

# Geographical location and geopolitical situation of the V4 countries

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## Summary

In this paper we provide a regional geographic analysis of the Visegrad Group, the V4 as a distinguished geographical unit on the map of Central Europe. The roots of the Visegrad Group, which was founded on 15 February 1991, can be traced to the Middle Ages. However, the Soviet rule and the resistance against it, and other most recent mutual interests, such as the EU accession in 2004 and the V4's attitude towards the EU's refugee crisis in 2015 – rather than a meeting of kings held more than 650 years ago – constitute the foundation of the shared historical consciousness and mutual solidarity between the Hungarian, Polish, Czech and Slovak peoples. The main question of this paper is whether and how the V4 can be viewed geographically as an organic and integrated region based on its natural and social attributes and its historical development. We are using both the concept of traditional and new (reorganised) regional geography to provide insights into that question.

**Keywords:** Visegrád Group, V4, Central Europe, Zwischeneuropa, regional geography, regional cohesion

## A visegrádi országok földrajzi fekvése és geopolitikai helyzete

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## Összefoglalás

A jelen dolgozat a Visegrádi Négyeket, mint önálló földrajzi régiót igyekszik megközelíteni, és arra keresi a választ, hogy a hagyományos, illetve az ún. új regionális földrajz szemléletét ötvözve mennyiben kezelhetők a V4-ek önálló földrajzi egységként. Míg a hagyományos regionális földrajz a régiókra statikus egységként tekintett, és azok szisztematikus leírására, a térbeli összefüggések bemutatására törekedett, addig az új regionális földrajz a régióra térben és időben dinamikus egységként tekint, és alapvetően a régió-formálódás feltételeit, körülményeit vizsgálja.

Az 1991. február 15-én a visegrádi találkozó során életre hívott együttműködés gyökerei a középkorig, egészen pontosan az 1335-ös visegrádi királytalálkozóig nyúlnak vissza. Az 1991-ben újra életre hívott visegrádi együttműködés nemcsak a re-integráció első formáját jelentette a széthulló KGST és varsói szerződés nyomán kialakult közép-európai hatalmi űrben, de az elmúlt három évtizedben a legjelentősebb, legszorosabb közép-európai politikai kooperációvá nőtte ki magát, aminek eredményeként 2004-ben a régió országai egyszerre váltak az Európai Unió tagjaivá.

Az első világháború előtt a Habsburg és porosz érdekszférába tartozó régió, amelynek országai a két világháború között még egymással rivalizáltak, először 1945 után került azonos politikai-katonai tömbbe a keleti blokk, a KGST és a Varsói Szerződés Szovjetunió által meghatározott keretein belül. Paradox módon épp e diktált szovjet típusú társadalmi-gazdasági berendezkedéssel szembeni ellenállás volt az, ami a három országot, azaz az ezekben működő korabeli ellenzékieket (Charta 77, Szolidaritás stb.) egységbe kovácsolta az 1980-as évek végére. Ezek, az 1990-es évek elején hatalomra kerülő, egymáshoz szellemiségben közelálló új politikai elitnek voltak azok, amelyek végül a visegrádi együttműködési megállapodást 1991-ben aláírták. Mindezek alkotják a közös történelmi tudat és a lengyel, a magyar, a cseh és a szlovák nép közötti kölcsönös szolidaritás alapjait, sokkal inkább, mintsem a bő 650 évvel korábbi királytalálkozó.

A V4 országok közötti regionális földrajzi kohézió azonban gyenge. Ennek legfőbb okai a politikai érdekellentétek és a történelmi-etnikai különbözőség, ami abból fakad, hogy a régió belső határvonalai – ellentétben a 20. század elején létrejött külső határokkal – évszázados stabilitást mutatnak. A főbb hegyvonulatok (a Kárpátok és a Szudéták) évszázadok óta társadalmi-gazdasági és etnikai-kulturális választóvonalaként működtek. Emellett a belső regionális kohézió másik fontos elemét az ott élő emberek regionális identitása, szolidaritása adja, ám a belső szolidaritás csak cseh és szlovák, illetve magyar és lengyel viszonylatban erős, ami a V4-től függetlenül is létezik. Hosszú távon a fő kérdés, hogy túl tudnak-e jutni ezen országok a belső ellentéteiken az aktuális politikai érdekeken túlmenően is, és ki tudnak-e alakítani olyan stratégiai partnerséget, amely már ma is létezik Magyarország és Lengyelország, illetve Csehország és Szlovákia között?

