



# TWENTY YEARS AFTER ENLARGEMENT: REVIEW OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE FUTURE ROLE OF V4 COOPERATION

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to critically evaluate the evolution, dynamics and future prospects of cooperation among the Visegrád Group (V4) – Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – within the broader context of European integration and spatial aspects of development. While the 20th anniversary of the 2004 EU enlargement provides the motivation for the study, the central goal is to evaluate how V4 cooperation has contributed to and was shaped by major territorial, political, and socio-economic transformations over the past two decades. Employing a mixed-method approach, this research integrates statistical data from Eurostat and the output from existing relevant research on V4 countries to gauge the economic development trajectory and the impacts on these countries, as well as semi-structured interviews with senior academics, including planners, economists, and public administration experts. Our mixed-method methodology combines quantitative assessments of economic development indicators with qualitative insights from interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the V4 countries' development post-EU accession. The key themes include economic development including statistical trends in economic indicators, focusing on GDP growth and convergence with the EU average over the past two decades; socio-economic convergence, focusing on the success of socio-economic convergence at the community level while acknowledging the rise in territorial inequalities at sub-regional and local levels; the impact of structural funds on local government units, evaluating their role in developing technical and social infrastructure and addressing territorial disparities; functional linkages, particularly how the enlargement influenced functional linkages within the EU, especially the interaction between the V4 countries and the 'old' Member States; and challenges and disparities focusing on uneven effects of various challenges, including economic crises, migratory patterns, geopolitical conflicts, and external shocks, on the spatial distribution of winners and losers.

**Keywords:** EU enlargement, V4 countries, territorial implications, socio-economic convergence, structural funds, functional linkages, spatial disparities, Cohesion Policy.

## Introduction

The Visegrád Group, also known as V4, consists of four Central European countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. This alliance was formed in 1991 in the town of Visegrád (Hungary) to foster cooperation for regional development, enhance political and cultural ties and further

European integration (Dangerfield, 2008; Bočková, 2013; Ciderova & Kovacevic, 2015; Pakulski, 2016). The further goals were to implement democratic and market reforms and to obtain Western financial aid and foreign investments necessary to carry out these reforms after the collapse of the command and distribution economy and trade relations in the Mutual Economic Assistance Council (Jasiecki, 2016). All countries entered the European Union (EU) in 2004 and Schengen Area in 2007, while only Slovakia adopted Euro as its currency in 2009.

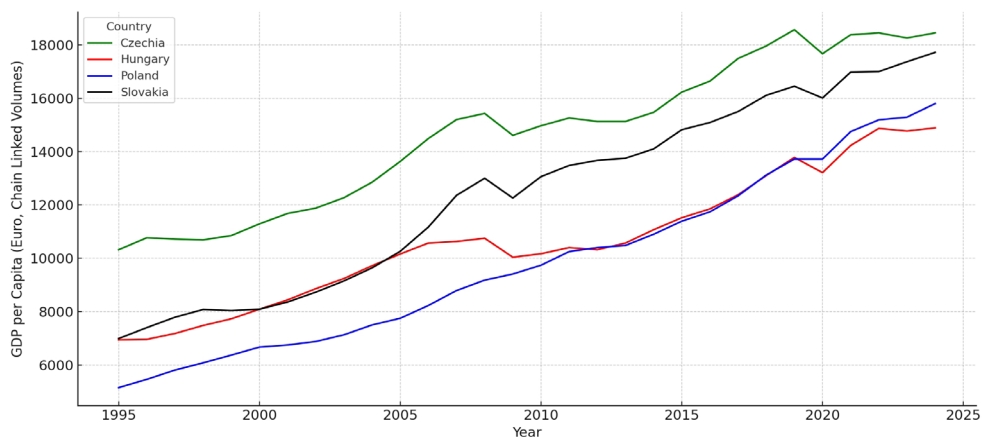
The formation of the V4 was driven by various motivations, primarily centered around the common socio-political and economic transitions these countries were undergoing following the end of socialist regime in Central Europe. The V4 countries share a long history, interconnected by their similar socio-political experiences under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and later as part of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War in the second half of 20th century (Lukáč & Gyarfásóvá, 2002). After the fall of communism, these countries found themselves in similar strategic positions, with the need to redefine their geopolitical and economic alignments in a rapidly changing Europe. Following the collapse of socialist regimes, these nations were transitioning from planned economies to market economies, facing similar economic restructuring challenges (Kozminski, 1993). The common features at the beginning of 1990s included '1) lack of formal organisational and political structures of cooperation; 2) Atlantic orientation; 3) more pro-free market than the European mainstream and 4) proenlargement and engagement with the Eastern neighbourhood' (Jasiecki, 2016, p. 107).

A primary motivation for the V4 cooperation, was to support each other's aspirations to join the EU and NATO. By presenting a unified front, they aimed to strengthen their negotiations and accession processes. Together, the V4 countries could have more influence within European political and economic structures compared to acting individually (Kowalska et al, 2018). These countries sought to promote and preserve their cultural heritage by enhancing cultural exchanges and cooperation in education and science (to support achieving these objectives, the International Visegrad Fund was established in year 2000) (Cottey, 2009).

Whereas the political systems in these countries are similar (with various position of the president within the overall governance structure), there are differences in their economies. All V4 economies have undergone significant structural transformation since the early 1990s, with a growing dominance of the services sector and increasing emphasis on innovation-led growth, though to varying degrees (Piatkowski, 2018). Czechia is one of the most developed and industrialized economies in Central Europe with a well-diversified economy that includes 'heavy and general machine-building, iron and steel production, metalworking, chemical production, electronics, transportation equipment, textiles, glass, brewing, ceramics, and pharmaceuticals' (FE, 2013, February 21). Services account for around 60% of its GDP (Statista, 2025), and Prague has emerged as a regional hub for IT and financial services (GDD Pulse, 2025). Czechia is also a strong performer in R&D investment within the V4, with relatively high public and private sector expenditures on innovation. Hungary has a medium-sized, open economy that relies significantly on foreign trade. Key industries include food processing, pharmaceuticals, automotive manufacturing, information technology, chemicals, metallurgy, machinery, electrical equipment and tourism (IMF, 2018). Services contribute over 60% of GDP, with Budapest as a major center for finance, logistics, and shared services. Hungary has significantly invested in innovation infrastructure, yet its overall innovation output remains below the EU average, with a reliance on foreign-owned firms for R&D activity (EC, 2024a). Poland is the largest of the V4 economies and has a diverse economy that includes 'machine building, iron and steel, coal mining, chemicals, shipbuilding, food processing, glass, beverages and textiles' (EBSCO, 2025) and is a major agricultural producer. Services comprise around 60% of GDP, driven by a growing digital economy, business services and financial sectors, particularly in Warsaw and Kraków. In terms

of innovation, Poland has shown steady improvement, with growing R&D intensity and a focus on digital transformation through national strategies (EC, 2025). Slovakia has undergone significant economic reforms since its separation from Czechia in 1993 and used to be known for its high economic growth rates in 2000s and 2010s. Its industries include ‘automotive industry, electronics and electrical components industry, machinery and equipment industry, chemicals and plastics industry, information and communication technology industry, shared services and business process outsourcing centers, aviation and space industry, pharmaceutical and life sciences industry and research and development’ (SARIO, 2023). However, the service sector is less diversified compared to its neighbors. Slovakia has faced challenges in boosting its innovation performance and R&D investment, with limited coordination between government, academia, and the private sector, although recent policies aim to strengthen this ecosystem (EC, 2024b).

