2013 onwards, these relations date from 1991, the year of both Visegrad's founding and the independence of Ukraine. In this early period, Ukraine repeatedly sought Visegrad

<sup>1</sup>The formal name for Visegrad cooperation is spelt accordingly. The Hungarian castle and palace and the town north of Budapest where the cooperation was established is Visegrád. Even official Hungarian statements, however, use the Hungarian-language spelling, adding confusion. The diacritical spelling is used hereafter only in keeping with original sources, even if those do so incorrectly.

<sup>2</sup>Generally referred to in Ukraine as the 'Revolution of Dignity', the events of 21 November 2013 to February 2014 are better known abroad as Maidan or Euromaidan.

<sup>3</sup>For this reason, our analysis primarily focuses on relations between Ukraine and V4 from 2013.

<sup>4</sup>There is a dearth of recent studies on this topic, especially outside Central and Eastern Europe. Notable exceptions are Schweiger and Visvizi (2018), Flenley and Mannin (2018).

membership to ‘coordinate actions in building a liberal democracy, market economy and civil society’.<sup>5</sup> That early, aspiring relationship often evaded extra-regional analyses. Balmaceda observed in 2000: ‘Recent Western works on Ukraine’s foreign relations have concentrated narrowly on the question of its future relations with Russia, and have not paid much attention to Ukraine’s growing relationships with its immediate Western neighbours’ (Balmaceda 2000, p. 17).

Visegrad always supported Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, even when Ukrainian governments gravitated to Moscow. Visegrad backed Ukraine’s European integration, and encouraged the EU to support Ukraine’s progress, including Ukraine’s planned accession to the EU’s AA and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in November 2013. Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich’s sudden rejection of the AA provoked mass protests, with violence ensuing. His flight from the country and Russia’s subsequent interventions catapulted Ukraine to the top of Europe’s security agenda. The next sections analyse five forms of support which Visegrad has provided to Ukraine, before assessing what Ukraine sought and received from Visegrad, and finally, how Ukrainians came to reassess Visegrad’s usefulness.

*After Maidan: what Visegrad provided and what Ukraine received*

From 2013 onwards, both disjuncture and continuity occurred in Visegrad–Ukrainian relations. The disjuncture occurred because Maidan led to the end of a Ukrainian presidency that had suddenly retracted its plan to draw closer to the EU, and had instead turned fully towards Moscow. From statements that Yanukovich specifically made to Visegrad leaders earlier in 2013 (detailed below), it is conceivable that Visegrad felt betrayal. Parallel to this was continuity, because the post-Maidan government sought to intensify Ukraine’s relations with the West. In these circumstances, Visegrad and Ukraine initially saw each other as preeminent partners. Their post-Maidan relations took five forms, analysed in the sections that follow.

*Condemnation of aggression and reaffirmation of territorial integrity*

Visegrad backed Ukraine through declarations asserting its territorial integrity and condemning Russian aggression. The significance of these statements should not be understated. One leading regional analyst summarised that: ‘In the case of Slovakia and Hungary, which are heavily dependent on oil and gas supplies from Russia, the V4’s statements were harsher than the stances officially adopted by these states domestically’ (Gniazdowski 2014).<sup>6</sup>

Despite scepticism among some Ukrainian interlocutors as to possible divisions within Visegrad (which Ukrainian analyses later detected), Visegrad issued early and firm statements against Russian aggression towards Ukraine. On 4 March 2014, before Russian forces had fully seized Crimea, the V4 warned of the implied legal violations and

<sup>5</sup>‘Czworobok zamiast trojkata’, *Życie Warszawy*, 20 May 1992; see also Klyuchuk (2017, p. 129).

<sup>6</sup>See also Gniazdowski *et al.* (2014).

the threat that Russia posed beyond Ukraine: ‘The Visegrad countries believe that the recent military actions by Russia are not only in violation of international law, but also create a dangerous new reality in Europe’.<sup>7</sup> The four went further by mobilising their own historical experiences to express solidarity with Ukraine, a move which Visegrad likely intended as a means of awakening Western partners to their view of a menacing Russian historical trajectory: ‘The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are appalled to witness a military intervention in twenty-first century Europe akin to their own experiences in 1956, 1968 and 1981’.<sup>8</sup> These historical analogies of Soviet/Russian aggression provided ideational solidarity that Visegrad, but not Western Europe, could extend to Ukraine.

The V4 continued to reiterate support for Ukrainian territorial integrity and to condemn Russian aggression, particularly in a statement by Visegrad’s foreign ministers issued at their informal summit with the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries in April 2014.<sup>9</sup> Visegrad called Russian behaviour ‘deplorable’, stating that it challenged ‘the fundamentals of European peace and security and the validity of international legal order and principles’, and called for more measures against these attacks on Ukraine’s territorial integrity.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Visegrad served as a platform for Ukraine to seek the support of European countries with which the V4 had established relations: Austria, the UK, Switzerland, Germany and France (Maksak 2018). While this support did not materialise, the expectation expressed by Ukrainian foreign policy analyst Hennadiy Maksak indicated the kind of hopes Ukraine held of the V4.

On the EaP’s tenth anniversary in 2019, Visegrad condemned ‘the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by the Russian Federation’ and reiterated the group’s refusal to recognise it, reaffirming its ‘support of Ukraine’s unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity’.<sup>11</sup> This language was in keeping with early statements. But its reiteration, including ‘condemnation’, corrected Visegrad’s own record of what amounts to a limited response to renewed Russian aggression the year before, when Russian naval forces engaged Ukrainian ships and took 24 hostages near the Kerch Strait. Ukrainian officials appealed specifically to Visegrad during the Kerch crisis, believing that its support would be both forthcoming and effective. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry called on its Visegrad ‘partners to resolutely condemn the aggressive actions of the RF [Russian

<sup>7</sup>‘Statement of the V4 Prime Ministers on Ukraine’, Visegrad Group, 4 March 2014, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/statement-of-the-prime>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>8</sup>‘Statement of the V4 Prime Ministers on Ukraine’, Visegrad Group, 4 March 2014, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/statement-of-the-prime>, accessed 7 April 2021. The statement also implies, ahistorically, that Soviet forces intervened Poland in 1981. To the contrary, it has been argued that Soviet non-intervention in Poland was the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which provided belated justification for the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia (Mastny 1999).

<sup>9</sup>On Visegrad and EaP generally, see Duleba *et al.* (2013), Kačan (2013).

<sup>10</sup>‘Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 Countries on the Occasion of the V4+EaP Informal Ministerial Meeting’, Visegrad Group, 28–29 April 2014, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/statement-of-the>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>11</sup>‘The Visegrad Group Joint Statement on 10th Anniversary of the Eastern Partnership’, Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR, 6 May 2019, available at: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/3574816/190510+The+Visegrad+Group+Joint+Statement+on+10th+Anniversary+of+the+Eastern+Partnership+Bratislava++May+6++2019+%28002%29>, accessed 6 April 2021.

Federation] and to demand immediate release of 24 Ukrainian servicemen who have the status of prisoners of war according to the Geneva Conventions, as well as the return of the Ukrainian Navy's vessels' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2018).<sup>12</sup> On 30 November 2018, within days of the clash, the Political Directors of the four Visegrad foreign ministries travelled to Kyiv and met the Ukrainian State Secretary for Foreign Affairs. In the meeting the V4 representatives reiterated support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and called for the sailors' release. One source acknowledged 'the existence of several misunderstandings in bilateral relations with the members of the group', but continued by stating that the V4 demonstrated a '*consolidated political position* regarding the support for Ukraine in relation to the Russian aggression in the Sea of Azov'.<sup>13</sup>

While Ukrainian government and press sources carried Visegrad's statement, Visegrad's online records did not, omitting reference to this meeting. Instead, Visegrad's website included the opposite of any coherent, forceful denunciation. The website offered only separate references to two unilateral responses. The first, from the Czech news agency, reported that the Czech Senate (only one part of the country's bicameral legislature) condemned the detention of the Ukrainian vessels.<sup>14</sup> The second, from the Polish news agency, explained that 'Poland's position on Kerch Strait incident [was] in line with NATO', and that Russia had violated international law.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the Kerch incident, Ukraine continued to expect more of Visegrad than was declaratorily delivered. In turn, Visegrad delivered more in terms of support for Ukraine's post-2014 efforts to intensify Euro-Atlantic relations.

#### *Ukraine's integration with the EU and NATO: advocacy and practical support*

After President Viktor Yanukovich had been ousted following the Maidan protests sparked by his refusal to sign the EU AA, Visegrad urgently issued a statement, carried in Ukrainian media, that reminded Ukrainians that the EU Agreement remained available and that the Group would support renewed efforts to have Ukraine sign these agreements.<sup>16</sup> Ukraine sought to use Visegrad's intensified advocacy and practical support as a means of deepening its relations with Euro-Atlantic institutions more broadly. In early 2014, with

<sup>12</sup>Ukrainian media coverage of the appeals to Visegrad include 'Kyiv zaklykav Vyshehradsku chetvirku vymahaty vid RF zvilnennia ukrainskykh moriakiv', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 30 November 2018, available at: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2018/11/30/7199892/>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>13</sup>Emphasis added; 'Ukrainska pryzma: Zovnishnia polityka 2018—zнову 'chetvirka z minusom'', *Ukrainian Prism*, 2019, available at: <http://prismua.org/ukrainian-prism-foreign-policy-2018/>, accessed 6 April 2021.

<sup>14</sup>'Czech Senate Condemns Russian Detention of Ukrainian Ships', *ČTK*, 28 November 2018, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/news/czech-senate-condemns>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>15</sup>'Poland's Position on Kerch Strait Incident in Line with NATO', *PAP*, 28 November 2018, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/news/poland-position-on-kerch>, accessed 7 April 2021. Three documents are listed on the Visegrad website for November and December 2018: 'Annex II to the Memorandum of Understanding on Co-operation Among the Statistical Institutes of the Visegrad Group Countries; Bratislava, November 20, 2018'; 'Joint Statement from the North Atlantic Council Simulation, December 5, 2018 [a Visegrad youth simulation]'; and 'Protocol of the 5th Meeting of the International Olympic Committee Steering Committee [PDF]; Bratislava, November 29, 2018'.

<sup>16</sup>'Joint Statement of V4 Foreign Ministers on Ukraine', 24 February 2014, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/joint-statement-of-v4>, accessed 27 February 2023.