**Kulcsszavak:** Visegrádi Együttműködés, V4, Közép-Európa, Köztes-Európa, regionális földrajz, regionális kohézió

## 1. Introduction

The roots of the Visegrad Group, which arose as the Visegrad Three (V3) at the Visegrad summit on 15 February 1991 and, with the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, became the Visegrad Four (V4) on 1 January 1993, can be traced to the Middle Ages and the Congress of Visegrád in 1335. At that meeting, Charles I (Charles Robert) of Hungary, John of Luxembourg, king of Bohemia, and Casimir III the Great of Poland formed an alliance. In addition to establishing peace and enhancing trade between the three countries (in opposition to Vienna's staple rights), the alliance aimed to promote a common stand against the hegemonic efforts of an increasingly powerful Austria and the Teutonic Order, core of the later Prussia, and ultimately the German Empire. Re-established in 1991, the Visegrad Cooperation represented the first manifestation of re-integration in the Central European power vacuum that had emerged on the eastern border of the European Economic Community (later the European Union) following the collapse of Comecon (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, an economic alliance within the Eastern Bloc) and the Warsaw Pact. During the past three decades, the Visegrad Group has grown into the major political grouping in Central Europe.

It should be noted, however, that there was no political continuity between the Visegrad agreements of 1335 and 1991. Indeed, by the advent of the modern era all three countries – Bohemia, Hungary and Poland – had lost their independent statehood. Although sovereignty was restored after World War I, the emergence of the so-called Little Entente in the interwar period ruled out any possibility of cooperation between the three countries of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland. This in turn made it difficult for the region to resist German hegemony. Thus, it was only after 1945 that the conditions for closer cooperation arose within the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet-dominated framework of Comecon and the Warsaw Pact. Paradoxically, it was resistance to the Soviet-type economic and social system that united the three countries, or rather their opposition movements (Charta 77, Solidarity, etc.), by the late 1980s. These political forces, which shared similar values and came to power in the early 1990s, were the ones that signed the Visegrad

Declaration on Cooperation in 1991 (*Latawski 1994*). Within the Eastern Bloc, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland were the countries that saw national people's uprisings, revolutions and strikes against Soviet domination prior to 1989 – in 1956, 1968 and 1981. Those events – rather than a meeting of kings held more than 650 years ago – constitute the foundation of the shared historical consciousness and mutual solidarity between the Hungarian, Polish, Czech and Slovak peoples.

Besides presenting the geography of the Visegrad countries, this article examines whether and how the V4 can be viewed geographically as an organic and integrated region based on its natural and social attributes and its historical development. Whereas traditional regional geography has tended to focus upon the synthetic and systematic description of individual regions, the new (reorganised) regional geography that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, having abandoned the idiographic approach, placed the spotlight on the framework of region formation and on the region as a dynamic socio-political construct in time and space (*Thrift 1983; Amin-Thrift 1992; Pudup 1988; Murphy 1991; Paasi 1991, 2002*). In the following, being mindful of *Holmen's* critique (1995) of new regional geography, we draw upon the ideas of both classical descriptive regional geography and the new regional geography in an endeavour to discuss in what sense, or senses, the V4 countries can be regarded as a single region. In the first half of the essay, we initially examine the broader geographical situation of the V4 and the geopolitical framework and historical roots of cooperation. We then turn to the present, with an analysis of demographic trends, ethnic relations, the economy, transport and logistics. Finally, we provide a synthesis on whether V4 could be considered an organic geographic region and what its future might be.

## 2. Geographical location

The V4 countries lie in the eastern half of Central Europe. Geologically and geomorphologically, the region belongs to the mega units called the Hercynian and Alpine-Himalayan System (*Embleton 1984; Král 1999*). With its varied topography, the region is divided into the Central European Lowland and Highlands, the Carpathians and the Pannonian Basin. Lowlands predominate in



**Figure 1** | Geographic map of the V4 countries  
Source: own compilation

Poland and Hungary and hills and mountains in Czechia and Slovakia (*Figure 1*). The V4 countries are both connected and separated by the Carpathians, with elevations in the High Tatras often exceeding 2000 m.

Reflecting its geographical location, the region forms a transitional zone between the maritime (oceanic) climate of Western Europe (mild summers and cool but not cold winters) and the continental climate of Eastern

Europe (hot summers and cold winters) (EEA 2012). The transitional nature is mirrored in the vegetation and more broadly in the biogeographical classification. Accordingly, the northern (Polish and Czech) areas belong in the main to the continental biogeographical region, while the southern (upland Slovak and lowland Hungarian) areas fall within the Alpine and Pannonian biogeographical regions (EEA 2017).

In consequence of the various mountain chains, the main rivers of the region flow towards three seas (the North, Baltic and Black seas). Rather than connecting the V4 countries, these waterways provide links with neighbouring regions and countries – with Germany (the Danube, the Labe/Elbe, the Odra/Oder), the Post-Soviet region (the Bug, the Vistula), and south-eastern Europe (the Danube, the Tisza).