Looking at key economic trends in the V4 countries reveals a clearer picture of their development. First, an increasing trend in real GDP per capita (Fig. 1) indicates notable economic growth over time. This metric, which measures the value of all final goods and services produced per person, provides a view of how economic standards have improved.



**Figure 1.** Real GDP per capita  
Source: Eurostat (2025a).

From 1995 to 2024, the real GDP per capita trends among the V4 countries – Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – reveal diverging economic trajectories shaped significantly by their 2004 EU accession. Czechia consistently leads in GDP per capita, maintaining stable and steady growth throughout the period, with little post-accession acceleration. Poland, starting from the lowest point in 1995, shows the most impressive convergence, with rapid and sustained growth post-2004 that brings it close to Czechia by 2024. Slovakia also experiences notable gains, overtaking Hungary after 2006 and maintaining strong momentum, though growth tapers slightly toward the end of the period. In contrast, Hungary’s performance is comparatively weak; despite starting ahead of Poland and Slovakia, its growth stagnates in the post-accession years, eventually falling behind its V4 peers.

Despite shared goals and interests, the alliance has also faced several challenges and disagreements over the years (including divergent national interests, domestic politics and differing responses to broader European issues). Over time, these differences have sometimes grown, particularly as nationalist and populist governments have gained power in some of the countries. Eu-

roscepticism became prominent in some form in all 4 countries. According to [Rodriguez-Pose et al. \(2025\)](#), sources of euroscepticism are always multifactorial, combined by cultural and economic backgrounds and highlighting fractured relationships between voters and institutions. When voters tend to eurosceptic parties, they initially offer them some kind of emotional satisfaction and hope. These governments often emphasize national sovereignty and control over EU influences, which can conflict with the more pro-EU stances of their neighbors ([Ágh, 2016](#); [Pakulski, 2016](#)). The recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have tested the unity of the V4, with countries sometimes adopting divergent approaches to crisis management and recovery plans ([Lendvai-Bainton & Szelewa, 2021](#)).

The paper explores the symbolic and spatial dimensions of the V4 by analyzing its institutional trajectory, shared and divergent national interests, spatial disparities and patterns of regional development. By combining statistical trends with semi-structured interviews – the study provides an analysis of V4 cooperation as a specific regional framework that has evolved from post-accession solidarity into a more fragmented and pragmatic form of collaboration. The paper further offers insights into the group's role in the EU's multilevel governance system and speculates on its potential future directions.

The paper is structured as follows. In the introduction, we are presenting the V4 countries, the reasons behind the formation of this group, stemming from history and common interests and the recent situation. We then review the literature on spatial conditions and spatial disparities of these countries. In the methodological part, we present the research methodology that consisted of semi-structured interviews and reviewing the basic statistical data about V4 countries. Then we present the research results, structured around 5 themes: V4 expectations and changes over years; achievements and milestones; current status of cooperation; key actors; and future of cooperation. In the discussion, we are debating the possible futures from the perspective of spatial aspects of development.

## Literature Review on the Spatial Implications of EU Membership for V4 Countries

The EU enlargement in 2004 has had significant spatial implications on its 10 new member states, particularly the V4 countries. In this part, we aim to synthesize the key aspects of this enlargement following the literature, emphasizing the transformations and challenges in regional development, spatial planning, and territorial cohesion experienced by V4 countries following their EU accession.

The initial expectations surrounding the formation of the V4 focused primarily on shared geopolitical, economic and EU integration objectives stemming from the historical experiences of Central European nations transitioning from communism to democracy. The founding declaration signed in 1991 by Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary emphasized aspirations for integration into Western institutions such as NATO and the EU, reflecting a shared desire for security, democratic consolidation and modernization ([Ambroziak et al., 2020](#)). Early V4 cooperation was seen as a pragmatic alliance for coordinating efforts during systemic transformation and managing the shift toward market economies and liberal democracies ([Ptáček & Smolík, 2022](#)). Moreover, the cooperation was framed as a platform to help internal reforms and foster cooperation in areas like infrastructure, culture and education, while supporting regional stability and balancing the influence of larger EU members. These expectations were shaped not only by the geopolitical

imperatives of the early 1990s but also by shared cultural and historical similarities, particularly the legacy of Habsburg rule and the Cold War, which gave rise to a strong sense of regional solidarity and mutual support in pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration (Taterová, 2022).

The EU membership has led to a variety of spatial transformations in the V4 countries. These include the influx of EU structural and cohesion funds, changes in border management, urban and rural development, and alterations in demography and migration patterns. There have been several studies about regional development (Poledníková, 2014; Jasiecki, 2016; Chetverikova, 2020), political development (Ciderova & Kovacevic, 2015; Pakulski, 2016), employment (Mura et al., 2020) and R&D (Bočková, 2013; Kowalska et al., 2018) in V4 countries. The EU structural funds have been crucial in shaping the spatial economic landscapes of the V4 countries (Poledníková, 2014). Investments have been targeted towards reducing regional disparities, enhancing connectivity, and supporting sustainable urban development (Bachtler et al., 2013). These funds have facilitated the construction of infrastructure projects such as highways and railways, which have improved regional accessibility and economic integration within the EU (Potluka et al., 2010).

The Schengen Agreement, which led to the accession of V4 countries to the Schengen Area in 2007, has significantly transformed border management practices. The removal of internal borders within the Schengen Area has enhanced cross-border cooperation and mobility (Popescu, 2012). This change has had spatial planning implications, particularly in border regions, where new opportunities for economic and social interaction have emerged (Topaloglou et al., 2005). The V4's geographical positioning as part of the EU's external borders has also made them crucial in regional security measures and managing migration flows from non-EU countries.

The V4's institutional development has been largely ad hoc and intergovernmental in nature, even though it was primarily conceived as a pro-European cooperation (Végh, 2018). Over time, the group has gained visibility within EU policymaking, particularly during times of crisis, yet its consistency and cohesion have remained fragile. During the 2015 migration crisis, the V4 demonstrated an unprecedented level of collective action, presenting a united front against mandatory relocation quotas, which positioned the group as a cohesive political actor, albeit with predominantly negative perception from other EU members (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2025). However, subsequent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, exposed deep internal divisions, largely driven by divergent domestic political contexts and foreign policy orientations. While minimal institutional mechanisms emerged during the pandemic, the group failed to maintain strategic coherence, especially on issues like the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility and responses to Russian aggression (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2025). Furthermore, although certain V4 presidencies, notably the Polish and Hungarian ones, attempted to enhance regional agenda-setting in domains like energy, digitalization, and defense (Stepper, 2017), these efforts remained constrained by asymmetrical interests and political divergences. At the moment the V4 cooperation seems to be more reactive and opportunistic than institutionalized, with domestic political factors acting as the primary determinant of V4 cohesion (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2025).

