

Visegrad Beyond Orbán's Orbit

Article by Edit Zgut-Przybylska

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The Visegrad Group (V4) in its current configuration is coming apart at the seams. For years, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used the group to increase his weight in the European Union. In early 2023, Visegrad is more divided than ever as Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia struggle to rebuild the cooperation they enjoyed prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The latest V4 meeting, centered around the accession of the Nordic countries to NATO, was indicative of the deep disagreements between the four countries. Hungary is the only NATO member besides Turkey that has still not ratified the accession of Sweden and Finland into the military alliance, while the rest of the V4 support it. According to media reports, while Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, and Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger were trying to convince Orbán to finally put his cards on the table, he gave a cynical response instead, stressing that the Hungarian Parliament will only make a final decision in 2023.

This fragmentation became prominent even before Russia invaded Ukraine, as the V4 countries' showed different approaches toward the European Union. While Slovakia and Czechia cautiously sided with the mainstream liberal democracies in the EU, Poland and Hungary have been clashing with Brussels on a wide range of strategic issues, from migration and the supremacy of EU law to rule-of-law conditionality.

In contrast, Czechia is not in any disputes with the EU over the rule of law. This Czech position fundamentally undermines Poland's political potential to be the regional leader due to its weight. Meanwhile, the only eurozone member in the group, Slovakia, has integrated with Europe's core more closely than the other three in the V4, and this has inevitably shaped its position in Europe. However, since the Slovak Government has just collapsed, Bratislava is currently in such political turmoil that it could eventually undermine democracy itself there.

The war in Ukraine has reshaped the V4's power dynamic further. Poland has been at the forefront of international condemnation of the Kremlin, calling for weapons deliveries to Ukraine and the toughest possible sanctions against Russia. Hungary has taken a markedly different approach. Viktor Orbán has frequently blocked or softened efforts to sanction Russia, weakening the unity of the West both in the EU and in NATO, of which his country is also a member. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church is not yet on the EU sanctions list because the Hungarian Government objected.

These diverging paths were also shown on 13 December at the last Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) summit, when every EU Member States voted unanimously to suspend funds for Hungary. This was possible due to the package deal and the fact that Hungary had blackmailed the other Member States by vetoing 18 billion euros

in aid to Ukraine – an ultimately self-defeating act. Although Morawiecki astonished everyone at the most recent EU summit by threatening to block 18 billion euros in aid to Ukraine over the blocked EU funds for Poland, it was Orbán who was completely isolated by the end of the year. Neither the Polish nor the Italian Government vetoed the agreement to suspend the EU funds for Hungary, which was mediated by the Czech EU Presidency.

***Dwa bratanki* (“two brothers”) has been watered down**

Polish-Hungarian bilateral relations were the key pillars of Visegrad when Law and Justice (PiS) came to power in Poland in 2015. At the beginning of Russia’s war on Ukraine, the defiant Eurosceptic alliance of Hungary’s Fidesz and PiS seemed fundamentally shaken. As Polish society put all its efforts into helping Ukraine, Orbán became toxic in Poland due to his harsh anti-Kyiv rhetoric. This stems from the existential threat posed by Russia and the constant historical fear that Poland could be partitioned once again. The Russian aggression elevated collective anxiety to such an extent that not even PiS wanted to sweep Orbán’s friendship with Putin under the rug.

Consequently, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of PiS, openly criticised the Hungarian Prime Minister’s assessment of the war and Russia’s role in it. In a similar spirit, Morawiecki stressed that the “paths of Hungary and Poland have diverged”. A meeting between Polish President Andrzej Duda and Hungarian President János Áder was cancelled in March, and it was the first time in a decade that Polish guests were not sent to Budapest on 15 March to support Orbán at the Peace March (a pro-Government demonstration organised by Hungarian GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations)). Op-eds in Polish conservative newspapers demanded that the PiS administration break ties with Fidesz. Back in April, domestic surveys showed that more than half of Polish respondents called for a complete rethinking and re-evaluation of the relationship with the Orbán administration.