### 3. Geopolitical situation

#### 3.1 Historical roots

Although the Visegrad Four constitute the core area of Central Europe (Figure 2), in a geopolitical sense they also form the middle part of so-called *Zwischeneuropa*, a German term, which literally means “intermediate Europe” (see Mikkeli 1998; Biedeleux–Jeffries 1998; and others). *Zwischeneuropa* was coined by Penck, A. (1915) and it describes the transitional (or intermediate) region between the Atlantic and continental parts of Europe. Originally a physical geographical term, it took on a geopolitical sense after World War I, denoting the transitional geopolitical buffer zone that stretched from Finland to Greece and was bordered in the west by the German power centre and in the east by the Russian

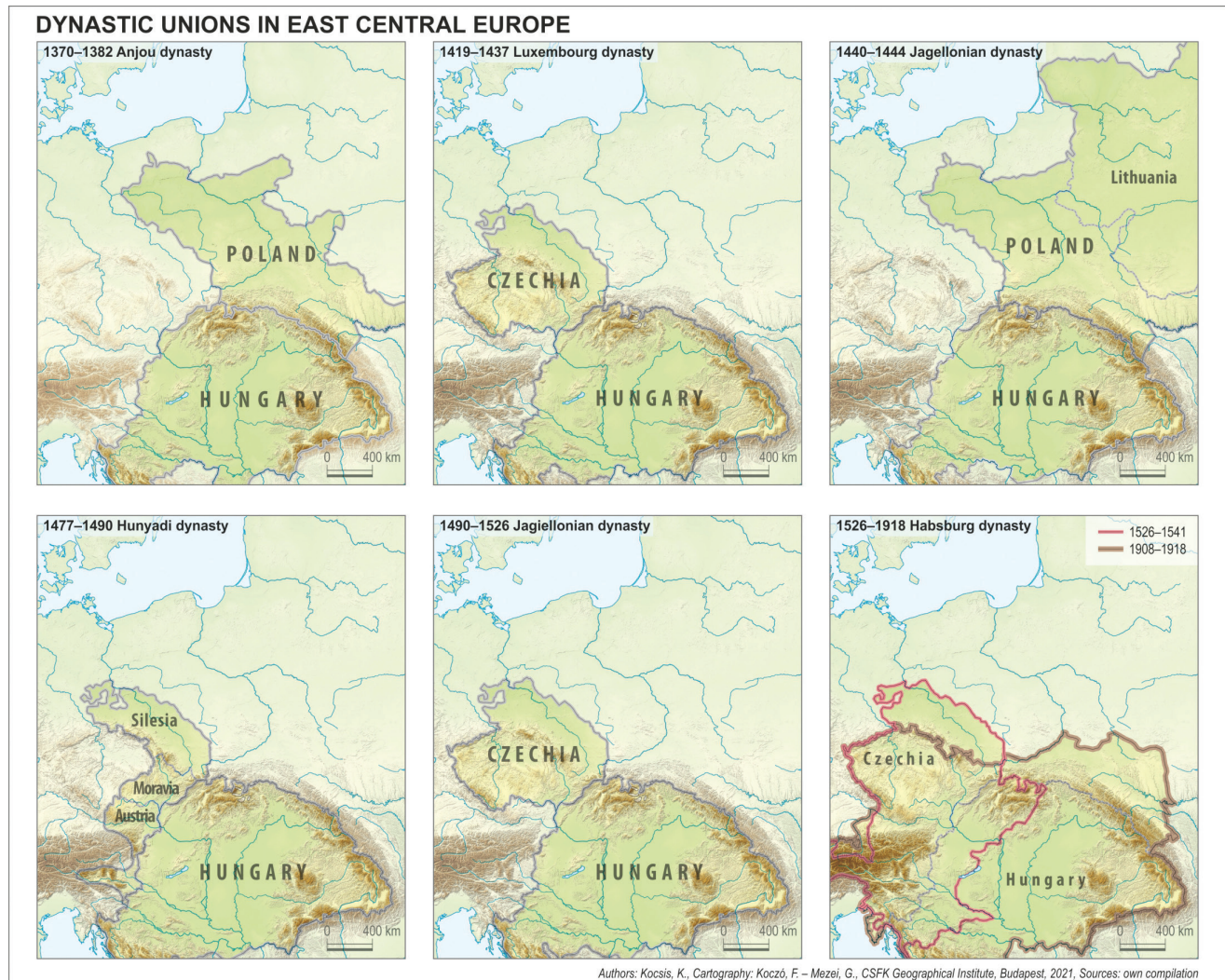


Figure 2 | Central Europe and the the V4 countries  
Source: own compilation partly based on Jordan, 2005

(and subsequently Soviet) one. In the last century, anti-imperialism and an emphasis on national sovereignty were viewed as the main attributes of this region of small nation-states which emerged in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman (Turkish), Habsburg (Austrian) and Romanov (Russian) empires in the early part of the 20th century (Nagy 2014). While this conclusion may have been correct at the time, in historical terms the small to medium-sized nations of the region and their dynastic (Anjou, Luxembourg, Hunyadi, Jagiellonian, Habsburg) alliances and federations have themselves constituted multi-ethnic “empires” in several historical periods: e.g. Bulgaria (7th–14th centuries), Great Moravia (9th–10th centuries), Hungary (10th–16th centuries), Czechia (13th century), Serbia (14th century), Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (16th–18th centuries).