Bilateral relations among the V4 countries have historically oscillated between cooperation and divergence, increasingly reflected asymmetrical interests. The Czech-Slovak relationship remains the strongest, with consistently high mutual regard, while ties between Hungary and Poland are assessed as particularly close, underpinned by ideological affinities and shared Eurosceptic tendencies (Janebová & Végh, 2019). However, other bilateral perceptions, such as Hungary-Czechia or Poland-Slovakia, are notably weaker, with foreign policy elites prioritizing other partners such as Germany or the USA over fellow V4 members (Janebová & Végh, 2019). This lack of cohesion is compounded by divergent approaches to EU integration, migration, and relations with Rus-

sia, as Hungary has often charted a more pro-Russian course, in contrast to Poland's consistently critical stance (Dutta, 2023). While joint declarations and symbolic unity persist, such as through the International Visegrad Fund or the V4 Battlegroup, practical alignment on key strategic issues remains limited (Macek, 2021).

Urban and rural development policies within the EU have sought to address the challenges of both urbanization and rural depopulation in the V4 countries. EU policies have supported urban development projects aimed at revitalizing cities, improving public services and fostering economic growth (Dühr et al., 2010). Simultaneously, initiatives to combat rural depopulation have been implemented, such as promoting rural tourism, supporting agricultural modernization and enhancing rural infrastructure (Csaki et al., 2008). Despite these efforts, challenges remain in achieving balanced spatial development and territorial cohesion, as disparities between urban and rural areas persist (Petrakos et al., 2016). Throughout the post-socialist transition, rural and peripheral areas across the V4 were increasingly marginalized, experiencing demographic decline, limited infrastructure development, and underinvestment. Comparative policy analysis by Kovács et al. (2015) shows that while regional development strategies in these countries gradually converged under the influence of EU integration, rural policy remained predominantly focused on agriculture and tourism, lacking a broader socio-economic revitalization agenda. Parallely, poverty and social exclusion in rural areas, especially in Hungary and Poland, persisted due to income disparities, limited access to education and employment, and spatial inequalities (Piwowar & Dzikuc, 2020). V4's joint stance has been more cohesive on issues like migration than on cohesive urban-rural development strategies, V4 has often resisted EU-wide redistributive mechanisms, emphasizing national sovereignty and external border control instead (Kajánek, 2022).

Migration patterns, both internal and external, have significantly impacted the demographic landscapes of the V4 countries. The EU's freedom of movement has facilitated labor mobility, leading to significant out-migration from rural areas to urban centers and other EU countries (Kahanec & Zimmermann, 2010). This mobility has affected urban housing markets, increasing demand and driving up prices, while rural areas face labor shortages and demographic decline (Novotný et al., 2016). Moreover, the return migration of skilled workers has brought back valuable human capital, potentially fostering local development (Dustmann & Frattini, 2011).

## Methodology

With an objective to examine the spatial aspects of development of V4 countries, a mixed methodology consisting of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed. Quantitative research was done by examining the available statistical data available from databases such as Eurostat. The aim was to capture the development of these countries post their EU accession in 2004 and track down their development over the past 20 years. Considering that a vast amount of EU funds (INTERREG schemes, EU structural and investment funds, Horizon 2020 and others) was deployed, the V4 countries received a considerable opportunity to catch up with the rest of the EU member countries.

The qualitative research consisted of semi-structured interviews. Overall perception of the crucial characteristics, milestones, achievements, setbacks and perspectives of V4 was the main focus of this series of interviews with actors and professionals from all V4 countries. Our main aim was to help perform qualitative evaluation of the above-mentioned fields in respective countries. Statements and research outputs generated by the survey among experts were complemented by thorough quantitative assessment of related spatial characteristics.

The main tool used in the qualitative part of our research was the semi-structured interview, focusing on spatial, social and economic indicators in the V4 countries, with particular emphasis on developments after 2004. The interviews captured respondents' subjective perceptions in the aforementioned domains; thus, the primary sources of information were respondents' opinions, attitudes, subjective evaluations, estimations and leanings.

According to established theory, attitudes represent learned predispositions to respond favorably or unfavorably to a given object, person or event (Fishbein & Ajzen, as cited in Hayes, 2003, p. 95). Attitudes are acquired, mutually consistent, and relatively stable across time and situations, typically reflecting positive or negative evaluations. A subtle distinction exists between attitudes and opinions: attitudes are more deeply rooted, stable and associated with abstract constructs, whereas opinions are more volatile, relate to more immediate or practical issues, and are therefore easier to assess.

Most topics were introduced through open-ended questions. The main advantage of open-ended questions, compared to scales or structured questionnaires, is that they allow respondents to express their views in a discursive manner, provide arguments, and place their statements within a wider context. They do not impose strict temporal or spatial constraints on responses. Open-ended questions also make it possible to explore the specific and unique aspects of each topic in a flexible and non-judgmental way.

Given the limited number of respondents, selection was not based on demographic or social criteria. The primary criterion was respondents' knowledge and their ability to assess issues relevant to the research aims. We sought to maintain a comparable respondent profile across the V4 countries, with the majority drawn from academic and research institutions or from spatial planning practice.

**Table 1.** Respondents' characteristics

Country	Gender		Language of interview			Field		
	Male	Female	English	Slovak	Czech	Academia	Planning experts	Business
Czechia	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	0
Hungary	1	1	2	0	0	2	0	0
Poland	2	1	3	0	0	3	0	0
Slovakia	3	0	0	3	0	2	0	1

Source: authors.

Interviews were conducted as an interactive discussion (mostly through Google Meet and MS Teams platform) and the answers were summarized and analyzed as a cluster of ideas, leans, opinions and answers. The current text uses two combined sources: the automatic captions by Transkriptor software and Youtube automatic transcription. Such original texts have been compared, combined, compacted and edited by the first author. The other authors have reviewed and modified it. Interviews were done in English (5 interviews), Slovak and Czech language (5 interviews). 7 respondents were males and 3 females (Table 1). Each interview took between 45-60 minutes. Part five of this paper discusses the results of these interviews.



## Regional development and spatial disparities of V4 countries

In this section, we present a deeper analysis of regional development and spatial disparities within the V4 countries, building upon the knowledge established by previous recent scientific research and reports. This analysis synthesizes prior research to offer a better understanding of the regional economic and spatial dynamics, attempting a comprehensive exploration of the factors influencing disparities across these nations and within their regions.

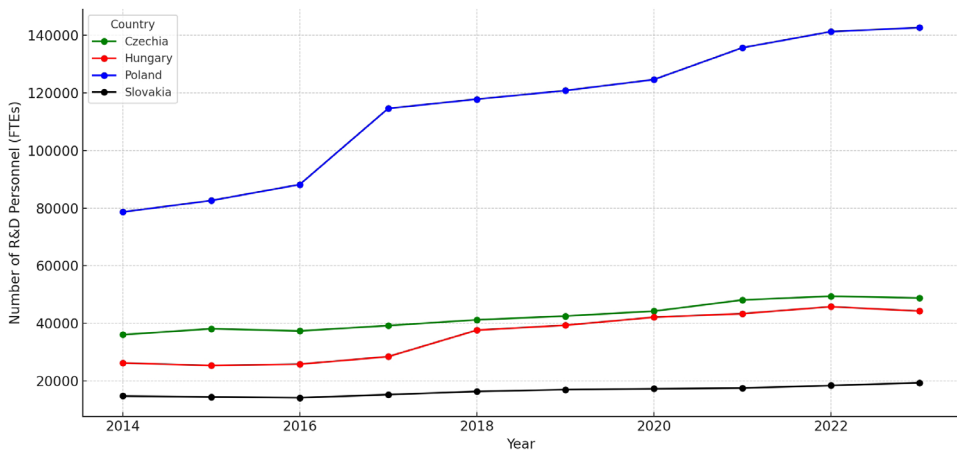
Regional disparities in the V4 countries represent one of the most persistent challenges in the region's development trajectory. Despite the shared socialist past, EU accession and access to Cohesion Policy funding, the four countries continue to exhibit sharp differences between more prosperous urban centers and lagging peripheral areas. These disparities matter not only for the economic performance of the V4 but also for their long-term territorial cohesion, social stability and integration within the EU. Understanding how these inequalities have been addressed in policy is essential for grasping the structural dynamics shaping the region.