Yanukovych still in power, Ukrainian media had carried Visegrad's pledges to accelerate an EU visa-free travel regime.<sup>17</sup> Returning from a V4 meeting in 2016, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin tweeted the V4's 'full support' and called the group's actions 'a very neighborly attitude' (Stets 2016).<sup>18</sup> The mutual value of free movement of labour is considerable: Polish statistics showed that 1.2 million Ukrainians were working in the country in 2016 (Zachová 2018).

Following Yanukovych's flight from Ukraine, Visegrad emphasised the 'moral duty' of starting immediate preparations for Kyiv's signature of the AA and the DCFTA, replicating the language that the group had used in its early days to persuade the European Community and NATO to open their doors to them.<sup>19</sup> So important was Visegrad to Ukraine's post-Maidan leadership that Ukrainian embassies issued a statement following the V4–EaP meeting on 28–29 April 2014 declaring the V4's support for the completion of the EU's AA and the free trade agreement with Ukraine 'as soon as possible, right after the presidential elections', which were held in May 2014.<sup>20</sup> Petro Poroshenko, elected Ukrainian president in new elections held on 25 May 2014, emphasised that 'international support' from Ukraine's 'closest neighbours' was key to Euro-Atlantic integration.<sup>21</sup>

Ukrainian media and government sources reiterated Visegrad's support while recognising that membership of Euro-Atlantic institutions was not imminent, and the V4 could not press the EU beyond the measures agreed within the union. Nevertheless 'the V4 countries also endorsed the vision of "gradual access of our partners to the EU Single Market up to the levels recognised as mutually beneficial for the partners and the EU Member States"'.<sup>22</sup>

On 11 April 2017, V4 foreign ministers met in Kyiv with Ukraine's president, prime minister and foreign minister. While no Visegrad statement was recorded on Visegrad's website or in the presidency annual report,<sup>23</sup> the V4 foreign ministers reiterated in a public address their encouragement of Ukraine's ratification of the AA and their backing of the visa-free regime. Accession support continued in the Polish Visegrad presidency in 2020–2021: 'For V4, it will be important to support the implementation of EU association

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, 'Vyshehradaska chetvirka pidtrymuye yaknayshvydshe vvedennya bezvizovoho rezhymu z YeS dlya Ukrainy', *112 UA*, 30 January 2014, available at: <https://ua.112.ua/polityka/vishegradska-chetvirka-pidtrimuye-yaknayshvidshe-vvedennya-bezvizovogo-rezhimu-z-yes-dlya-ukrayini-16117.html>, accessed 18 December 2018.

<sup>18</sup>See also, 'Visegrad Group to Fully Support Ukraine's Visa-free Regime with EU—Klimkin', *Unian*, 4 May 2016, available at: <https://www.unian.info/politics/1337454-visegrad-group-to-fully-support-ukraines-visa-free-regime-with-eu-klimkin.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>19</sup>See, 'Joint V4 Ministers' Letter on Ukraine to Baroness Ashton and Štefan Füle', 2013, available at: [http://www.mzv.cz/file/1140739/Joint\\_V4\\_Ministers\\_Letter\\_on\\_Ukraine\\_to\\_Ashon\\_and\\_Fule.pdf](http://www.mzv.cz/file/1140739/Joint_V4_Ministers_Letter_on_Ukraine_to_Ashon_and_Fule.pdf), accessed 7 April 2021. Note: the letter was dated 2013 but issued in 2014.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, 'V4 Condemns Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine', Embassy of Ukraine in Japan, 30 April 2014, available at: <https://japan.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/1151-v4-condemns-russias-aggression-against-ukraine>, accessed 6 April 2021.

<sup>21</sup>Prezydent Ukrainy proviv zustrich z delehatsiieiu Vyshehradskoi hrupy', *Decentralization*, 16 December 2014, available at: <https://decentralization.gov.ua/news/144?page=9>, accessed 6 April 2021.

<sup>22</sup>Foreign Minister Kuleba: Ukraine Ready to Deepen Cooperation Within Eastern Partnership', *Ukrinform*, 10 April 2020, available at: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3002830-foreign-minister-kuleba-ukraine-ready-to-deepen-cooperation-within-eastern-partnership.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>23</sup>The Polish Presidency Report notes the Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group on the future of the Eastern Partnership, which was issued the day before, 12 April 2017.



agreements’, including the DCFTA with Ukraine (and with Georgia and Moldova).<sup>24</sup> However, Visegrad’s intentions of advocating greater EU attention to the EaP and, within that, to Ukraine and its central place in the partnership, met resistance. The V4 consequently downgraded its aims from encouraging the fulfilment of specific EaP goals only to ‘increas[ing] the interest of EU countries’ in the EaP region, in which Ukraine was physically the largest and strategically most important member. The Polish V4 Presidency in 2020–2021 declared its aim ‘to further promote and expand V4 cooperation with activities and projects supporting the development of the EaP’.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from lobbying for Ukraine’s intensified Euro-Atlantic relations, Visegrad sought to provide tangible, practical assistance to those ends, reiterating the vitality of its relations with Ukraine. Some of that support was directly related to resumed fulfilment of the Association Agreement that the Yanukovich government had scuttled in November 2013. Klimkin announced, after meeting his V4 counterparts, that the Visegrad countries had agreed to assume responsibility for reform assistance, each for a key sector, to ensure Ukrainian fulfilment of the AA.<sup>26</sup> Poroshenko announced that ‘applying the experience of each Visegrad country’ would be ‘very valuable’ for Ukraine and ‘extremely important’ for its European integration.<sup>27</sup> Ukrainian officials and media commended not only Visegrad’s assistance but also the division of labour: Slovakia led on energy cooperation (see below); Poland on reform for regional decentralisation; Czechia on education; and Hungary on knowledge transfer and small and medium enterprise reforms.<sup>28</sup> Ukrainian expectations were also that ‘the Visegrad Group will do its utmost to accelerate the European integration of Ukraine with [these] joint efforts’,<sup>29</sup> which earned Poroshenko’s public thanks to Visegrad.<sup>30</sup> V4 presidency programmes pledged the ‘utilization of the V4 countries’ transition experience in the context of the EU’s assistance to its partner countries’,<sup>31</sup> and statements by the Ukrainian government characterised its interactions with Visegrad as preparation for EU accession (Demkova 2014).

Visegrad–Ukrainian cooperation on EU accession did not solely remain in government offices and meetings, but was explained to the Ukrainian public, both in Kyiv and in

<sup>24</sup> *Report on the Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group*, July 2020–June 2021, p. 6, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=482>, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>25</sup> *Report on the Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group*, July 2020–June 2021, p. 6, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=482>, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Visegrad Group Will Help Ukraine Implement Association Agreement with EU—Klimkin’, *Interfax Ukraine*, 17 December 2014, available at: <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/240293.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Prezydent Ukrainy proviv zustrich z delehatsiieiu Vyshehradskoi hrupy’, *Decentralization*, 16 December 2014, available at: <https://decentralization.gov.ua/news/144?page=9>, accessed 6 April 2021.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Vyshehradska chetvirka: “my zatsikavleni v novii, demokratychnii, uspishnii Ukraini”’, *Torhovo-Promyslova Palata Ukrainy*, 2016, available at: <https://uccci.org.ua/press-center/uccci-news/vishiegrads-kachietvirka-mi-zatsikavleni-v-novii-diemokratichnii-uspishnii-ukrayini>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Prezydent Ukrainy proviv zustrich z delehatsiieiu Vyshehradskoi hrupy’, *Decentralization*, 16 December 2014, available at: <https://decentralization.gov.ua/news/144?page=9>, accessed 6 April 2021.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Prezident Slovakii nameren snova posetit’ Ukrainu v mae’, *Gordon UA*, 22 February 2015, available at: <https://gordonua.com/news/politics/prezident-slovakii-nameren-snova-posetit-ukrainu-v-mae-67944.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Hungarian Presidency 2013–14 of the Visegrad Group’, *Visegrad Group*, 2014, p. 13, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=230>, accessed 7 April 2021.



smaller cities. For these purposes, Visegrad even launched its own ‘roadshow’, a format about which both parties were positive. Ukrainian media similarly reported encouragingly on this public diplomacy.<sup>32</sup>

Visegrad assistance extended also to improving Ukraine’s military capacity for interoperability with the V4 and, by extension, the EU and NATO. Ukrainian participation in Visegrad’s Battlegroup, a combined standby military force for use by NATO or the EU, was proposed in April 2013, before the Maidan protests. Ukrainian officials stated that their military had equipment that could be of use to Visegrad, while Poland, on behalf of the group, said that possible cooperation included personnel training and control of air space.<sup>33</sup> After Maidan, military cooperation between Ukraine and Visegrad was accelerated, against the backdrop of NATO assistance *via* the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine, agreed at NATO’s 2016 Warsaw summit (NATO 2016). Difficulties in bilateral Hungarian–Ukrainian relations, discussed elsewhere in this article, seem to have been put aside during the Hungarian Visegrad presidency in 2018–2019. That Visegrad presidency programme affirmed that ‘V4 stands ready to further support the activities in the framework of NATO cooperation with Ukraine’, through the Alliance’s CAP to consolidate its military assistance to the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary 2017).<sup>34</sup> Visegrad was seen as aiding Ukraine’s modernisation to achieve NATO standards and to augment Ukrainian military engagement with the Euro-Atlantic community. A Ukrainian study wrote that ‘the level of compatibility and compliance with NATO standards is an important task for the reform of the security and defence sector of Ukraine’.<sup>35</sup> While some in Ukraine questioned whether such military cooperation would translate into ‘concrete plans’ or remain at the level of simply meetings,<sup>36</sup> Visegrad continued the intensification of Ukraine–NATO relations. The Polish Visegrad presidency programme for 2020–2021 included the goal of ‘projecting stability and NATO policy on partnerships and enlargement’. Within that, the V4 recognised that Ukraine’s short- and medium-term prospects of NATO membership were slim and that therefore it required a special status to allow for closer cooperation with NATO: that of an Enhanced Operating Partner, which was granted on 12 June 2020.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup>‘Communiqué of Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group after the Meeting with Prime Minister of Ukraine’, Visegrad Group, 2016, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/communique-of-prime>, accessed 7 April 2021; ‘Vyshehradaska chetvirka: “my zatsikavleni v novii, demokratychnii, uspishnii Ukraini”’, Torhovo-Promyslova Palata Ukrainy, 2016, available at: <https://uccu.org.ua/press-center/uccu-news/vishiegrads-ka-chietvirka-mi-zatsikavlieni-v-novii-diemokratichnii-uspishnii-ukrayini>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>33</sup>‘Ukraine Will Be Invited to Visegrad Battlegroup’, *Ukrinform*, 18 April 2013, available at: [https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/1484050-ukraine\\_will\\_be\\_invited\\_to\\_visegrad\\_battlegroup\\_302101.html](https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/1484050-ukraine_will_be_invited_to_visegrad_battlegroup_302101.html), accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>34</sup>See also NATO (2016).