In the V4, geographical features (the topography and the region’s transitional nature) have fundamentally influenced the spatial patterns of socio-economic, ethnic, religious and cultural development in the region and

through that its geopolitical situation and political geography. For instance, the principal mountain ranges (Carpathians, Sudetes, Ore Mountains, Bohemian Forest) have marked the national boundaries for centuries. Whereas the boundaries of pre-1918 Hungary and Czechia reflected/reflect the natural attributes of basins encircled by mountains, the political boundaries of Poland, a country lying in the Central European Lowland and the East European Plain, were far more unstable in a spatial sense. Paradoxically, the V4’s most robust historical boundaries, namely those running along the mountain ranges (above all the Carpathians and the Sudetes), serve also to divide the region, placing barriers between the various V4 countries and marking what are now sharp ethnic boundaries between Czechs, Slovaks and Poles (Rónai 1945; Sobczykński–Wosiak 2021). The rivers Danube and Ipoly/Ipel’ form a natural boundary between Hungary and Slovakia, but this border does not reflect the Hungarian-Slovak ethnic boundary (Kocsis–Tátrai 2015).



**Figure 3** | Dynastic unions in East Central Europe  
Source: own compilation

The early Czech (Bohemian), Hungarian and Polish states and principalities arose to the east of the Carolingian (Frankish) Empire and the East Frankish Kingdom (Germany) in the 9th and 10th centuries (Czechia 870, Hungary 895, Poland 960). These principalities became kingdoms in the 11th–14th centuries (Hungary since 1000, Czechia since 1198, Poland since 1320). It should be noted that the coronations of the first Polish and Czech (Bohemian) kings occurred somewhat earlier (Mieszko II was crowned in 1025 and Vratislaus II in 1085). In the period until 2021, the countries of the region have been principalities, kingdoms and republics as follows: Czechia 307, 741 and 97 years; Hungary 105, 945 and 76 years; Poland 352, 542 and 97 years; Slovakia 35 years of republic. The medieval Czech (Bohemian), Hungarian and Polish states gradually lost their relative independence as a result of the Habsburg, Ottoman/Turkish, Prussian/German and Russian advance in the 16th–18th centuries (Czechia 1526, Hungary 1541, Poland 1795). Independence was regained only after World War I (1918). The Slovak Republic appeared for the first time on Europe's political map between 1939 and 1945; it has once again been an independent state since the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993.

The coexistence of the V4 countries under a common ruler has deep historical roots. The coexistence of the Czechs and Hungarians lasted in total 466 years under the Přemysl (1305), Luxembourg (1419–1437), Hunyadi (1477–1490), Jagiellonian (1490–1526) and Habsburg (1453–1457, 1526–1918) dynasties (Figure 3). The coexistence of Hungarians and Poles lasted 26 years at the time of the Hungarian Anjou (1370–1382), Polish-Lithuanian Jagiellonian (1440–1444) and Hungarian Transylvanian Báthory (1576–1586) dynasties. The coexistence of Czechs and Poles in one state lasted for 16 years (1003–1019) during the reign of Bolesław I (the Brave), king of Poland. The common statehood of Czechs and Slovaks spanned the 69 years of the existence of the Czech-dominated Czechoslovakia (1918–1939, 1945–1992). The longest period of coexistence is that of the Hungarians and Slovaks, for the territory of today's Slovakia formed the northern part of Hungary from the 10th century until 1918, while the present Slovak ethnic group, language and nation emerged between the 15th and 19th centuries (Lukačka 2015). European history also includes a period of some 146 years between 1772 and 1918 when much of the V4 region (the Hungarian, Slovak, Czech and southern Polish territories) was united under a single dynasty (the Habsburgs).

The coexistence of the V4 nations was only slightly affected by divisive wars. Relations between Hungarians and Poles were the least affected by wars and dynastic conflicts (1014–1018, 1094, 1132, 1656–1657). The medieval wars between Czechs and Poles (10th–11th, 12th–14th centuries) and between Czechs and Hungar-

ians (11th–13th, 15th centuries) were far more intensive conflicts. The most recent armed strife between the four countries (the border conflicts over the new national boundaries) occurred in the first half of the 20th century: between Czechs and Poles over the Cieszyn/Těšín region in 1919 and in 1945, between Czechs and Hungarians in Slovakia and in North Hungary in 1918–1919, between Hungarians and Slovaks in East Slovakia in March 1939, and between Slovaks and Poles in South Poland in September 1939, when the newly formed Slovak Republic participated alongside Germany in the invasion of Poland, resulting in the outbreak of World War II.

### 3.2 Current geopolitical setting

#### Territory, borders

The V4 countries have a total area of 533,624 sq km, which is roughly equal to the area of France and corresponds to 5.2% of the area of Europe and 12.6% of the area of the European Union (Table 1). Among the four unitary nation-states, Poland is a medium-sized country, while Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia are small countries. Given the absence of direct access to the sea, the latter three countries are regarded as landlocked nations, with access to the sea along the rivers the Labe/Elbe (North Sea) and the Danube (Black Sea).