Economic research has consistently highlighted the core-periphery divide across the V4. Maris (2014) demonstrated that regional imbalances are particularly visible between urban and rural areas, with GDP per capita, unemployment and wage levels diverging significantly between capital cities and less developed regions. More recently, [Neszmélyi et al. \(2022\)](#) confirmed that even after EU membership, major inequalities persist between core and peripheral regions, with Theil index calculations showing little evidence of harmonization over time. Similarly, [Matlovič et al. \(2018\)](#) identified two strong patterns of polarization after EU accession: a West-East gradient, especially visible in Slovakia and Hungary, and a metropolitan gradient separating capital regions from the rest of the country. Taken together, these studies suggest that EU integration has not reduced regional disparities but, in some cases, has intensified them.

At the same time, urban dynamics and planning approaches have introduced new dimensions to these disparities. [Dorogi \(2022\)](#) examined the transformations in V4 cities since 2010, showing how creative industries, cooperative urban networks and demands for liveable cities became central drivers of development. These processes were accompanied by suburbanization and the spread of metropolitan areas, which further shaped the socio-spatial landscape. [Salamin \(2022\)](#) contextualized these changes within the broader Europeanisation of planning systems: after the 1990s transformations, non-territorial policy fields such as climate change, digitalisation and sustainability began to influence spatial development. This shift drew attention to new priorities like smart cities, urban resilience and safety, reflecting the growing importance of urban policy within regional development debates ([see also Finka et al., 2022](#)).

Beyond territorial and urban differences, disparities are also rooted in human capital and socio-demographic divides. [Koišová et al. \(2021\)](#) highlighted the uneven distribution of fertility, education and employment across regions, with Bratislava, Praha, and Mazowieckie showing high potential, while Eastern Slovakia and other peripheral regions lag behind. These socio-demographic divides directly affect innovation capacities. [Wibisono \(2023\)](#) found strong spatial dependence in innovation activity, concentrated in capitals like Prague and Warsaw. Interestingly, public R&D expenditure sometimes produced negative effects on innovation, while the number of R&D personnel (Fig. 2) played a stronger positive role. Together, these findings stress that the knowledge economy, while essential for future growth, may reinforce existing regional hierarchies unless policies specifically target lagging regions.





**Figure 2.** R&D personnel and researchers by sector of performance, fields of R&D and sex  
Source: Eurostat (2025b).

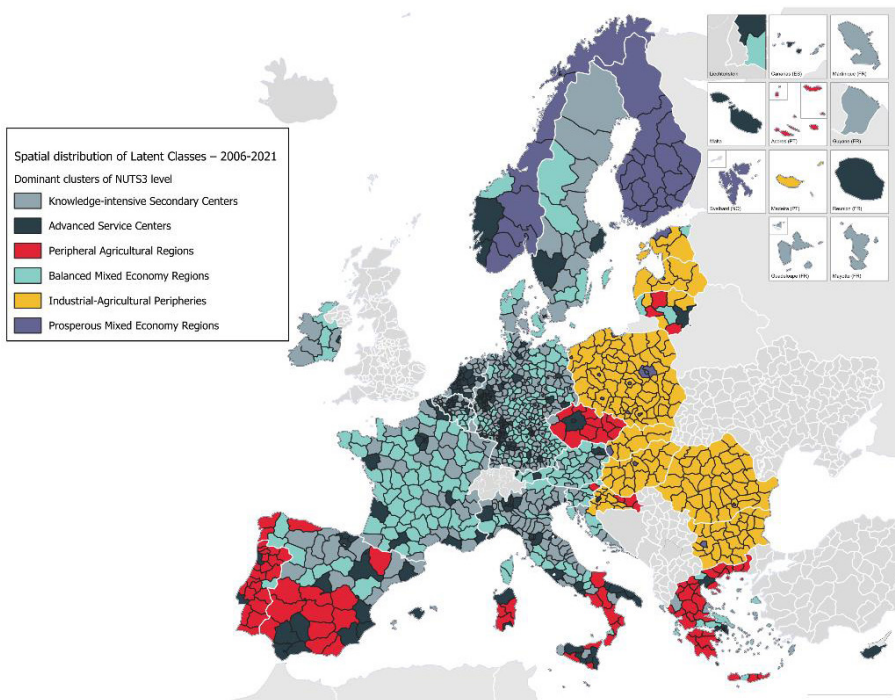
Between 2014 and 2023, the number of R&D personnel in full-time equivalents (FTEs) (see Fig. 2) across the V4 countries shows clear differences in scale and growth dynamics. Poland leads by a wide margin, with steady and significant increases from around 78,600 FTEs in 2014 to nearly 142,600 in 2023, reflecting its expanding research capacity. Czechia also demonstrates stable growth, peaking at about 49,400 FTEs in 2022 before a slight decline in 2023, maintaining its position as the second-strongest performer. Hungary, in contrast, shows more volatility: after a stagnation in the mid-2010s, it experienced strong gains after 2017, reaching around 45,700 FTEs in 2022 before dipping slightly to 44,200 in 2023. Slovakia remains the smallest in absolute terms, though it has shown consistent but modest growth from 14,700 to 19,300 FTEs over the same period. Overall, the trends highlight Poland's dominance in R&D workforce capacity, with Czechia and Hungary in a competitive middle tier, while Slovakia continues to lag behind despite gradual improvements. These findings support Wibisono (2023), which emphasizes the critical role of public investment in human capital as a strategy to mitigate regional disparities. Strengthening human capital through enhanced R&D capabilities is thus critical for fostering regional economic development.

The V4 countries show divergent outcomes in how R&D spending translates into innovation. Czechia and Poland demonstrate a strong, statistically significant correlation between R&D expenditure and innovation performance, while Hungary and Slovakia do not exhibit such a relationship, suggesting policy or structural inefficiencies. Czechia leads in R&D intensity and innovation output, whereas Slovakia remains the weakest performer. These differences highlight the importance of not just increasing investment but also improving the effectiveness of national innovation systems (Ivanová & Žárská, 2023).

The institutional and governance dimension adds yet another layer to regional disparities. Hoffman (2023) noted that local development policies remain fragmented across the V4, with Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia struggling with municipal fragmentation and centralisation, while Poland's more regionalised system allows municipalities a stronger role in development. Dühr and Belof (2020) further showed that even at the transnational level, cooperation among the V4 (and with Bulgaria and Romania in the V4+2 framework) faced barriers. While common strategies such as the Common Spatial Development Document (2010) and the Common Spatial Development Strategy (2014) were adopted, deep policy convergence was limited by national pri-

orities and differing planning traditions. This underlines the institutional difficulties in coordinating spatial development across multiple scales.