<sup>35</sup>‘Slovachchyna yak advokat Ukrainy v Yevropi’, *Tsentr Media*, 26 January 2018, available at: <https://centre.today/slovachchyna-yak-advokat-ukrainy/>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>36</sup>For example, Shelest (2020).

<sup>37</sup>*Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group July 2020–June 2021 Presidency Programme*, p. 29, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=451>, accessed 2 March 2023.

V4–Ukrainian military cooperation extended into the EU when Ukraine signed the V4’s cooperation framework for its EU Military Tactical Group in June 2016.<sup>38</sup> The V4 and Ukraine made this military cooperation their priority on 21 June 2015 (Tkachenko 2015), and it was put into practice a year later when, on 6 June 2016, Ukraine joined the V4’s Military Tactical group. That, in turn, allowed Ukrainian armed forces to ‘develop operational capabilities, obtain the best military standards and maintain interoperability with the armies of EU member states in the context of joint crisis management efforts’.<sup>39</sup> Ukrainian media hailed this as ‘open[ing] the door for further deepening of cooperation with the EU and the parallel enhancement of defense capabilities ... a mutually beneficial process, during which Ukraine contributes to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area, and on the other hand, acquires the necessary experience in the process of exercises and trainings’ (Beleskov 2017). After what these partners deemed ‘successful’ Ukrainian participation in 2016, Ukrainians were scheduled for inclusion in the next Visegrad EU deployment in 2019.<sup>40</sup> Following Russian–Belarusian military exercises conducted in June 2017, meetings were held between the chiefs of staff of the V4, the three Baltic states and Ukraine to intensify military cooperation in the format ‘V4 + Baltic states + Ukraine’.<sup>41</sup> Within a year, joint military activity extended to ‘multilateral assessment of threats, strengthening, mutual understanding and pragmatism in the implementation of joint plans’.<sup>42</sup> The V4 provided Ukraine with a beneficial platform for military cooperation.

*Additional tangible assistance: education, transportation infrastructure and energy security*

Visegrad’s support to Ukraine went beyond measures specifically relating to the EU and NATO. Educational and cultural support continued to be channelled through the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), the Group’s endowment to support regional cultural and think tank activities, of which Ukraine remained the largest beneficiary.<sup>43</sup> In 2015,

<sup>38</sup>‘Ministry of Defence of Ukraine Joins Technical Agreement between Defence Ministries of Visegrad Group’, Ukraine Government Portal, 7 June 2016, available at: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/249092490/>, accessed 7 April 2021. See also Polikovs’ka (2016).

<sup>39</sup>‘Ministry of Defence of Ukraine Joins Technical Agreement between Defence Ministries of Visegrad Group’, Ukraine Government Portal, 7 June 2016, available at: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/249092490/>, accessed 7 April 2021. See also Polikovs’ka (2016).

<sup>40</sup>‘Vyshehrad planuje zaluchyty Ukrainu do chervuvannia svoiei boiovoi hrupy’, *Ukrinform*, 14 July 2017, available at: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-world/2266042-visegrad-planue-zaluciti-ukrainu-docerguvanna-svoei-bojovoi-grupi.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>41</sup>‘Ukraina i Vyshehradska chetvirka: novyi format pohyblennia spivpratsi’, Ministerstvo oborony Ukrainy, 24 June 2017, available at: <https://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2017/06/24/ukraina-i-vishehradska-chetvirka-novij-format-pogliblennya-spivpraczi/>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>42</sup>‘Muzhenko ‘zviryv hodnynyky’ z nachal’nykamy henshtabiv krain Vyshehradskoi chetvirky’, *Ukrinform*, 27 June 2018, available at: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-polytics/2488689-muzenko-zviriv-godinniki-z-nacalniki-genshtabiv-krain-vishehradskoi-chetvirki.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>43</sup>See, for example, ‘Communiqué of Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group after the Meeting with Prime Minister of Ukraine’, Visegrad Group, 2016, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/communiqué-of-prime>, accessed 7 April 2021. This Visegrad assistance was praised in the Ukrainian national media. See, ‘Krainy “Vyshehradskoi chetvirky” stvorily fond dopomohy Ukraini’, *Unian*, 16 December 2014, available at: <https://www.unian.ua/society/1022328-krajini-vishegradskoji-chetvirki-stvorili-fond-dopomogi-ukrajini.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.

Visegrad announced the award of 410 university scholarships,<sup>44</sup> and V4 support for reform of higher education in Ukraine was intensified.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, a longstanding Visegrad idea to extend IVF opportunities to Russians was quietly postponed, and then dropped altogether following the 2013–2014 crises (Rácz 2014b, p. 67). Following the full-scale Russian invasion of February 2022, the IVF dispersed €1,000,000 to projects supporting Ukrainian refugees.<sup>46</sup>

Visegrad's inclusion of Ukraine in transportation infrastructure planning also signalled the long-term importance of Ukraine to Visegrad. V4 prime ministers announced in 2016 that:

the Visegrad Group countries and Ukraine will further endeavor to develop transport infrastructure to connect the Ukrainian transportation network with the Trans-European Transport Network, as these would foster economic cooperation between partners and, in consequence, lead to the stabilization of the region.<sup>47</sup>

The 2018–2019 Slovak V4 presidency went further, stating that Ukraine would be included in road transportation networks.<sup>48</sup>

While transport was an aspirational form of cooperation requiring a long lead-time, energy security was tangible and already enjoyed impressive recent history. Visegrad responded decisively to the energy crisis of 2009, when Russia closed supplies for both domestic Ukrainian consumption and transit to EU states, by building new facilities to house additional fuel and reverse flow systems to return it to Ukraine in the event of future Russian cut-offs.<sup>49</sup> With Russian intervention in Ukraine from 2014, the post-Maidan Ukrainian government sought not only to continue but also to increase Visegrad's energy security. The Ukrainian MFA declared, in December 2014, that 'mutual energy security remains among the top priorities of cooperation of V4 and Ukraine' and reconfirmed the readiness of the V4 'to support continued reverse gas flows to Ukraine during the upcoming winter months' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2014). These new energy facilities, an initiative of the V4, ensured Ukraine's energy security (Dąborowski 2015). Considering Visegrad's dependence on Russian fuel supplies, these arrangements to support Ukraine are

<sup>44</sup>See, 'Krainy "Vyshehradskoi chetvirky" stvorily fond dopomohy Ukraini', *Unian*, 16 December 2014, available at: <https://www.unian.ua/society/1022328-krajini-vishegradskoji-chetvirki-stvorili-fond-dopomogi-ukrajini.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>45</sup>See, for example, 'Vyshehradska hrupa obhovoryt u Chernivtsiakh reformy osvity', *Pogliad*, 12 October 2015, available at: <https://pogliad.ua/news/chernivtsi-vishegradska-grupa-obgovorit-u-chemivcyah-reformi-osviti-125928>, accessed 6 April 2021.

<sup>46</sup>*Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2022–June 2023)*, p. 2, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=493>, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>47</sup>'Communiqué of Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group after the Meeting with Prime Minister of Ukraine', Visegrad Group, 2016, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/communiqué-of-prime>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>48</sup>'Dynamic Visegrad for Europe', Slovak Presidency 2018–19 of the Visegrad Group, 2018, p. 9, available at: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/276214/Program+predsedn%C3%ADctva+Slovenskej+republiky+vo+Vy%C5%A1ehradskej+skupine+EN/ba84a58e-6b6a-4ad4-bdd0-3043d687c95b>, accessed 8 April 2021.

<sup>49</sup>Comparative analyses of Central European reactions to Russian energy provisions include Butler and Ostrowski (2018).

remarkable. On energy security, as on defence, outside observers asserted that ‘V4 cooperation increasingly focuses on things that really matter strategically’ (Mitchell 2014, p. 18).

*Visegrad as a reform role model and heightened credibility by association*

Kyiv used cooperation with Visegrad to signal its progressiveness and commitment to the same political and economic reforms that it believed had earned Visegrad EU and NATO membership. That the Visegrad countries’ integration provided ‘a vividly positive example for Ukraine’ was recognised already before Maidan (Perepelytsia 2010, p. 95), with references also to shared mentalities and culture and the ‘similar roots of our societies’ (Solonyna 2009; Kostyuk 2011). Visegrad, too, saw itself as a model, as evident in the writings of Petr Vágner (2010), a Czech diplomat and historian and an IVF Director. After Maidan, both parties increased their references to Visegrad as a role model. The Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, speaking for the group, stated in 2014: ‘We, the V4 countries, offer assistance to Ukraine drawing from our experience and expertise obtained through transformation of our societies and economies’ (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic 2014). A joint statement by the five countries declared, ‘Genuinely implemented reforms, as demonstrated by the V4 countries, will bring [Ukraine] closer to the European Union and contribute to the realization of Ukraine’s European aspiration’.<sup>50</sup>

Visegrad’s utility as a model for Ukraine was seized upon, even if differences in starting points for domestic reform were minimised. One assessment wrote that ‘after all, the V4 countries developed in conditions similar to those of Ukraine but have already successfully undergone reforms and have a stable economic and political situation today’.<sup>51</sup> Visegrad’s success encouraged Ukraine’s aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration, but also fuelled greater assistance expectations of Visegrad by Ukraine. As Kateryna Zarebo of the Ukrainian think tank New Europe Center explained in 2018: ‘the economic reputation of Ukraine in the West is not good, we want to change it, show its potential. The Visegrád Group as an economic partner could help us’ (Strzałkowski 2018). Non-Ukrainian experts also encouraged the use of Visegrad’s inventions to aid Ukrainian reforms. For instance, it was suggested that Ukraine could advance its EU integration by joining Visegrad’s Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), a formation in which it had unsuccessfully sought membership during the 1990s (Aslund & Fehlinger 2017).