The length of the external (land and sea) borders of the V4 is 5217 km, 30.1% (or 1571 km) of which are border sections with non-EU and non-NATO states (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Serbia). The historical stability of the external borders (except for the thousand-year-old Czech-German border section) is extremely limited, as they have existed for no more than 76–100 years (since World War I or World War II). The region's internal boundaries (the Czech-Slovak, Polish-Slovak [formerly the northern border of the historical Kingdom of Hungary] and Czech-Polish borders) are more ancient state boundaries (dating back 500–1000 years). In the case of Czechia and Poland, the ethno-linguistic stability of the state boundaries since 1945 is the outcome of the flight, evacuation, repatriation and deportation of

Table 1 | Territory and borders of V4 countries

	Territory (sq km)	Continental border (length, km)	Sea border (length, km)	Territory compactness index
Czechia	78,870	2327		11.0
Hungary	93,023	2215		12.2
Poland	312,696	3511	440	11.8
Slovakia	49,035	1652		10.3
<b>V4</b>	<b>533,624</b>	<b>9705</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>14.0</b>

Source: own calculation based on statistical yearbooks of the given country (2020)

minorities (ethnic Germans and Ukrainians) living in the border regions. As a result of these events, between 1945 and 1950, the number of Germans decreased by 8 million in the present territory of Poland and by 2.9 million in the territory of Czechia (Eberhardt 1996). During the same period, many ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia fled or were deported from the country, but this did not result in the current Slovak–Hungarian border becoming a language boundary. Instead, the forced migrations have resulted in a mixed (Hungarian–Slovak) population in this border area of South Slovakia, which had been an almost homogeneously ethnic Hungarian area before 1945 (Kocsis 2000).

Each of the V4 countries is compact in area in relation to the European average. Based on the so-called territory compactness index (Okunev 2021), a measure of the relation between the area of a territory and the total length of its borders and coastline, the value was 14 for the V4 countries, whereas it was 10–12 for the EU member states on average. By way of comparison, the values for Norway, Croatia and Denmark, each of which has a highly indented coastline, range from 3.6 to 5, while France, which acquired its current ideal form in the 19th century, the value on the index is 17.6.

### Population

In 2020, the population of the V4 was 64.2 million. If counted as a single nation-state, the V4 would rank 23rd in the World on the list of countries by population, ahead of Italy and roughly equal to France. The V4's population amounts to 8.6% of Europe's population and 14.3% of the European Union's total population. With its 38.3 million inhabitants, Poland is both the largest and the most populous of the four countries (Table 2).

In the period 1950–1990, the average annual *population growth* of the V4 (9.4‰) was considerably higher than the European average (7.8‰). Since 1990, however, population growth has been negative, owing primarily to emigration. This trend has strengthened in the past decade, affecting Hungary and Poland in particular. In 2020, the population decrease in the V4 countries (0.8‰) was less than the rate of decrease in South-eastern, Southern and Eastern Europe, but lay far behind the immigration-fuelled population growth of Western, West Central, and Northern Europe. Similar conclusions can be drawn regarding the *natural population change* (the balance of live births and deaths). During the past decade, the annual average natural population increase in the V4, which had been relatively high in earlier periods, turned nega-

Table 2 | Population movement in the V4 and in the macroregions of Europe

	Number of total population (in thousands)				Average annual population growth rate (‰)				Average annual natural increase/decrease (‰)				Average annual net migration (‰)	
	1950	1990	2010	2020	1950– 1990	1990– 2010	2010– 2020	2020	1950– 1990	1990– 2010	2010– 2020	2020	2015– 2020	2020
<b>East Central Europe (V4)</b>	<b>46,555</b>	<b>64,155</b>	<b>64,496</b>	<b>64,194</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>–0.5</b>	<b>–0.8</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>–0.5</b>	<b>–1.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.2</b>
<i>Czechia</i>	8,930	10,363	10,517	10,701	4.0	0.7	1.7	0.2	4.3	–0.9	0.0	–0.5	1.7	0.7
<i>Hungary</i>	9,338	10,375	10,014	9,769	2.8	–1.7	–2.4	–0.3	3.7	–3.4	–3.3	–3.3	0.8	3.0
<i>Poland</i>	24,824	38,119	38,530	38,265	13.4	0.5	–0.7	–0.1	14.4	1.3	0.0	–0.8	–0.6	0.7
<i>Slovakia</i>	3,463	5,298	5,435	5,459	13.2	1.3	0.4	0.0	14.0	1.3	0.7	0.1	–0.2	–0.1
West Central Europe	83,058	95,466	99,125	103,562	3.7	1.9	4.5	2.9	2.2	–1.1	–1.5	–1.4	6.0	4.3
Northern Europe	24,321	31,180	32,140	33,179	7.1	1.5	3.2	2.5	5.7	0.8	1.1	0.8	2.2	1.7
Western Europe	114,516	142,906	159,303	167,746	6.2	5.7	5.3	3.8	5.2	3.1	2.8	1.8	2.5	2.0
Southern Europe	91,108	116,843	128,304	128,424	7.1	4.9	0.1	–1.3	8.2	0.6	–1.2	–2.6	1.3	1.3
South-eastern Europe	39,643	56,985	50,565	47,899	10.9	–5.6	–5.3	–5.3	12.3	–0.2	–2.6	–3.6	–2.6	–1.7
Eastern Europe	150,182	213,511	202,778	203,152	10.5	–2.5	0.2	–1.3	10.5	–4.5	–1.3	–1.9	1.5	0.6
<b>EUROPE</b>	<b>549,329</b>	<b>720,858</b>	<b>736,413</b>	<b>747,636</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>–0.7</b>	<b>–0.3</b>	<b>–1.0</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.1</b>