Finally, recent crises have tested the resilience of these uneven structures. The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped priorities in local development, as Hoffman (2023) observed, but it did not fundamentally alter the differentiated governance frameworks of urban and rural municipalities. More broadly, these shocks highlight how disparities are not static but evolve under external pressures, often reinforcing existing vulnerabilities in weaker regions. This dynamic is further reflected in the findings of the TERRA RES (Kollár et al., 2024) project, which shows that the V4 countries share structurally weaker profiles as industrial-agricultural peripheries, except for their capital regions. This includes characteristics such as peripheral production systems, uneven territorial capacities and a strong dependence on exaptive forms of resilience during shocks (Fig. 3).

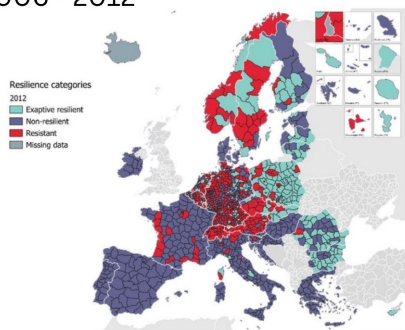


**Figure 3.** Spatial distribution of Latent Classes (2006–2021)

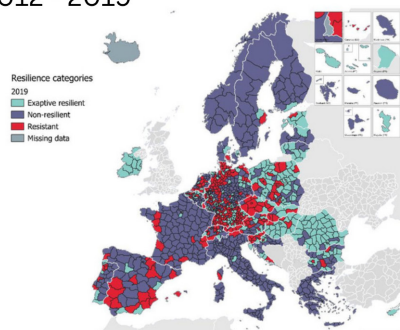
Source: Kollár et al. (2024, p. 24).

While crises repeatedly exposed these structural weaknesses, TERRA RES (Kollár et al., 2024) also demonstrates that many V4 regions responded through exaptive resilience, creatively reorganizing their economies during shocks such as the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Ukraine war. Yet the unevenness persists: some areas, particularly in Hungary and Czechia, struggled with non-resilience during recent crises, illustrating how external pressures can both activate adaptive potential and deepen long-standing territorial vulnerabilities (Fig. 4).

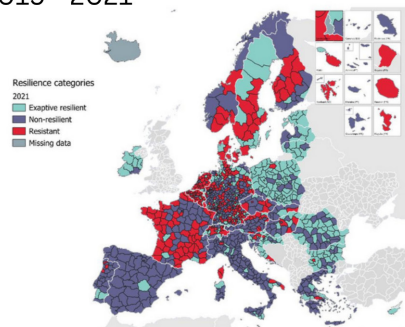
2006 - 2012



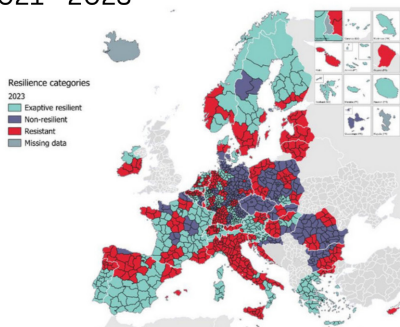
2012 - 2019



2019 - 2021



2021 - 2023



**Figure 4.** Territorial resilience, 2006–2023

Source: Kollár et al. (2024, p. 26–29).

Taken together, the studies reveal a complex and multi-dimensional picture of regional disparities and cooperation challenges within the V4. Persistent economic divides that rooted in structural inequalities linked to urbanization, planning systems, human capital and governance, remain deeply embedded in current institutional and socio-economic processes. As Walsch (2014) observes, although the V4 has been effective in external cooperation, such as shaping EU enlargement and accessing cohesion funds, intra-regional collaboration often remains symbolic, confined mainly to technical domains like transport and energy. This is in line with Radovici and Danko's (2023) finding that V4 support for the Western Balkans, while meaningful, tends to be fragmented and driven by rotating presidencies rather than by a coherent regional strategy. When viewed through the lens of the Integration Mechanisms Matrix (Table 2), these dynamics highlight that genuine cooperation within the V4 tends to emerge primarily where EU frameworks generate functional, institutional, social, or normative spillovers. The Integration Mechanisms Matrix shows that V4 cross-border projects function not as isolated initiatives but as four recurring EU-driven cooperation mechanisms. Infrastructure projects generate functional spillovers requiring technical and political coordination; environmental investments create institutional spillovers through joint monitoring and shared risk-management; mobility and education schemes foster social spillovers by building expert networks; and EU directives introduce normative spillovers that harmonize legal and administrative practices. Together, these mechanisms explain why cooperation among V4 states becomes durable and self-reinforcing across multiple policy fields.

**Table 2.** Integration Mechanisms Matrix

Mechanism	Example	EU Role & Resulting Spillover
<b>Network-building</b>	Warsaw-Budapest rail corridor	EU TEN-T/CEF rules require interoperability, producing functional spillovers as V4 ministries repeatedly coordinate technical and financial decisions – a dynamic analyzed by <a href="#">Tóth (2019, 2023)</a> , who shows how EU railway policy forces V4 alignment.
<b>Environmental public goods</b>	Slovak-Hungarian wastewater & waste-management projects	EU Cohesion Fund and Interreg encourage joint monitoring and shared risk-management. This reflects the logic identified by <a href="#">Nałęcz (2012)</a> , who stresses that transboundary water governance inevitably institutionalizes cooperation. <a href="#">Pawera et al. (2017)</a> show similar cohesion effects even without macro-economic gains.
<b>Human-capital formation</b>	Student mobility & education modules	Erasmus+ and Visegrad programs generate social spillovers by building expert networks. <a href="#">Tóth (2023)</a> notes that such expert communities later facilitate coordination in technical fields like rail interoperability, while <a href="#">Nałęcz (2012)</a> documents similar patterns in water governance.
<b>Governance &amp; legal coordination</b>	EGTCs, cross-border commissions	EU directives (WFD, Groundwater Directive, Railway Packages) drive legal harmonization and create <i>normative spillovers</i> . Both <a href="#">Nałęcz (2012)</a> and <a href="#">Tóth (2019; 2023)</a> show how adoption of EU standards reduces transaction costs and embeds V4 states in shared administrative routines.

Source: authors.

## Results

Based on the qualitative analysis of the interview data, five distinct groups of inferences are identified (V4 symbols, economic development, and initial expectations and changes over years; Achievements, failures, milestones, and limitations; V4 current status and bilateral relations; V4 key actors; and finally, the Future of V4 cooperation and common planning culture). It is important to note that the interviewees were asked to reflect on general socio-economic developments in their countries, without being shown the statistical indicators directly. Nevertheless, their narratives were frequently mirroring the patterns identified in the previous section. Qualitative research confirms that the strong economic performance of the V4, namely rapid GDP per capita growth and improvements in infrastructure, occur within widening internal disparities, uneven regional development and rising socio-political tensions. The thematic fields and scopes are distinguished as separate items as follows:

### V4 symbols, economic development and initial expectations and changes over years

V4 (previously V3) was established in the 1990s as an alliance of 3 (later 4) countries in Central Europe aspiring to access European structures. All respective countries have overcome similar problems related to transformation of economic systems from centrally planned towards free market economy as well as radical shift in their geopolitical orientation. Common past and common goals were mentioned as the most relevant factor in forming the identity of V4 since the beginning. Although the essence of V4 have been transformed, this common tie still persists ('little bit of joint history I think and I feel a lot of empathy for those countries', 'they were part of Eastern bloc but they were not part of Soviet Union so they were independent formally'). Most of our respondents agree that during the time some differences were magnified and highlighted