*Geocultural identification to disassociate Ukraine from Russia, Eurasia and the post-Soviet space*

Recent publications have addressed the long history of ‘Central Europe’, despite its elusive definition (Dhand 2018; Twardzisz 2018; and earlier, Neumann 1993). In summary, the term

<sup>50</sup>‘Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group and Ukraine’, Visegrad Group, 14 December 2014, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/joint-statement-of-the-141217>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>51</sup>‘Vyshehradaska chetvirka: “my zatsikavleni v novii, demokratychnii, uspishnii Ukraini”’, Torhovo-Promyslova Palata Ukrainy, 2016, available at: <https://uccr.org.ua/press-center/uccr-news/vishiegrads-kachietvirka-mi-zatsikavleni-v-novii-diemokratichnii-uspishnii-ukrayini>, accessed 7 April 2021.

‘Central Europe’ is taken to be a geocultural expression, one that differentiates its members from those in the former Soviet Union (and also the Balkans). Ukraine saw Visegrad as a positive instance of cooperation across a previously divided region, an achievement that won Ukrainian plaudits, such as from an émigré Ukrainian historian, who wrote, ‘Ukraine crosses fingers for Visegrad’ (Osadcuk 2006). Ukraine’s National Institute for Strategic Studies called Visegrad the embodiment of ‘Central European spirit’, which it defined as a combination of ‘traditions, creativity and modern structures in economic and social spheres’.<sup>52</sup> Ukraine’s immediate post-independence attempts to join Visegrad in 1991 failed. Unfortunately for Ukraine, Visegrad became a ‘discriminating mechanism’ that separated it from those with whom it wanted to be geoculturally placed (Wolczuk 2002, p. 100). Being ‘Central European’ is consequential: ‘No one questioned their [Central European countries] belonging to European civilization, to the European cultural community and to European history’ (Perepelytsia 2013).

Although ‘Central Europe’ has multiple meanings and has been fluid over epochs (Dhand 2018), Visegrad nevertheless came to represent at least one form of ‘Central Europe’ and its membership or mere association with it allows for countries to self-designate themselves away from other, seemingly less desirable regions (Fawn 2001). Of course, Visegrad cannot claim a monopoly on the ‘Central European’ label. An alternative grouping that could embody Central Europe is the Central European Initiative (CEI), now a 17-member state body that includes Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> But the CEI has limited capacities, and its member governments demonstrate its low priority by sending inappropriately low-ranking officials to meetings and summits (Fawn 2019, p. 514). Although the Ukrainian government ‘considers the CEI as an important mechanism for integration into the European economic and political space’, it also recognises the CEI’s current limitations.<sup>54</sup> Some observers contend that Visegrad, especially Poland, helped Ukraine to gain CEI membership (Wolczuk 2002), which may have compensated for Ukraine’s continued lack of success in gaining Visegrad membership. Ukraine is also a member of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, a grouping whose own organisers acknowledge has been unable to initiate multilateral development projects.<sup>55</sup> That Ukraine already had membership of other regional formats and yet still sought to join Visegrad demonstrates its appeal. In terms of Ukraine’s geocultural identity, domestic observers reaffirm that ‘the Visegrád Group ... on our deep conviction, are the countries of Central Europe’ (Rostetska & Naumkina 2019, p. 191).

There were compelling reasons for post-Maidan Ukraine to seek close relations with Visegrad. The above constitutes an impressive agenda. Those expectations, however, remained unfulfilled to the degree hoped for by Ukraine. The last section accounts for those misplaced expectations, and identifies five lessons learned.

<sup>52</sup>*Spivrobotnyctvo a krainamy Vyshehradskoi Chetvirky yak instrument Yevropeiskoi intehratsii ta modernizatsii Ukrainy* (Kyiv, National Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014, p. 10), available at: [http://old2.niss.gov.ua/content/articles/files/Vushegrad\\_110214-d954e.pdf](http://old2.niss.gov.ua/content/articles/files/Vushegrad_110214-d954e.pdf), accessed 6 April 2021.

<sup>53</sup>Austria was an original member but left the CEI in 2018, reducing its numbers to 17.

<sup>54</sup>‘Cooperation Within the Framework of the Central European Initiative (CEI)’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, available at: <http://old.mfa.gov.ua/en/about-ukraine/international-organizations/cei>, accessed 6 April 2021.

<sup>55</sup>For regional comparisons, and also ones based on interviews, see Fawn (2013b, 2019).

*The learning curve for Ukraine in its relations with Visegrad: five lessons*

This source analysis benefits from brief cautionary notes. Some Ukrainian media assessments of Visegrad appear critical, with provocative language, particularly over the perceived insufficiency of Visegrad's aid. Thus, for example, even when V4 supplied funds to Ukraine in 2014, the group was called a 'reanimated corpse', a 'political zombie' and then, 'devoid of a future' due to the perceived internal division within the V4 (see Loginov 2014). Some Ukrainian criticisms of Visegrad's responses expressed hyperbole, such as contending that Visegrad produced no more than paper declarations (Romanchuk 2015). As a perhaps solipsistic overstatement of Ukraine's importance, some analyses even suggested that Visegrad was 'on the verge of collapse due to the [2014] military conflict in Ukraine' (Romanchuk 2015), or that divisions over Russian actions had undermined trust within Visegrad, provoking the group's 'political erosion' (Romanowska 2018). Such alarmism proved far-fetched before 2022; apart from the irony that Visegrad achieved unprecedented international notoriety in 2015, with its stance on the 'migrant crisis' (Fawn 2018; Braun 2020).

*Ukrainian membership of Visegrad: limits and possibilities*

Since the early 1990s, Ukraine has sought V4 membership to enhance its prospects of European integration. Ukraine renewed its interest both during and after 2014. As before, however, the V4 refused to expand. Ukraine kept pursuing the idea, and Ukrainian politicians, particularly Poroshenko, and analysts remained keen on membership. The Poroshenko government's rhetoric was highly ambitious about turning the V4 into V5 despite previous rebuffs, and not only of Ukraine. Ukraine's post-Maidan vigour may have been a strategy to float the idea and soften its Visegrad partners to it. That did not succeed.

Instead, the V4 advanced platforms for close cooperation with additional partners, maximising cooperation without the need for membership. Ukraine was one of Visegrad's first partners in such engagement in the early 2000s. These two guiding principles of Visegrad's behaviour suggest that Ukraine should have moderated its membership expectations. Seemingly absent from many Ukrainian discussions about Visegrad is the fact that the V4, uniquely among the many interstate formations involving central and southeast European countries since 1989, has never enlarged.<sup>56</sup> However, Ukrainian leaders issued multiple statements in 2014 and 2015 suggesting that membership was being discussed or had even been agreed. Multiple sources claimed that a 'V5' was being created, doubtless encouraged by Poroshenko's statements, such as, 'We believe that, as a result of the active reformation of Ukraine, the Visegrad Four will change from V4 to V5'.<sup>57</sup> When this did not materialise, a

<sup>56</sup>After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia on 1 January 1993, the two legal successor states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia continued in Visegrad, which was only informally referred to as the Visegrad Four. The entry of those countries and the operation of Visegrad thereafter is considered to have been without any interruption.

<sup>57</sup>'Poroshenko maie namir pryednaty Ukrainu do Vyshehradskoi hrupy', *Korrespondent.net*, 16 December 2014, available at: <https://ua.korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/3456895-poroshenko-maie-namir-pryednaty-ukrainu-do-vyshehradskoi-hrupy>, accessed 7 April 2021.



Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesperson still asserted, ‘this opportunity [membership] is really being discussed’ (Demkova 2014). Ukrainian sources, including the Foreign Ministry, subsequently began referring to a ‘Visegrad+Ukraine’ format (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2017). True, Visegrad has used its ‘plus’ format with many partners, from the United Kingdom to South Korea and usually on an *ad hoc* basis, but a specific, standing ‘Visegrad+Ukraine’ format did not exist. The last full-length Visegrad presidency programme described the ‘plus’ format as one where the group was ‘an important partner’ for the interlocutors; the list of ‘plus’ meetings was described as extensive and usually subject-specific.<sup>58</sup>

Ukrainian aspirations aside, Central European analysts deemed Ukraine to be seeking an ‘unrealistic direct membership’ (Pulišová & Strážay 2010, p. 14). Only Russian analyses seem to expect Visegrad expansion, possibly from overstated fears of Visegrad’s influence and an implicit desire to dampen Ukrainian efforts to reorient its foreign policy westwards.<sup>59</sup> Those Russian sources also see Visegrad expanding not just to Ukraine but to the Baltic Sea, through the Carpathian region and to the Danube.<sup>60</sup>

Given that Slovenia, Romania and Croatia, countries having more in common with the Visegrad Four, including EU and NATO membership, than Ukraine, had been rebuffed by Visegrad (Fawn 2001), Ukraine’s attraction to Visegrad speaks of desperation as much as foreign policy ambition. In fairness to Ukrainian hopes, Visegrad members have sent discordant messages about admission, and Ukrainian media and policymakers seized on the positive (Zaiats 2013).

Poroshenko reiterated Visegrad’s potential importance to Ukraine by announcing the commencement of a new format of relations in November 2014, which Ukrainian diplomatic channels disseminated.<sup>61</sup> This may have been a realisation that full Visegrad membership was not possible, and thus an effort to reset relations and at a higher level than previously. Ukrainian analysts continue to hope for close relations with Visegrad, even without membership (Rostetska & Naumkina 2019, p. 185). Having called for new relations in 2014, Poroshenko claimed in 2015 that both a ‘permanent’ form of cooperation between Ukraine and Visegrad had begun, and also that membership remained possible. He even foresaw a likely transformation of ‘Visegrad Four into Five’ (cited in Tkachenko 2015). An expansion of Visegrad membership did not happen, but Ukraine continued to pursue this aspiration with determination.

<sup>58</sup>Report on the Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group, 1 July 2016–30 June 2017, pp. 6–7, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=361>, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>59</sup>As is apparent in other parts of this article, Visegrad has avoided discussion, let alone issuance of policy, regarding Russia. Historically, in both Visegrad’s foundation in 1991 and its work thereafter, the group has been careful to avoid appearing as a ‘bloc’ opposed to the Soviet Union or Russia.