Source: own calculations based on: <https://population.un.org/wpp>

Remarks: West Central Europe: D, CH, FL, A, SLO. Northern Europe: IS, N, DK, S, FIN, EST, LV, LT. Western Europe: GB, IRL, B, L, NL, F. Southern Europe: GR, I, M, P, E. South-eastern Europe: HR, BIH, MNE, SRB, RKS, AL, MK, BG, RO. Eastern Europe: BY, RUS, UA, MD

tive in line with the European average (V4  $-0.5\%$ , Europe  $-0.3\%$ ). In this respect too, however, the V4 countries exhibit differences. In 2020 the natural population decrease was  $-3.3\%$  in Hungary,  $-0.8\%$  in Poland, and  $-0.5\%$  in Czechia, whereas Slovakia continued to register a natural population increase ( $0.1\%$ ). Between 2015 and 2020, the average annual *net migration* (the balance of immigration and emigration) was 0.0 for the V4 region, with the migration gains of Czechia and Hungary being offset by the migration losses of Poland and Slovakia according to the official statistics.

In terms of the *aging index*, a measure of the population age composition refers to the number of elders per 100 persons younger than 15 years old, the V4 average (125) is slightly less favourable than the European average (119), especially in relation to Southern and West Central Europe (Table 3). In the V4 region, Slovakia's population is the least (107.4), while Hungary's population is the most rapidly aging (139.9). The share of the working-age population (aged 15–64) is 65.8% in the V4 region, which slightly exceeds the European average (64.8%) and is significantly higher than the rate in Western and Northern Europe, where the age structure is much younger due mainly to immigration of working age populations. The V4 region's *unemployment rate* in 2020 (3.5%) was the lowest registered in the various European macroregions, far below the high unemployment rates registered in Eastern, South-eastern and Southern Europe (6–12%). The V4 countries also exhibit the highest level of *educational attainment* among the various European regions. In 2020, the ratio of the population

aged 15–64 with upper, post-secondary and tertiary educational attainment was 86.1% in the V4. This far exceeded both the European average (75.9%) and the average for West Central and Northern Europe (80.5%). In terms of the stability of the ethno-cultural composition of the population, the V4 region is distinct among the various European regions. In the V4 region, the *foreign-born population share* was 3.4% in 2020, which is considerably lower than the European average (11.6%) and far lower than in the main destinations of international migration: Northern, Western and West Central Europe (13.9–19.6%). Within the V4 region, the foreign-born population share is higher than average in Czechia (5.1%, as a result of the immigration of Ukrainians, Vietnamese, Russians, etc.) and in Hungary (6.1%). In the case of Hungary, the relatively high percentage reflects the immigration of ethnic Hungarians from the neighbouring countries (mostly from Romania, Ukraine and Serbia). The *ethnic homogeneity* of the population is the highest in Poland (98.2% of the population are ethnic Poles, 2011), in Hungary (96.3% Hungarians, 2016) and in Czechia (95.6% Czechs, 2011). In Slovakia, the ratio of Slovaks is only 80.7% (2011), due to the significant Hungarian and Roma minority populations in the south and east of the country.