(‘I think we are trapped in a way in geography because of the geographical proximity we consider that there is a kind of common interests or common features’, ‘if we want or not, every country has its particular goals now’). Some opinions emphasized that rather idealistic roots (in velvet revolutions in 1989) were rather replaced by pragmatic approaches towards EU (‘a tool against EU and Brussel’). Differently ticking political dynamics in all 4 countries did not make possible any deeper coordination based on shared values (‘all four countries were collaborating together for decades but in recent years, V4 occurred in politically vulnerable position’). Rarely there has been any particular symbol of V4 mentioned (‘maybe Visegrad town over the Danube River’). If we concentrate on economic development and economic dimensions, respondents do not thwart its significance, but they clearly emphasized the symbolic and cultural-historical character of V4 alliance (‘V4 is more a symbolical alliance than political and economic unit’, ‘political significance is far lesser than cultural and historical’). Same historical trajectory with all the troubles related to Central Europe was highlighted (‘we all came from Austrian-Hungarian empire, then muddled through socialism and went together through transformation’). There were some kinds of mutual empathy (‘I have a lot of empathy for those countries and their fight for our joint economic interest in the EU’), understanding and nostalgia (‘1990s were the golden era of cooperation’). A major economic goal (EU accession and common European market) was reached in 2004 and was never followed up with further clearly defined common economic goals. After EU accession, the determination, commitment and political vision has somehow petered out and was replaced by rather pragmatic sectoral tasks and achievements. So we can speculate, that also the public engagement and identification of the idea of V4 in the public in respective countries has somehow faded away (V4 stopped to be a topic in election campaigns etc.). The V4 countries experienced solid GDP growth and rising living standards after accession. Interviewees frequently referred to this period of economic optimism, confirming that early expectations of convergence were grounded in observable improvements. Yet, several respondents implicitly referenced the divergences in growth trajectories and labour market outcomes that emerged later, illustrating how macroeconomic gains did not necessarily translate into a shared sense of advancement.

### **Achievements, failures, milestones, limitations**

All respondents basically agree that most essential goal (EU integration) was fulfilled and public opinion in all respective countries agree that this is a successful step in the national history of respective countries (‘if you look at perspective we had in 1990s, it was achieved in fact, we became I think really fully integrated part of Europe’). Many agree that this goal was easier to reach as a group of states (‘it will generate economic growth, which will help to transform our society’). After EU accession in 2004 the common goal somehow faded away and vision is missing. Cooperation is rather pragmatic, aimed to use financial means and benefits from the EU funds. Sporadically, the radically changing societal atmosphere was mentioned (‘today’s society is senseless split apart, nobody wants to cooperate’). An important fact is that in formative years (1990s), the political elites in all V4 countries shared common goal (EU accession, economic transformation), but lately the essence of V4 has become a scope of many contradicting political battles (‘some V4 issues became a centre of fierce political battles’) within respective countries. Domestic political development, tight election campaigns and series of internal political disputes in respective countries have become the major driving forces in political agenda, even in issues concerning V4 cooperation.

On the other hand, decades of cooperation of various actors within V4 countries built up a dense network of contacts, opportunities and exchange of experiences which might be useful in difficult situations ('we can gain positive experiences how to defend NGOs against the pressure of government from our Hungarian colleagues'). Inspiration might be drawn also from positive case of high efficiency, e.g. Poland was mentioned several times as a country mastering the process of utilizing of EU funds and schemes in most efficient way ('Poland massively improved and advanced their technical infrastructure due to EU funds', 'Poland is becoming regional power'). Common approach in some conflicting and highly delicate issues (e.g. migration policy) have been reported to be partially successful ('the EU migration policy I think we managed to oppose many of the of the legal acts and suggestions that were kind of not in our best interest probably and that ignored our social economic context'). Although volatile and very challenging situation with migration streams induced some minor disputes concerning the regime in border crossing points, overall, the rather restrictive and harsh mindset related to illegal migration was and is very similar in all V4 countries, making them allies in this dimension. Successful development might be observed also on lower levels of co-operation, joint initiatives of mayors, various networks of municipal/regional actors or in the cultural sphere (the Visegrad fund). While the political dynamics on the highest level might sometimes decelerate the cooperation because of different ideological roots, the cooperation on lower levels is often very effective ('mayor of Warsaw stands together with mayor of Budapest so and they are joined by mayors of Bratislava and Prague', 'our cooperation with colleagues geographers from Kraków is excellent, but it is based on personal contacts'). Particular aspects of V4 cooperation cover spatial aspects of development, territorial cohesion, socio-demographic shifts, regional cooperation, environmental issues, innovativeness and smart regions/cities and in several cases this effort delivered good results. Remarkably, no particular event or factor was mentioned as an important milestone in V4 development, even though it is obvious that several external shocks, especially migration crisis in 2015 (as discussed extensively by e.g. [Jasiecki, 2016](#)) and the beginning of war in Ukraine in 2022 did have a considerable effect on the collaboration within V4, especially within its geopolitical dimensions. Those events imposed some serious rifts in the cooperation process, especially the attitude toward Ukraine became main political factor dividing V4 into two groups (Slovakia and Hungary on one side and Poland and Czechia on other). Further development in geopolitical discourse within the EU in recent months rather aggravated this rift and probably influenced other fields of cooperation. The unclear and unpredictable situation with gas and oil supplies highlighted differences in the positions of particular countries. Due to the high dynamics of political development in last months, it is practically impossible to assess long term impact of these events on overall cooperation and relations within the V4 group. Interviewees' emphasis on lacking a new unifying socio-economic goal after 2004 resonates with the stagnating or unevenly distributed gains captured by indicators such as GDP growth, uneven R&D capacity development, and persistent core-periphery patterns.

### **V4 current status, bilateral relations**

As mentioned earlier, recent geopolitical events highlighted the differences among all four countries within V4 and substantially redefined the current status of bilateral cooperation. Some common interests will always prevail ('relationship between Czechia and Slovakia will be always special, no matter who is in the government', 'Polish-Slovakian border is very long, but the opportunities of cooperation are underused'), other position have been largely redefined ('those states are different in their size and e.g. Poland is a country building their strategic relations rather with Germany and France now', 'these states are different in their historical experience', 'we are not moving



forward') and geopolitical context have been changed ('I will not ignore my partners in Prague, Bratislava and Budapest because they are my long-term strategic partners but I also think about Baltic'). There are present also some fears and sceptic attitudes regarding the future ('I am afraid that they [EU] might ignore the V4 group to some extent or this collaboration might be at a kind of symbolic or ceremonial level', 'I don't think that we are going forward, the V4 significance is less-er than it once was') and lack of continuity with the original ideas of 'founders' of V4 (Á. Göncz, L. Wałęsa, V. Havel 'this cooperation is a kind of paused', 'collaboration might be kind of symbolic or ceremonial level in future years'). Question concerning the future leadership remains open, several times the transformation of Poland has been mentioned as possible driver of change ('Polish role is quite important because they have specific connection with the USA and they are the fourth-fifth strongest army in NATO', 'Poland is now regional power') and the roles of other three partners are rather unprofiled ('Hungary probably Czechia are in a hidden position so we are in the shadow', 'everybody is taking care about own business'). Several times the role of Hungary as a maverick of this group was thematized ('now it's super difficult to imagine how Hungary fits into it right because it's driven away from everything') as well as some defensive attempts ('I just hope that our partners in Czechia, Slovakia and Poland do not think that our prime minister is the country's only voice') were formulated. Bilateral relations are considered smooth and friendly, with some minor flaws (Slovakia-Hungary). Partnerships are most intensive and resilient in some narrowly delimited fields. Anyhow, it seems that there is no common strong vision shared by all the V4 partners at the moment and a highly volatile external environment does not enable to foster such vision at the moment. Rather adaptive, even opportunistic decision-making strategies prevail in all V4 countries and there is low probability of common concerted ideological position in near future. Several respondents linked deteriorating political cohesion within the V4 to growing differences in national socio-economic trajectories and are complementing the statistical evidence of divergent development paths among the V4 countries, particularly the contrasting performance of Hungary relative to Poland or Czechia, and the stagnation of rural or peripheral regions.