<sup>60</sup>‘Russian and the Visegrad Group: The Ukrainian Challenge’, Russian International Affairs Council, 22/2015, 30 June 2015, p. 9, available at: [https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-and-the-visegrad-group-the-ukrainian-challenge/?sphrase\\_id=75027387](https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-and-the-visegrad-group-the-ukrainian-challenge/?sphrase_id=75027387), accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>61</sup>President: New Format of Interaction between Ukraine and the Visegrad Group Has Been Initiated in Bratislava’, Velvyslanectví Ukrajiny v České republice, 17 November 2014, available at: <https://czechia.mfa.gov.ua/cs/news/29726-u-bratislavi-zapocatkovano-novij-format-spivrobotnictva-ukrajini-z-visegradykoju-chetvirkoujglava-derzhavi>, accessed 7 April 2021.



*Learning the depth of division: Visegrad, Russia and anti-European sentiments*

Following the 2014 crisis and the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine attempted to determine how much influence Russia wielded over Visegrad as a group and on individual members. The primary conclusion was that Moscow had been able to lure Visegrad away from being ‘European’, and then use Visegrad’s ‘non-European’ behaviour to strengthen discord among EU countries (Magda 2017).

Ukrainian foreign policy decision-makers and analysts initially, however, overestimated Visegrad’s internal coherence. Doing so contributed to a presumption that the Group would act instinctively and collectively against Russian aggression. It may also be that Ukrainians expected Visegrad policy towards Russia to reflect Ukraine’s experiences. These Ukrainian views contrasted with those of the V4, which already in 2014 expected (incorrectly) that Ukraine’s dilemmas might even become a ‘crisis’ for Visegrad, one that could even destroy it (Ehl 2014).

This article earlier identified Visegrad’s statements supporting Ukrainian territorial integrity. To achieve this consensus, divergent state interests regarding Russia had been reconciled. Ukraine’s expectations of Visegrad were probably reinforced by Visegrad statements that paralleled the Russian aggression against Ukraine with their national experiences of Soviet invasion and occupation. Such historical parallels suggest deep Visegrad unity against Russia; in fact, Visegrad had always tried to avoid raising Russia-related matters precisely because its members have diverging interests. Therefore, a V4 position on Russia ‘has always been a taboo’ (Kořan 2014).<sup>62</sup>

Ukrainian media and analysts blamed the Kremlin for divisions emerging within Visegrad and perceived them as weakening its collective support of Kyiv rather than reflecting more accurately divisions within individual Visegrad polities towards Russia. A leading example was when Russian oligarch Vladimir Yakunin, a close associate of President Vladimir Putin, organised a ‘dialogue of civilizations’ on Rhodes.<sup>63</sup> The Czech president and the Polish and Hungarian prime ministers attended. Ukrainian sources now identified divisions in Visegrad, and suggested that only Poland would remain supportive of Ukraine, and warned that the Kremlin would try to use the forum to have the sanctions against Russia lifted (Dyman 2016). Ukrainian analyses correctly identified the risk but exaggerated the impact. For example, Czech President Miloš Zeman used the occasion to reiterate his call to end EU sanctions, that from a leader who called in 2014 for Ukraine to be ‘Finlandised’, presumably meaning a neutralisation of Ukraine’s foreign policy capacity to suit Moscow’s demands as was imposed on Helsinki after World War II. However, as had happened with his ideas for group expansion, Zeman was contradicted by other Czech political actors and Visegrad collectively.<sup>64</sup> Ukrainian sources additionally suggested that Moscow had undermined political values and popular opinion in Visegrad countries and exploited their ‘drift’ towards conservative values, which further

<sup>62</sup>More generally, see Dangerfield (2012), Marušiak (2015, p. 30).

<sup>63</sup>The Rhodes meetings had begun in 2003, with diverse international support. In 2013, Yakunin established the Endowment for the World Public Forum ‘Dialogue of Civilizations’ Foundation, and it was under this arrangement that Zeman and others attended.

<sup>64</sup>For contrarian Czech political views to Zeman’s, see ‘President Zeman Proposes “Finlandization” of Ukraine’, *Radio Prague International*, 26 November 2014.

encouraged their anti-EU policies (Magda 2017). (In fact, the ‘drift’ came easily enough from domestic opportunism rather than Russian inspiration.)<sup>65</sup> However, some Ukrainian assessments tended to overplay Russian influence on Visegrad’s response. In addition to the comments that opened this section, one Ukrainian study in early 2015 contended that Visegrad was collapsing because of the challenges posed to achieving consensus within Visegrad. It was only ‘finally, after a long debate’ that Visegrad achieved common positions on Ukraine (Romanchuk 2015). That process aside, so important was Visegrad to Ukraine and so great the latter’s fears of Russia’s pernicious influence that Ukrainian sources claimed Moscow was corroding V4’s capacity to be a ‘Brussels lobby’ and was transforming it into a ‘weak spot’ in the EU (Magda 2017).

*Domestic political issues in Visegrad countries and their impact on Visegrad–Ukraine relations*

Ukrainian commentators became aware of domestic political changes in Visegrad states and their impact on the group’s ability to support Ukraine. Despite Visegrad’s initial coherence on Ukraine after Maidan, each V4 country adopted different approaches over time.<sup>66</sup> Rhetorical and material support came mostly from Poland; support from Czechia and Slovakia remained largely in support of reform efforts to meet EU expectations; and Hungary was obstructive. The latter deserves particular attention.

Hungarian presidency programmes and reports address the generalised importance of the political and economic transformation of the Visegrad countries for the Western Balkan and post-Soviet states. They say less than other presidencies about Ukraine (Poland gives it the most attention). When they did start in 2014, it was with hostility and to the point (as non-Ukrainian analyses also identified) of ‘undermining’ Visegrad unity (Sadecki 2014, p. 1). Hungarian analysts observed that despite V4 statements supportive of Ukraine, Hungary continued in practice to maintain ‘tight connections’ with Russia (Arató & Koller 2018, p. 99).

From 2014, Hungary strengthened its advocacy for Ukraine’s Hungarian minority, especially in relation to language rights. Budapest was arguably additionally using Visegrad as a platform to amplify its complaints. For one regional analyst, ‘Hungary’s diplomacy from the very beginning [of the Ukrainian–Russian conflict] had been concerned above all with the way the crisis would affect the situation of the Hungarian minority in the Ukrainian Zakarpattia region’ (Gniazdowski 2014). Ukrainian reports in 2014 referred to Hungary’s advocacy of autonomy in Western Ukraine as supportive of Putin’s positions towards Ukraine, which included decentralisation and even deep federalisation (Romanchuk 2015).

Regardless of the validity of such observations, perceptions mattered, and Ukrainian–Hungarian relations were affected by each other’s policies. Poroshenko’s signing of the 2017 Language Law that enforced Ukrainian language instruction in secondary schools

<sup>65</sup> Amongst the extensive literature on the indigenous origins of Central European democratic backsliding, see Enyedi (2020).

<sup>66</sup> Vyshehradaska Chetvirka: “My zatsikavleni v novii, demokratychnii, uspishnii Ukraini” Torhovo-Promyslova Palata Ukrainy’, 12 April 2016, available at: <https://ucci.org.ua/press-center/ucci-news/vishiegrads-ka-chietvirka-mi-zatsikavlieni-v-novii-diemokratichnii-uspishnii-ukrayini>, accessed 20 March 2023.

alarmed Budapest. This rebounded in Visegrad–Ukrainian relations and Budapest was accused by Ukraine of rebuffing numerous Ukrainian cooperation proposals within the context of Visegrad (Patricolo 2018) and derailing Ukraine’s efforts to intensify its relations with NATO and the EU. Postcommunist Hungarian governments have advocated for the rights of their diaspora, but Russian and Hungarian interests may have converged in advocating for minorities’ rights as a means to weaken Kyiv’s control over the country (see Jarábik 2014). In turn, Ukrainian media deemed this as a means to divide Visegrad and deprive Kyiv of important external support. Russian observers, ‘with barely disguised *schadenfreude*’ attributed Hungarian dismay with alleged Ukrainian mistreatment of its minorities to Budapest’s obstruction of Ukrainian cooperation in the NATO–Ukraine Council, and even the overall integration of Ukraine towards NATO and the EU (Mesežnikov 2020).<sup>67</sup> Hungarian advocacy of minority rights in Ukraine was even deemed an attack on the country’s territorial integrity (Romanowska 2018). Ukrainian analysis suggests that pro-Moscow Hungarian attitudes resulted in ‘V4 +’ Ukraine initiatives not being implemented (Maksak 2018).

Ukrainian commentaries also observed, correctly, that Hungary focuses more on Visegrad’s ‘south’, that is, the Western Balkans, than on the EaP. Even though each Visegrad presidency programme is developed in close consultation with the other three partners (Fawn 2013a), some of Visegrad’s presidencies have adopted strikingly different priorities, as evidenced by a comparison of their reports. The Hungarian presidency report for 2017–2018 makes no mention of Ukraine, while noting Visegrad engagements with Egypt, Israel, Japan and South Korea.<sup>68</sup> That absence is especially surprising considering the bilateral meeting between Poroshenko and Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán before Hungary assumed the 2017–2018 V4 presidency; the two leaders were reported to have discussed the expansion of Ukrainian cooperation with the Visegrad Group in the course of Hungary’s presidency.<sup>69</sup>

By contrast, the Polish presidency report for 2016–2017 included the Ukrainian prime minister’s meeting with Visegrad prime ministers. More routine and functional ministerial meetings, such as environmental cooperation, were held between V4 and Ukrainian officials. Additionally, the V4’s meeting with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, included ‘the intensification of military activities of the Russian Federation against Ukraine’.<sup>70</sup> The Polish Visegrad presidency also raised Russian aggression in the V4 foreign ministers’ meeting with their Turkish counterpart.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup>‘Slovachchyna yak advokat Ukrainy v Yevropi’, *Tsentr Media*, 26 January 2018, available at: <https://centre.today/slovachchyna-yak-advokat-ukrainy/>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>68</sup>‘Achievements of the 2017/18 Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group’, Visegrad Group, 2018, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=367>, accessed 8 April 2021.

<sup>69</sup>‘Poroshenko Concerned with Statements from some Hungarian Officials about Creation of Hungarian Minority Autonomies in Neighboring Countries’, *Ukrainian News*, 30 March 2017, available at: <https://ukranews.com/en/news/488548-poroshenko-concerned-with-statements-from-some-hungarian-officials-about-creation-of-hungarian>, accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>70</sup>*Report on the Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group, 1 July 2016–30 June 2017*, p. 15, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=361>, accessed 24 March 2023.