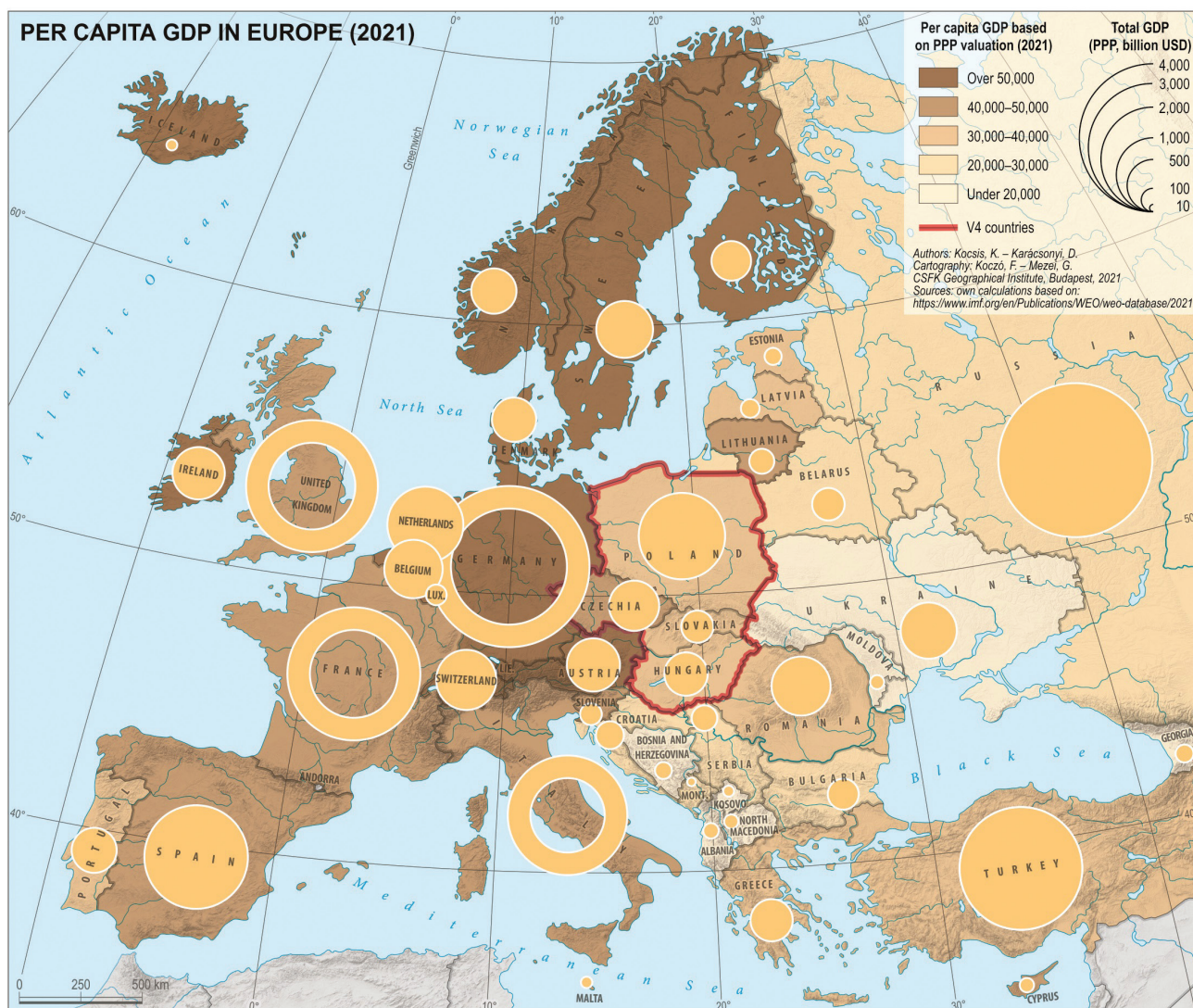
#### Economy

The V4 countries make up 14.3% of the population of the EU, but in 2021 they accounted for just 11.3% of its Gross Domestic Product (herein GDP, based on purchasing power parity, PPP). Thus, in terms of economic

Table 3 | Selected indicators of the population structure in the V4 and in the macroregions of Europe (2020)

	Population under age 15 (%)	Population aged 15–49 (%)	Population aged 15–64 (%)	Population aged 65 or over (%)	Aging index	Unemployment rate (%)	Educational attainment of the population aged 15–64: upper, post-secondary and tertiary education (%)	Foreign-born population (%)
<b>East Central Europe (V4)</b>	<b>15.2</b>	<b>46.6</b>	<b>65.8</b>	<b>19.0</b>	<b>125.0</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>86.1</b>	<b>3.4</b>
<i>Czechia</i>	15.8	45.5	64.1	20.1	127.8	2.6	87.7	5.1
<i>Hungary</i>	14.4	46.4	65.4	20.2	139.9	4.3	80.3	6.1
<i>Poland</i>	15.2	46.8	66.0	18.7	123.1	3.2	87.1	2.2
<i>Slovakia</i>	15.6	48.1	67.7	16.7	107.4	6.7	86.5	3.6
West Central Europe	14.1	41.9	64.7	21.2	150.6	4.1	80.5	19.6
Northern Europe	16.8	43.6	63.0	20.2	120.6	7.0	80.0	13.9
Western Europe	17.5	43.5	63.0	19.5	111.5	5.7	78.9	14.0
Southern Europe	13.6	42.7	64.5	22.0	161.9	12.0	62.0	12.2
South-eastern Europe	15.4	45.4	65.5	19.1	124.0	8.1	76.7	5.3
Eastern Europe	17.8	46.5	66.5	15.8	88.8	6.3	..	8.8
<b>EUROPE</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>44.3</b>	<b>64.8</b>	<b>19.1</b>	<b>119.0</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>75.9</b>	<b>11.6</b>

Source: own calculations based on: <https://population.un.org/wpp>



**Figure 4** | Per capita GDP in Europe (2021)  
 Source: own calculations based on: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO>

development, the V4 region as a whole and the individual countries are below the EU average (The World Bank 2021). In terms of GDP per capita based on PPP, the region’s most developed country, Czechia, has ranked higher than Portugal since 2007, higher than Greece since 2010, and higher than Spain since 2018 (Figure 4). In contrast, in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, the GDP per capita is roughly equal to or lower than that of Spain or Portugal.