## V4 key actors

Identity and image of the V4 group is influenced mostly by top politicians in respective countries and their agenda ('it depends on top politicians and it is important that they will find common language'). In the past, there were phases when ideologically different governments ('we had periods in the past when our PM was R. Fico while Czech government was right wing oriented and cooperation worked smoothly') delivered good results of cooperation, but recent geopolitical shifts and external shocks (mainly the war in Ukraine) made this harmonization more challenging. Some respondents emphasize the need for more active role of other stakeholders, e.g. NGOs and universities, who might compensate for the political hindrances ('you might have heard about successful Interreg projects like ConnectGreen or SaveGreen, I think some civil NGOs in the field of environmental and nature protection as well as universities might be future leaders of cooperation'). Other voices highlighted the need for cooperation even in situations when the EU is taking away some powers and responsibilities from national levels ('we need to stick together even if Brussels is being overly authoritarian and is taking away some responsibilities and powers from the national governments'). Other respondents highlighted the growing role of some business stakeholders, especially those who are having political impact and are close to governments ('large petrol company Orlen has maybe ambitions to develop over V4 countries and invest in Central Europe'). But almost all considerations come back to the political level ('political representation



is key factor, we need to find some new vision, otherwise it will peter out'). Human factors and human resources were repeatedly emphasized ('important factor is personal continuity, contacts built up during those 20 years. If those contacts disappear, the cooperation will fade away'). Mutual exchange of experiences was mentioned as a driving force of any progress ('exchange of experiences might even vital important, if we want to prevent failure').

### **Future of V4 cooperation and common planning culture**

The last thematic focus of our interviews was mapping out the spatial dimension of cooperation, possible similarities and convergence effects in common Central European planning culture. Several common factors like tradition of urban planning ('Slovakia and Czechia have a lot in common'), character of urban development and the settlement structure ('all these countries have relatively small number of big cities and rural population is present there'), common heritage of former socialist planning, problems with post-industrial derelict structures etc. were mentioned. This might be one of the factors why in all these countries political conservatism is prevailing nowadays ('we are careful and the degree of trust toward new, progressive approaches is rather low [...] another thing is the absence of political leaders'). Our respondents are aware of the complexity and depth of planning culture ('planning culture is something more than spatial development pattern'), clearly indicating gravitation to Central Europe culture in all respective countries ('Polish planning culture is different than German'). Experience of socialist planning and radical breakthrough of some neoliberal approaches are common definition signs for all examined countries, not only in its territorial dimension. Another common experience is concerning the evolution of participatory planning culture, which became mainstream of all planning initiatives in 21st century in Europe. Some obstacles in the mentality, attitudes of authorities and law enforcement were mentioned ('even local authorities, they still do not understand the participatory culture'). Lack of vision and direction was mentioned again ('we are succumbing to various trends and tendencies, once we are "green" then "smart" ... every 2 years we are changing direction').

An open question is which direct spatial implications are related to the EU accession of V4 countries. If we put aside the general legal and legislative framework related to the EU membership, few respondents draw tangible conclusions in this field. Some infrastructural and transport impacts have been mentioned ('better West-East connection in Poland', 'connection of Polish Baltic ports with Czechia and Slovakia', 'motorway between Polish Silesia and Czechia/Slovakia') but there is still a lot of space for improvement ('transport connection between Poland and Slovakia is still miserable'). Spatial implications of V4 related cooperation are more visible in particular cross-border initiatives, but with rather pragmatic approach ('we are rather pragmatic, everybody is taking care about his business and cooperates when it is advantageous for him', 'Polish trucks are entering our small villages but we have no other option', 'there is no sense to build completely new transport corridor, we have to follow up what has been made in the past'). Particular policy documents (e.g. Common Spatial Development Document and the Common Spatial Development Strategy) were almost not mentioned at all, playing only a minor role in coordinated spatial development. It seems that the immediate common spatial future will be largely influenced by political trends and even by ad hoc political decisions.

A special territorial feature of V4 cooperation is the uniqueness of particular bilateral relations. Czechia and Slovakia were for many decades part of one state and strategic planning was influenced by this fact ('in former socialist Czechoslovakia, the heavy industry was located deliberately to mountainous, remote Slovak regions'). The specific situation is also in southern Slovakia, a region inhabited predominantly by the Hungarian minority ('Hungary makes a lot of investment in territori-

al assets in southern Slovakia and it is not always transparent'). Czech-Polish and Slovak-Polish borders are shaped by rather mountainous landscape, so the territorial impacts of mutual cooperation are rather limited. In all bilateral relations, there are some ad hoc coalitions and signs of pragmatic approach toward territorial issues ('when we need something from Visegrad fund').

The spatial disparities (R&D concentration, resilience patterns and inequality gradients) were echoed in expert discussions on planning cultures, cross-border disparities and regional vulnerabilities. Interviewees' reflections on infrastructure gaps and uneven capacities correspond directly with these quantitative findings.

The quantitative indicators and qualitative insights from the performed interviews suggest that although the V4 countries have considerably benefited from EU integration (economic growth and modernization), the uneven spatial and social distribution of these benefits has increasingly shaped societal perceptions and political behaviour. The dissatisfaction emerging from territorial inequalities, rather than economic performance seems to be a key factor explaining the rise of populist and Eurosceptic tendencies across the V4.

## Discussion and conclusions

Based on the qualitative research presented above, the respondents' opinions confirm the significant changes that V4 has undergone over the past 20 years. Accession to the EU and NATO was the main defining factor of the group and after this goal was fulfilled, it was not replaced by a similarly important goal. Cooperation continued at various levels, but the mobilizing character of the V4 was replaced to some extent by political opportunism and the fragmentation of joint efforts. To a certain extent, the V4 confirmed its negotiating power in relation to the EU, but different domestic political agendas modified the cooperation and to a certain extent replaced it with bilateral ties or cooperation only within the given sector. The common Central European planning culture is still present, but it is not a decisive factor in the development of the V4. External shocks changed the internal political dynamics and led to more frequent solo initiatives by individual members.

The unpredictability of geopolitical developments means that it is not easy to find a long-term vision that would be acceptable to all members. The internal political division within the individual countries and the related lack of synergy in the rotation of individual government formations also contributed to this. A large role is also played by the transformation of the self-perception of individual members (Hungary's exceptionalism, Poland's regional power ambitions, Czech's euroscepticism and Slovakia's internal political split). Cooperation in other spheres (culture, nature protection, environmental issues) was overshadowed by the political dominance of the V4 agenda in relation to European conflict topics (COVID-19 pandemics, war in Ukraine, EU migration policy). Despite the fact that bilateral relations between the individual V4 countries continue to be rather good, unification based on a new vision has not been achieved and the common agenda of the V4 has not been translated into territorial development.