<sup>71</sup>A note on presidency reports: the Hungarian report of 2017–2018 departed from previous practice. Where presidency reports grew year-on-year in length, pagination and appendices, the Hungarian report adopted a much shorter format. The preceding Polish report is one of the longest, and the last long-style report. However, the absence of any mention of Ukraine in the Hungarian report, irrespective of the space permitted or the report’s new format, is striking in itself and also remains in contradistinction to the preceding Polish report. At the time of writing, no later annual reports were available.

Indicative of differences among Visegrad presidencies was that Hungary's annual report, albeit in a new format and shorter than its predecessors, omitted mention of Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary 2017). A major Ukrainian analysis of Visegrad concluded that the 2017–2018 Hungarian presidency was 'one of the least successful in recent years in the context of cooperation in the format of V4 + Ukraine' (Maksak 2018). Nevertheless, Hungarian Visegrad presidencies have also pledged support for Ukraine's closer military cooperation with NATO (as this article notes elsewhere).

With time, Ukraine became more attuned to domestic differences among Visegrad states. Analysts outside Ukraine have noted that Visegrad does not exist to reconcile interests and differences among the countries. Veteran Visegrad observer Andras Rácz stated, '[Visegrad] cooperation was designed and built to jointly represent and foster issues and policies of common interests. Hence, when there are no common interests, it is simply a mistake to blame the Visegrad cooperation for the lack of coherence' (Fawn 2013a; Rácz 2014a, p. 46).

That Ukrainians have noted differences between Visegrad presidencies allows for Ukrainian policymakers to wait for either a new presidency or for domestic political changes in Visegrad countries. Ukraine has also learned that the country which holds Visegrad's annual rotating presidency significantly influences the group's priorities and relations. On that basis, Ukraine's interest in Visegrad would remain, intensifying when V4 presidencies rotate in Kyiv's favour.

#### *Different Visegrad presidencies make a significant difference to the potential of relations*

That domestic issues in individual Visegrad states affect their foreign policies should be a given. However, Visegrad emphasises consensus. Indeed, the group's internal approach even to choosing, and discarding, issues can be said to be tautological (Fawn 2013a): and as with Russia, its members forego contentious issues. Observers now recognise that Visegrad exists not to reconcile group differences but only to advance pre-existing interests.

Visegrad presidencies are collaborative efforts, even if they bear the name of the annual holder. Nevertheless, both domestic priorities and individual presidencies make significant differences in the group's priorities and approaches. To be sure, Visegrad has also created formats ensuring some consistency in attention; the annual V4–EaP forum is a primary example. And joint declarations mean, as above, that significant internal group differences can be overcome.

Ukraine realised that Hungary took the least interest in its affairs, except for when it was agitating over Hungarian minority rights. By contrast, Poland and Slovakia were recognised for supporting Ukrainian interests, with Poland already having been considered as a strategic partner (Wolczuk & Wolczuk 2002). The Slovak V4 presidencies also received substantial Ukrainian media interest, especially for safeguarding its energy security.<sup>72</sup> Slovakia was credited not only for inviting Poroshenko to a V4 summit but to one that included German representation (Mesežnikov 2014). As the Slovak Visegrad presidency approached in 2018, a leading commentator stated, 'Kyiv still has a lot to learn about

<sup>72</sup>'Vyshehradaska chetvirka zatsikavlena u spivpratsi z Ukrainoiu', *Ukrainske radio*, 7 July 2016, available at: <http://www.nrcu.gov.ua/news.html?newsID=33433>, accessed 7 April 2021.

how the V4 does business’ and expressed Ukraine’s hope that Bratislava’s leadership would ‘resuscitate stalled cooperation’ (Maksak 2018). Ukrainian sources then lauded Slovakia for its Visegrad presidency’s support of Ukrainian military cooperation with NATO, in contrast to Czechia, which was castigated for not introducing any new NATO–Ukrainian cooperation (Shelest 2020). Ukrainian experience again was that it can wait for Visegrad’s annual presidencies to alternate.

*Ukraine learned to diversify diplomatic partners and formats but returned to Visegrad*

After Maidan and as conflict unfolded in Ukraine in 2014, Kyiv put much hope on Visegrad. Since the 2000s, and especially in 2004 and 2013–2014, the V4 was perceived as Ukraine’s firm supporter in Euro-Atlantic integration, encouraging and supporting Ukraine’s progress based on the Visegrad Group’s own experience. Yet, it is difficult to assign values to Visegrad compared to other actors. The post-Yanukovich government sought relations with many Western partners, including Visegrad. The postcommunist space already has many overlapping regional formations, as this article indicated earlier. Ukraine, therefore, has choices. Additionally, some postcommunist EU/NATO members share Ukraine’s security outlook more than others. Poland and the Baltic states have taken a different stand from the other V4 states. Well before 2022, they saw Russia as unambiguously aggressive, and Ukraine as an outright victim. That outlook, and the military build-ups in those countries, both of their own resources and new NATO deployments, have confirmed them as reliable allies.

Ukraine arguably used to cooperate more with Visegrad but also tried other formats, such as the Lublin process, with Lithuania and Poland since 2020 (Bornio 2020), although it was built on a pre-existing Lithuanian–Polish–Ukrainian Brigade (helpfully abbreviated to LitPolUkrBrig) established in the same Polish city in 2014. The importance of military cooperation, the hallmark of a state being willing to work with others, should not be understated. Rather, Ukrainian military analysis cautioned at the time that ‘neither Lithuania nor Poland has sufficient resources to help Ukraine in a major way’ (cited in Goble 2014). Additionally, numerous multilateral brigades have been created across the region. Notwithstanding, and probably also because these brigades are less-established initiatives, Ukraine is still likely to come back to Visegrad. Central and Eastern Europe was and remains crowded with regional state cooperation initiatives (for early initiatives see Cottey 1999). Too many have appeared, often with fanfare, and then quietly disappeared, and others that continue do not function or deliver as well as Visegrad.<sup>73</sup> That Ukraine wants to experiment with other formations is the rationale. None of these arrangements are mutually exclusive, and the costs of participation stay low.

Visegrad, however, remains a viable postcommunist regional cooperation formation, outlasting and outperforming others. When its members have flirted with other arrangements—Czechia being the most adventurous—they never did so as an alternative to Visegrad. Even larger schemes, such as the Three Seas Initiative which was launched in 2015 being a later phenomenon, still link it back to Visegrad and give that Group a

<sup>73</sup>For comparative performances, see Fawn (2013b, 2019).

decisive role. This initiative was launched by Poland and Croatia, to link up regional initiatives (and, as the Three Seas acknowledges, the ideas came from a suggestion of the US-based Atlantic Council). Polish officials themselves refer to Visegrad's centrality in the Initiative.<sup>74</sup> That the Three Seas is not a competitor to Visegrad and indeed may even depend on it is a view suggested also by the Russian government-funded International Affairs Council, which deemed the V4 as a lynchpin for that geographically larger initiative.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to claims that Visegrad has created special formats for relations with Kyiv, Ukrainian analyses have also suggested modifying the V4–EaP format. The proposed formats (on which Visegrad has issued nothing publicly) would prioritise the two or three EaP countries that have signed AAs: Ukrainian sources suggesting either V4+3 (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) or V4+2 (Georgia and Ukraine) (Maksak 2018). This proposal retains Visegrad as a central partner and, whatever the precise format, keeps Ukraine in it with the V4.

Throughout its post-independence history, Ukraine has monitored regional formations, both west and east. It has also sought to avoid Moscow-led ones, from the initial Commonwealth of Independent States, the treaty for which it never ratified, to the Eurasian Economic Union. It co-founded in 1997 the GUAM, the cooperation with three other post-Soviet states which at that point, unlike Ukraine, had open secessionist conflicts with Russian involvement.<sup>76</sup> Despite the multiplicity of options available to Ukraine, Visegrad is still its 'preferred choice'. Visegrad's appeal for Ukraine is based on the assistance it can provide to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration and the geocultural significance such integration represents. Kyiv continued to give significance to Visegrad among its foreign policy choices, even if attention to and innovation in the relationship varied, and broke in 2022, particularly as Hungary took a divergent view on responses to Russia's aggression. The Visegrad–Ukraine relationship must be put in the context of neither NATO nor the EU being able to reverse Russian interventions in Ukraine in 2014, and then with the 2022 invasion becoming Europe's greatest conflict since 1945.

### *Conclusion*

Ukraine's 30-year interest in Visegrad constitutes an inherent longing for interaction, acceptance and imitation. Ukraine, too, has been an important subject of policy, for the Group itself, and for its advocacy for policies within the EU. But this is also a

<sup>74</sup>As in 'Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in New York City Hosted Consuls General of the Visegrad Group and NYC's Commissioner for International Affairs', website of the Republic of Poland, 26 October 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/usa-en/consulate-general-of-the-republic-of-poland-in-new-york-city-hosted-consuls-general-of-the-visegrad-group-and-nycs-commissioner-for-international-affairs>, accessed 27 February 2023.

<sup>75</sup>'Russian and the Visegrad Group: The Ukrainian Challenge', Russian International Affairs Council, 22/2015, 30 June 2015, available at: [https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-and-the-visegrad-group-the-ukrainian-challenge/?sphrase\\_id=75027387](https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-and-the-visegrad-group-the-ukrainian-challenge/?sphrase_id=75027387), accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>76</sup>GUAM's full name is GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. Between 1999 and 2005, with the inclusion of Uzbekistan, it was GUUAM. Its early development is outlined in Kuzio (2000).

relationship that gained little attention beyond these partners, not least because Ukrainian interest has been expressed directly to Visegrad and often in and through Ukrainian language and mediums. While targeted at NATO and the EU and resonating in Brussels, these dialogues are nevertheless principally conducted eastwards.

Ukraine overstated its V4 expectations, an outlook likely compounded by the unprecedented challenges of domestic upheaval and then Russian territorial conquest and instigation of conflict. No matter how misplaced, those intentions confirm Visegrad's enduring allure. Ukraine's Visegrad experiences provide broader lessons, ones arguably not generated in Visegrad's many other relationships, not least because that with Ukraine is longstanding and multifaceted. Ukraine has had to learn that Visegrad is not one consistent entity: its annual presidencies oscillate in their priorities and its collective attention and actions vary.