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Since September however, it seems that the Polish Government has become open to reconciling with Hungary so they can more effectively represent their common interests in the European Union and the V4. In an interview, the Polish Prime Minister was asked whether the Government’s disagreements with Orbán had been resolved. Morawiecki said that “They haven’t been resolved, but if we have misunderstandings in a family, should we lock ourselves in separate rooms and pretend we don’t live in the same house? Central Europe as a whole is our house.”

Polarised domestic politics have captured the foreign policy agenda of the PiS, much as they have in Hungary. With Poland’s general elections just 10 months away, the internal rivalry is expected to intensify between the competing power flanks in the Government, between Morawiecki and the more radical Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro, who is mainly

responsible for the judicial overhaul that the EU objected. This presumably also contributed to the fact that Morawiecki was playing Eurosceptic hardball during the last EU summit by jeopardising aid to Ukraine.

What might hold Hungary and Poland in a tactical alliance is that they are mutually dependent on each other in the Council of the EU regarding the Article 7 procedure. This is presumably why PiS joined the other nationalist parties and did not vote for the European Parliament resolution that classified Hungary as an “electoral autocracy”. Pushing a robust, Eurosceptic narrative, both Fidesz and PiS claim that Brussels undermines national sovereignty, identity, and culture in an imperialist way.

This is a tried-and-tested populist tactic in both Hungary and Poland. The EU’s criticisms of their governments have been depicted as a mere pretext for “corrupt elites” to attack Central and Eastern Europe for defending “traditionalist” values while rejecting immigration, gender and LGBTQI+ rights. While PiS is channelling electoral frustration towards Brussels by depicting the leader of the opposition, Donald Tusk, as a German collaborator, Fidesz is claiming that the corrupt EU elite is serving the interests of warmonger US Democrats, led by George Soros. The last bit of symbolic glue that holds Hungary and Poland together is the “protection of the traditional family model formed by men and women”, a last bastion that must be defended against the onslaught of modernity.

But bilateral relations between Hungary and Poland have not been fully restored. Despite the rhetorical détente, Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau is still not receiving his Hungarian counterpart Péter Szijjártó. That means PiS is still opposed to photo opportunities with Fidesz at the governmental level. Apparently, they will maintain cooperation at the presidential level, as was indicated by Polish President Andrzej Duda when he met with Hungarian President Katalin Novák.

Orbán has reached his limits in Europe

Orbán’s isolation in the Council of the EU has demonstrated that his veto power has reached its limits. Although the Hungarian government is framing the deal as a huge success of the Prime Minister, the agreement about 18 billion euros in aid for Ukraine and the global minimum tax indicates that his veto policy has run out of steam. Although the Orbán administration managed to achieve some amendments to the global tax agreement, they also agreed on a deal for Ukraine that had been previously opposed by the Hungarian Government.

Orbán, therefore, will keep exploiting whatever political cleavages he can to build alliances outside of the EuroAtlantic mainstream, in particular with American Republicans and far-right religious fundamentalists in Europe.

Amid multiple economic crises, Hungary will also deliberately strengthen ties with China to expand business opportunities for the clientelist network centred around Orbán. Hungary does not significantly profit from this, but the Prime Minister does, as it enriches the clientelist network that helps him to cement power. Consequently, Hungary will also remain one of the keenest obstructionists on critical EU decisions about China. It is not at all believable, though, that Hungary might favour China over Europe, since Hungary is fully

dependent on EU funds and 80 percent of its trade is still undertaken within the EU and with the USA.

Perceptions matter, though. Strengthening relations with Beijing resonates well among the core electorate of Fidesz. Amid the increasing tension between Hungary and the EU, the audience of the pro-Government media perceives close ties with Beijing as a positive evaluation of the Hungarian government's global standing. Such ties strengthen Orbán regime's domestic legitimacy by indicating that Hungary is such a key player in world politics that even a superpower wants to be in their good graces.

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