The future development of the V4 countries is subject to a range of factors that could influence the trajectory of the group in various ways. In this concluding part, we are outlining some possible scenarios. These include:

Continued Cooperation with Occasional Strains. It is likely that the V4 will continue to find common ground on issues where their interests align, such as regional security, energy policies, and opposition to certain EU-wide policies (like migration quotas). This pragmatic approach may see the group functioning effectively on a case-by-case basis, even if deeper ideological differences

persist. The V4 serves as a platform for these countries to amplify their voices within the EU. The strategic utility of the group in representing Central European interests could sustain its relevance. Pragmatism, preference of ad hoc approaches and flexible political and ideological attitudes are reflection of highly volatile and strained geopolitical situation and quick tempo of changes which do not favour consistent profiling of strategic effort. V4 is not a major election topic in any member country anymore, so the level, intensity and quality of cooperation will be rather a secondary reflection of other trends within the political landscape of respective countries. This shift toward a rather pragmatic, technocratic approach without any unified ideological or visionary base is repeatedly mentioned by many respondents. This flexibility can lead to situations in which particular countries will be in dispute on one issue but simultaneously be strong allies on another. Several opinions of respondents expressed confidence that even the harshest political turmoil will not endanger the cooperative relations on a lower level (e.g. in the field of culture within the Visegrad fund). On the other hand, complex and long-term issues like territorial development require at least basic mutual political and ideological understanding among key players.

**Potential for Internal Disagreements.** Differences in domestic politics and EU policy attitudes could lead to serious strains. For instance, if some members continue to pursue nationalist agendas that are contradictory with EU norms (such as rule of law and democratic values), it could create fractures within the V4. Several times, respondents mentioned Hungary and Slovakia and their specific, sometimes dissident stance toward many joint European initiatives and issues. Additionally, varying economic priorities and the handling of EU funds could also lead to disagreements. How each country's relationship with the broader EU evolves will also affect V4. Increased tensions between individual V4 countries and the EU might lead to scenarios where the unity of the group is tested. Mutual contradictions can be accentuated in situations where governments with different ideological and political backgrounds are in power in individual countries, as has often happened in the past.

**Potential Dissolution or Loss of Influence.** There's a possibility that the V4 might gradually lose its influence or coherence as a political bloc if the member countries find greater benefit in bilateral agreements or alternative regional groupings within the EU. Changes in government or shifts in policy priorities that lead to better alignment with EU norms might also reduce the need for a unified Visegrad stance. The group could become less relevant if the EU addresses some of the regional disparities and policy issues that the V4 advocates for, reducing the need for a separate voice. Another scenario of disruption includes split of the V4 into two groups of two states heading for opposite directions. While in the past there were signs of such a development in the case of Hungary and Poland, a Hungary/Slovakia bloc is being formed nowadays in the region. In the worst case scenario, creation of two antagonist blocks might hamper all the effort of coordinated spatial and territorial perspective for V4 countries. These risks have been carefully expressed by some respondents of our survey, though not being considered to be the most likely scenario. However, spatial consequences of an (possible though unlikely) open rift among V4 countries might be devastating and detrimental for the common future of the entire region.

**Regaining and Expanding Influence.** The V4 could regain or enhance its influence by strategically positioning itself as a critical player in the EU, particularly on issues like energy security, digital transformation, and the EU's neighborhood policies. Expanding cooperation into new areas such as technology and innovation could also rejuvenate the V4's purpose and cohesion. Taking leadership roles in emerging EU policy areas – such as cybersecurity, green energy transition or digital market regulation – could provide new meaning and relevance to the V4 cooperation. Respondents have shown a rather pessimistic attitude toward this scenario and we also consider

it unlikely. But the largely volatile political landscape in all V4 countries might deliver surprising results even in the near future. Spatial aspects of development in this case might be led by new technologies and new priorities, related to the need to jointly face growing vulnerability of social systems, negative demographic trends or security threats. The common interest of V4 countries might be rejuvenated in new circumstances.

Unilateral withdrawal of one or more member countries from the EU (very low probability) would seriously hamper any other form of V4 cooperation. Loss of single market access and trade barriers would inflict supply chain collapse, capital flight and currency crisis. End of EU funds funding critical infrastructure (highways, bridges), environmental projects, agricultural subsidies, regional development would massively downgrade territorial cohesion of the region, both within the particular country as well as in the cross-border dimension. It would also mean detrimental geopolitical consequences for whole Central Europe: security downgrade and political vulnerability being the most feared consequences. Economic crisis and disruption would probably massively accelerate brain drain. Unilateral withdrawal of one country would probably heavily damage neighboring countries (still staying within the EU). Cooperation of V4 countries in current form would be probably impossible to continue. Similar consequences would occur also in the scenario of complete dissolution of the EU.

Assessing the most realistic scenario for the future of the V4 involves considering the current political, economic, and social trends within the group and their broader European context. At the moment, the first scenario – ‘Continued Cooperation with Occasional Strains’ – appears the closest to reality. In this thought exercise, the V4 countries continue to share strategic interests that necessitate cooperation, such as regional security, energy independence, and infrastructural development. These common goals are likely to keep the group together, despite occasional disagreements on other matters. The strategic utility of the V4 as a platform to amplify their voices within the larger EU framework remains significant. Collectively, the V4 can wield more influence in negotiations and policy-making processes than each country could individually, particularly on issues where they share a common stance against broader EU policies. The geopolitical situation in Europe, particularly concerns about Russian influence and energy security, supports the need for continued collaboration among the V4 countries. Their position as a buffer zone between Western Europe and Eastern non-EU countries further necessitates a coordinated regional stance on many security and policy issues. While the group will likely continue to cooperate on strategic issues, varying political ideologies and approaches to governance – especially concerning democratic norms and EU integration – will cause periodic strains. These tensions are apparent in the differing responses to EU criticisms regarding rule of law and migration policies. The history of the V4 shows a capacity for pragmatic cooperation despite ideological differences, particularly when facing common external pressures or opportunities. This pragmatic aspect is likely to continue as each country balances its national interests with the benefits of regional cooperation.

More than 20 years since joining the EU have undoubtedly brought many successes in the cooperation among the V4 countries, especially in the field of culture, cross-border cooperation and solving environmental problems. However, the present has brought new security threats and risks, which to some extent overshadowed the original purpose and meaning of the V4 group. Two decades of membership of the V4 countries in the EU have clearly changed their position in the European context and have also had an impact on their territorial development. EU membership has strengthened all ties of these countries in Europe and opened up new possibilities within the framework of bilateral cooperation. The transformation of the political and social system as well as the gradual change of the spatial development paradigm is now an indisputable

fact. However, the synergy resulting from the common great goal was later replaced by a whole spectrum of particular interests requiring coordination not only on the strategic but also on the operational level. The last years have been marked by the search for a new common perspective, mobilizing the resources of society as was the case in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium. This has not yet been entirely successful and therefore the common future of the V4 countries remains open, V4 countries are looking for other forms and possibilities of mutual cooperation.

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