Each Visegrad presidency provides risks of inattention and renewed opportunities for action. Although Hungarian presidencies oversaw statements supporting Ukraine and condemning Russian aggression, one Hungarian presidency failed to mention Ukraine as a subject of action in its final report; by contrast, Poland and Slovakia have been comparatively more proactive towards Ukraine. Ukrainian analyses grew acutely aware of differences among Visegrad presidencies. A lesson for any Visegrad interlocutor is that rotating annual Visegrad presidencies are a structural means to reset its policies (even if those presidencies are collectively agreed beforehand) and therefore to wait for and to try to shape the priorities of new V4 presidencies. Within those presidencies, attention to partner countries and regions vary, including towards the Western Balkans, in contrast to the EaP. The former has been a pronounced interest of Hungarian presidencies, the latter especially of Polish presidencies. That said, Visegrad has been, and remains, a key platform for Ukraine to reach Western audiences and practically to fulfil some of its Euro-Atlantic foreign policy objectives, and may become more so again once the candidate country status granted on 23 June 2022 by the European Council becomes more meaningful.

Ukrainians recognise that domestic politics in individual V4 countries change, and that this affects Kyiv-Visegrad relations. Where Ukraine was the variable in bilateral relations, especially before 2014 and the end of the Yanukovich/Moscow orientation, it is Visegrad that has generated inconsistencies. Some Ukrainian analyses have expressed severe disappointment with Visegrad; others have fallen into Visegrad's unintended trap of confusing onlookers as to its apparent demise. Disenchanted Ukrainians have mistakenly labelled Visegrad as dead. Those mistaken, and affronted, eulogies ironically illustrate Visegrad's potential for Ukraine.

Ukraine provides salutary lessons about how closely, and mistakenly, the media of an interlocutor country can assess the actions of the V4. Visegrad has generally invested in its public relations and its self-promotion, including towards Ukraine, ranging from ceremonial summit invitations to Ukrainian leaderships to public 'roadshows'. Nevertheless, the negative and exaggerated assessments of Visegrad that this study identifies encourage Visegrad to do more to correct misperceptions.

This study also suggests that when Visegrad appears to adopt positions that contradict European values (however defined), which Ukrainians espouse and see embodied in the V4, the group risks squandering the interest of important consistencies. Visegrad's



particular value to Ukraine before 2022 was as a role model for political and economic transformation, and thereby also as a vehicle for helping Ukraine to become more ‘European’ through Euro-Atlantic integration. The war accelerated Ukraine’s integration with the West, with Kyiv applying for membership to the European Commission on 28 February 2022, days after the Russian attack. Irrespective of the colossal and as yet unknown costs of war, Ukraine’s integration will require much work, as the Commission’s official view outlined four months later.<sup>77</sup> The first Visegrad presidency programme after that announcement pledged the V4 countries’ continued support for Ukraine’s path to the EU.<sup>78</sup>

Before 2022 the Visegrad–Ukraine relationship was often shaped by wider political and security dynamics, and led to some over-expectations from Ukraine. That said, Visegrad also retains longstanding and generally positive interactions with Ukraine, and these could also assist Ukraine’s development in a post-conflict scenario and/or as EU accession develops. Kyiv can pursue that relationship forearmed with invaluable insights into Visegrad’s weaknesses, strengths, and means and modes of functioning.

RICK FAWN, School of International Relations, Arts Building, Library Park, St Andrews, UK. *Email:* rick.fawn@st-andrews.ac.uk

IULIIA DROBYSH, Independent researcher. *Email:* drobysh.iuliia@gmail.com

### *References*

- Arató, K. & Koller, B. (2018) ‘Hungary in the Visegrád Group: Introducing a Three-Level Game Approach’, in Schweiger, C. & Visvizi, A. (eds).
- Aslund, A. & Fehlinger, G. (2017) ‘Ukraine Should Join Central Europe Trade Club’, *EU Observer*, 29 September, available at: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/139205>, accessed 8 April 2021.
- Balmaceda, M. M. (2000) ‘Ukraine, Russia and Central Europe in a New International Environment’, in Balmaceda, M. M. (ed.) *On the Edge: Ukrainian–Central European–Russian Security Triangle* (Budapest, Central European University Press).
- Beleskov, M. (2017) ‘Yevropeys’kyi oboronnyi soyuz: navishcho YeS znovu hovoryt pro spinu armiyu’, *Yevropeyska pravda*, 27 February, available at: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2017/02/27/7062233/>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Bornio, J. (2020) ‘Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine Inaugurate “Lublin Triangle”’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17, 115, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/lithuania-poland-and-ukraine-inaugurate-lublin-triangle/>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Braun, M. (2020) ‘Postfunctionalism, Identity and the Visegrad Group’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 58, 4.
- Butler, E. & Ostrowski, W. (eds) (2018) *Understanding Energy Security in Central and Eastern Europe: Russia, Transition and National Interest* (Abingdon, Routledge).
- Cotey, A. (ed.) (1999) *Subregional Cooperation in the New Europe* (London, Macmillan).

<sup>77</sup>Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: Commission Opinion on Ukraine’s application for membership of the European Union’, European Commission, 17 June 2022, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/Ukraine%20Opinion%20and%20Annex.pdf>, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>78</sup>*Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2022–June 2023)*, p. 2, available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=493>, accessed 2 March 2023.

- Dąbowski, T. (2015) *Difficult Path Towards Gas Partnership: Visegrad Group Countries' Gas Cooperation with Ukraine*, available at: [http://www.visegradexperts.eu/data/\\_uploaded/Finals/Tomasz%20Daborowski.pdf](http://www.visegradexperts.eu/data/_uploaded/Finals/Tomasz%20Daborowski.pdf), accessed 8 April 2021.
- Dangerfield, M. (2012) 'Visegrad Group Co-Operation and Russia', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 50, 6.
- Demkova, S. (2014) 'Ukraina mozhe vstupyty do Vyshehradskoi hrupy—MZS', *UA Press*, 17 December, available at: <https://uapress.info/uk/news/show/52689>, accessed 6 April 2021.
- Dhand, O. (2018) *The Idea of Central Europe. Geopolitics, Culture and Regional Identity* (London & New York, NY, I.B. Tauris).
- Duleba, A., Rącz, A., Řiháčková, V. & Sadowski, R. (2013) *Visegrad 4 the Eastern Partnership: Towards the Vilnius Summit* (Warsaw, Centre for Eastern Studies; Prague, EUROPEUM; Budapest, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs; Bratislava, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association).
- Dyman, L. (2016) 'Rosiiia mozhe vnesty rozkol u Vyshehradskii hrupi—Wyborcza', *Zn.ua*, 2 February, available at: [https://zn.ua/ukr/WORLD/rosiya-mozhe-vnesti-rozkol-u-vishegradskiy-grupi-wyborcza-215929\\_.html](https://zn.ua/ukr/WORLD/rosiya-mozhe-vnesti-rozkol-u-vishegradskiy-grupi-wyborcza-215929_.html), accessed 6 April 2021.
- Ehl, M. (2014) 'Middle Europa: Will the Visegrad Four Survive Ukraine?', *Transitions Online*, 6, 24, available at: <https://www.cecol.com/search/article-detail?id=224172>, accessed 8 April 2021.
- Enyedi, Z. (2020) 'Right-wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe', *East European Politics*, 36, 3.
- Fawn, R. (2001) 'The Elusive Defined? Visegrád co-Operation as the Contemporary Contours of Central Europe', *Geopolitics*, 6, 1.
- Fawn, R. (2013a) 'Visegrad: Fit for Purpose?', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 46, 3.
- Fawn, R. (2013b) 'The International Transformation and Re-Regionalization of "Eastern Europe"', in White, S., Batt, J. & Lewis, P. G. (eds) *Central and East European Politics 5* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press and Basingstoke, Palgrave).
- Fawn, R. (2018) 'External Assessments of Visegrad Since its International Recognition Over the "Migrant" Crisis', *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, XXVII, 1–2.
- Fawn, R. (2019) 'Regional Relations and Regional Security', in Ramet, S. P. & Hassenstab, C. M. (eds) *Central and Southeast European Politics Since 1989* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Flenley, P. & Mannin, M. L. (eds) (2018) *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbourhood: Europeanisation and its Twenty-First-Century Contradictions* (Manchester, Manchester University Press).
- Gniazdowski, M. (2014) *The Countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe on the Crisis in Ukraine* (Warsaw, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich), available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-03-05/countries-central-and-south-eastern-europe-crisis-ukraine>, accessed 8 April 2021.
- Gniazdowski, M., Groszkowski, J. & Sadecki, A. (2014) *A Visegrad Cacophony over the Conflict Between Russia and Ukraine*, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Analyses, 9 October, available at: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-09-10/a-visegrad-cacophony-over-conflict-between-russia-and-ukraine>, accessed 8 April 2021.
- Goble, P. A. (2014) 'Ukraine Forming New Military "Troika" with Lithuania and Poland', *Euromaidan Press*, 26 November, available at: <http://euromaidanpress.com/2014/11/26/ukraine-forming-new-military-troika-with-lithuania-and-poland/>, accessed 8 April 2021.
- Jarábik, B. (2014) 'Russia, Ukraine, and the Visegrad: Time to Get Real', *Visegrad Revue*, 14 November, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/11/14/russia-ukraine-and-visegrad-time-to-get-real-pub-57236>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Kałam, D. (2013) *East of Centre: Can the Visegrad Group Speak with One Voice on Eastern Policy?*, PISM Policy Paper No. 5, 53 (Warsaw, PISM).
- Klyuchuk, Y. (2017) 'Problemy rehionalnoi bezpeky u polsko-ukrainskomu prezydents komu dyskursi (1991–1995 rr.)', *Naukovi zapysky Ternopilskoho natsionalnoho pedahohichnoho univertsytetu imeni Volodymyra Hnatyuka. Seriya: Istorii*, 2, 2, available at: [http://www.irbis-nbuv.gov.ua/cgi-bin/irbis\\_nbuv/cgibis\\_64.exe?I21DBN=LINK&P21DBN=UJRN&Z21ID=&S21REF=10&S21CNR=20&S21STN=1&S21FMT=ASP\\_meta&C21COM=S&S21P03=FILE=&S21STR=NZTNPNU\\_ist\\_2017\\_2%282%29\\_20](http://www.irbis-nbuv.gov.ua/cgi-bin/irbis_nbuv/cgibis_64.exe?I21DBN=LINK&P21DBN=UJRN&Z21ID=&S21REF=10&S21CNR=20&S21STN=1&S21FMT=ASP_meta&C21COM=S&S21P03=FILE=&S21STR=NZTNPNU_ist_2017_2%282%29_20), accessed 6 April 2021.
- Kořan, M. (2014) 'Debating the V4: Divided We Fall', *Cepolicy*, 4 July, available at: [www.cepolicy.org/publications/debating-v4-](http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/debating-v4-), accessed 6 April 2021.
- Kostyuk, B. (2011) 'Ukraina ta Vyshehadska boyova hrupa: razom do spilnoi bezpeky', *Radio svoboda*, 14 June, available at: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/24234896.html>, accessed 6 April 2021.
- Kuzio, T. (2000) 'Promoting Geopolitical Pluralism in the CIS, GUUAM and Western Foreign Policy', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47, 3.

- Loginov, J. (2014) 'Vyshehradska chetvirka: kinets ilyuzii', *Zn.ua*, 5 September, available at: [https://zn.ua/ukr/international/vishehradska-chetvirka-kinec-ilyuziy-\\_html](https://zn.ua/ukr/international/vishehradska-chetvirka-kinec-ilyuziy-_html), accessed 7 April 2021.
- Magda, Y. (2017) 'Vyshehradska chetvirka—perevirka kremlivskym vyklykom', *Yevropeyska pravda*, 12 January, available at: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/experts/2017/01/12/7059962/>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Maksak, H. (2018) 'Evolutsiia zovnishnopolitychnoho ta bezpekovoho vymiru V4', *prism ua*, 23 January, available at: <http://prismua.org/як-далі-будувати-співпрацю-україни-з-в/>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Marušiak, J. (2015) 'Russia and the Visegrad Group: More Than a Foreign Policy Issue', *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 24, 1–2.
- Mastny, V. (1999) 'The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980–1981 and the End of the Cold War', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51, 2.
- Mesežnikov, G. (2014) 'Vyshehrad i Ukraina: osoblyvosti natsionalnykh pidkhodiv', *Ukrinform*, 13 November, available at: [https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-other\\_news/1728274-vishegrad\\_i\\_ukrainina\\_osoblyvosti\\_natsionalnih\\_pidkhodiv\\_1991140.html](https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-other_news/1728274-vishegrad_i_ukrainina_osoblyvosti_natsionalnih_pidkhodiv_1991140.html), accessed 7 April 2021.
- Mesežnikov, G. (2020) 'Russia's Best Friend? Budapest in between Moscow, Kyiv and Brussels', *Visegrad Insight*, 4 May, available at: <https://visegradinsight.eu/russia-best-friend-hungary/>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary (2017) 'Visegrad Connects', available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=313>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (2014) 'The Visit of the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group Countries to Ukraine', 16 December, available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/30760-vizit-ministriv-zakordonnih-sprav-krajini-vishegradskoyi-chetvirki-v-ukrajinu>, accessed 6 April 2021.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (2017) 'Pavlo Klimkin Met With His Czech Counterpart Lubomír Zaorálek', 28 February, available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/55169-pavlo-klimkin-u-zhenevi-zustrivysya-zi-svojim-chesykim-kolegoju-lyubomirom-zaoralekom>, accessed 6 April 2021.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (2018) 'Visegrad States to Further Support Ukraine in Countering the Russian Aggression', 30 November, available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/69092-krajini-vishegradskoyi-grupi-i-nadali-pidtrimuvatimuty-ukrajinu-u-protidiji-rosijsykyj-agresiji>, accessed 6 April 2021.
- Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic (2014) 'Slovakia and V4 to Assist Ukraine', 17 December, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/slovakia-and-v4-to>, accessed 6 April 2021.
- Mitchell, A. R. (2014) 'Central Europe—Cooperation in a Cold Climate', *Hungarian Review*, 3.
- NATO (2016) *Fact Sheet: Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine* (July), North Atlantic Treaty Organization, available at: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2016\\_09/20160920\\_160920-compreh-ass-package-ukraine-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_09/20160920_160920-compreh-ass-package-ukraine-en.pdf), accessed 6 April 2021.
- Neumann, I. B. (1993) 'Russia as Central Europe's Constituting Other', *East European Politics and Societies*, 7, 2.
- Osadczyk, B. (2006) 'Ukraine Crosses Fingers for Visegrad', in Jagodziński, A. (ed.) *The Visegrad Group: A Central European Constellation* (Bratislava, International Visegrad Fund).
- Patricolo, C. (2018) 'Ukraine Looks to Revive V4 Membership Hopes as Slovakia Takes Over Presidency', *Emerging Europe*, 29 July, available at: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/ukraine-looks-to-revive-v4-membership-hopes-as-slovakia-takes-over-presidency/>, accessed 6 April 2021.
- Perepelytsia, G. (2010) 'Capacity of Instruments for Development of Mutually Beneficial Relations in the Format "Ukraine–Visegrad Plus"', in Pulišová, V. & Strážay, T. (eds).
- Perepelytsia, G. (2013) 'Zagalni tendentsii ta vidminnosti u protsesakh transformatsii Ukrainy ta krain Vyshehradskei hrupy', in *Transformatsiini protsesy u krainakh Vyshehradskei Hrupy ta Ukraini: porivnyalni analiz* (Kyiv, Stylos).
- Polikovska, Y. (2016) 'Ukraina priyednalasia do boiovoi taktichnoi hrupy krain Vyshehradskei chetvirky', *Zaxid.net*, 7 June, available at: [https://zaxid.net/ukrayina-priyednalasia-do-boyovoyi-taktichnoyi-grupi-krajini-vishegradskoyi-chetvirki\\_n1394096](https://zaxid.net/ukrayina-priyednalasia-do-boyovoyi-taktichnoyi-grupi-krajini-vishegradskoyi-chetvirki_n1394096), accessed 7 April 2021.
- Pulišová, V. & Strážay, T. (eds) (2010) *Ukraine and the Visegrad Four: Towards a Mutually Beneficial Relationship* (Bratislava, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association).
- Rácz, A. (2014a) *Divided Stands the Visegrad? The V4 Have Been United Towards the Ukraine Crisis But Remain Split Concerning Russia* (Helsinki, Finnish Institute of International Affairs).
- Rácz, A. (2014b) 'The Visegrad Cooperation: Central Europe Divided Over Russia', *L'Europe en Formation*, 374.
- Romanchuk, I. (2015) "'Vyshehradska chetvirka" na mezhi rozpadu—cherez viyskovyi konflikt v Ukraini', *Mukachevo.net*, 23 January, available at: <http://www.mukachevo.net/ua/news/view/104253>, accessed 7 April 2021.

- Romanowska, A. (2018) 'V4 Countries Towards Russian Aggression Against Ukraine', *Warsaw Institute Review*, 24 September, available at: <https://warsawinstitute.org/v4-countries-towards-russian-aggression-ukraine/>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Rostetska, S. & Naumkina, S. (2019) 'Paradigms of European Integration Processes in the EU, Visegrád Group, and Ukraine', *Baltic Journal of Economic Studies*, 5, 3.
- Sadecki, A. (2014) *Hungary's Stance on the Ukrainian–Russian Conflict* (Warsaw, Centre for Eastern Studies), available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-05-21/hungarys-stance-ukrainian-russian-conflict>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Schweiger, C. & Visvizi, A. (eds) (2018) *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU* (Abingdon, Routledge).
- Shelest, H. (2020) *Is There a Future for Security Cooperation Between the Visegrad Four and Ukraine?* (Budapest, Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Development).
- Solonyina, Y. (2009) 'Chy povtoryt Ukraina shliakh Vyshehradskoi chetvirky do NATO', *Radio svoboda*, available at: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/1601061.html>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Stets, A. (2016) "'Vyshehradska chetvirka" nadast povnu pidtrymku bezvizovomu rezhymu Ukrainy z YeS—Klimkin', *Zaxid.net*, 4 May, available at: [https://zaxid.net/vishegradska\\_chetvirka\\_nadast\\_povnu\\_pidtrimku\\_bezvizovomu\\_rezhimu\\_ukrayini\\_z\\_yes\\_klimkin\\_n1390733](https://zaxid.net/vishegradska_chetvirka_nadast_povnu_pidtrimku_bezvizovomu_rezhimu_ukrayini_z_yes_klimkin_n1390733), accessed 7 April 2021.
- Strzałkowski, M. (2018) 'Analyst: Visegrád Group's Anti-European Course Is Anti-Ukrainian', *Euractiv*, 26 July, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/interview/analyst-visegrad-groups-anti-european-course-is-anti-ukrainian/>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Tkachenko, T. (2015) 'Krainy "Vyshehradskoi chetvirky" pohlybiat viyskove spivrobitnytstvo z Ukrainoiu', *Zn.ua*, 21 June, available at: [https://zn.ua/ukr/POLITICS/krayini-vishegradskoyi-chetvirki-domovilisyapoglibiti-viyskove-spivrobitnictvo-z-ukrayinoyu-176571\\_.html](https://zn.ua/ukr/POLITICS/krayini-vishegradskoyi-chetvirki-domovilisyapoglibiti-viyskove-spivrobitnictvo-z-ukrayinoyu-176571_.html), accessed 7 April 2021.
- Twardzisz, P. (2018) *Defining 'Eastern Europe'. A Semantic Inquiry Into Political Terminology* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan).
- Vágner, P. (2010) 'Can the Visegrad Group Serve as a Model for the Development of Cooperation Among Other Countries?', in Pulišová, V. & Strážay, T. (eds).
- Wolczuk, R. (2002) *Ukraine's Foreign and Security Policy, 1991–2000* (London, Routledge).
- Wolczuk, K. & Wolczuk, R. (2002) *Poland and Ukraine: A Strategic Partnership in a Changing Europe?* (London, Royal Institute of International Affairs).
- Zachová, A. (2018) 'Visegrad is Opening its Doors to Migrants', *Visegrad.info*, 22 June, available at: <https://visegradinfo.eu/index.php/80-articles/565-visegrad-is-opening-its-doors-to-migrants-but-specific-jobseekers-only>, accessed 7 April 2021.
- Zaiats, P. (2013) 'Chekhiia u perspektyvi bachyt Ukrainu u "Vyshehradskii chetvirtsi"', *zn.ua*, 14 October, available at: [https://zn.ua/ukr/POLITICS/chehiya-u-perspektivi-bachit-ukrayinu-u-vishegradskiyi-chetvirci-130035\\_.html](https://zn.ua/ukr/POLITICS/chehiya-u-perspektivi-bachit-ukrayinu-u-vishegradskiyi-chetvirci-130035_.html), accessed 7 April 2021.