It should be noted that within the V4 region the Polish economy has particular importance, representing 57.8% of the region’s total GDP in 2021 (Table 4). Moreover, its relative significance has grown steadily since the early 1990s, when it accounted for 50% of the region’s total GDP. Thus, in terms of the role and significance of the V4 in the global economy, Poland accounts for considerably more than half of the total, with the remaining 40% or so being divided among the three

other countries. In an international comparison, the size of the V4’s economy has grown continuously since the early 1990s, roughly in line with that of Turkey, whose economic development since the 1990s has been matched by the V4 countries. In terms of the size of the economy, the V4 region has roughly half of the size of the German or Russian economies, twice as much as the Dutch, five times that of Austrian, and four times that of Ukrainian economy.

Whereas the early 1990s – except in Poland, which had suffered an acute crisis since the beginning of the 1980s (Sachs–Lipton 1990) – were marked by a recession linked with the post-socialist transformation, the region began to experience rapid economic growth from 1994–1995 (Kornai 2006). The frontrunners in terms of economic growth were Poland and Slovakia, whereas the crises, related to the post-socialist transformation and to the 2008 global financial crisis were par-

**Table 4** | Selected indicators of economy and military power in the V4 and in the macroregions of Europe (2021)

	Total GDP (PPP) current billion US\$	Per capita GDP (PPP) current US\$	Total active military manpower	Total active military manpower per 1,000 persons	Total aircraft fleet	Total navy fleet	Total combat tank fleet	Defence expenditure (million USD)	Share of defence expenditure in the GDP (%)
<b>East Central Europe (V4)</b>	<b>2,357.7</b>	<b>36,727.7</b>	<b>186,000</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>662</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>1,045</b>	<b>22,332</b>	<b>1.8</b>
<i>Czechia</i>	460.9	42,956.0	25,000	2.3	90	0	116	4,013	1.4
<i>Hungary</i>	342.7	35,088.0	25,000	2.6	53	0	46	2,907	1.6
<i>Poland</i>	1,363.8	35,957.0	120,000	3.1	469	87	863	13,369	2.1
<i>Slovakia</i>	190.3	34,815.0	16,000	2.9	50	0	20	2,043	1.7
West Central Europe	6,008.4	58,017.4	236,000	2.3	1,018	82	478	74,848	1.4
Northern Europe	1,862.5	56,135.6	121,800	3.7	687	477	477	27,271	1.5
Western Europe	8,664.6	51,653.1	539,500	3.2	2,099	356	533	153,992	1.9
Southern Europe	5,288.9	41,183.2	530,500	4.1	2,115	483	1,908	56,708	1.4
South-eastern Europe	1,240.6	25,900.4	181,000	3.8	468	180	1,612	10,806	2.0
Eastern Europe	5,132.7	25,265.4	1,319,700	6.5	4,639	628	16,031	68,526	4.1
<b>EUROPE</b>	<b>26,264.6</b>	<b>39,210.0</b>	<b>3,114,500</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>11,688</b>	<b>2293</b>	<b>22,084</b>	<b>414,483</b>	<b>1.8</b>

Source: own calculations based on: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2021/April/weo-report> and <https://www.globalfirepower.com>

ticularly acute in Hungary. Moreover, economic growth was often inhibited in Hungary by the significant foreign indebtedness and the related sharp austerity measures to restore government budgetary balance, particularly in 1995 and in 2006–2009, which both in the short and long term worsened the country's economic competitiveness in relation to the other V4 countries (Győrffy 2007, 2020). For this reason, Hungary, which had been the region's economic frontrunner (in 1991 Hungary's GDP per capita was the highest in the region, and it received the most foreign direct investment until 1998) (Hare et al. 1992), became its worst performer by the beginning of the 2010s. In contrast, the three other countries could more or less maintain their positions relative to each other.

The rapid economic growth experienced by the V4 since the mid-1990s and particularly during the 2000s has been based on the re-industrialisation of the region (Kiss 2007, 2011), which in turn is the outcome of significant foreign capital investments attracted into the region by the opening up of free trade and the cheap and skilled local labour force with its weak or absent trade unions compared to Western Europe. The free trade association signed with the EU's predecessor, the European Economic Community in 1991 and the attainment of full EU membership in 2004 enabled the V4 countries to become integrated into the production and supply chains particularly of the German industry (Popławski 2016). The competitiveness of German firms on the world market was enhanced both by the Euro-zone (with its 'cheap' currency in relation to the old German mark) and by the low-cost labour force of the V4 countries. By the 2010s, the V4 had become Germany's eco-

nomic hinterland and a major sphere of influence for German corporations.

By the late 2010s, the V4 accounted for 14% of the EU's manufacturing, which is equivalent to 60% of the size of Germany's GDP value added by manufacturing (The World Bank 2021). Still, manufacturing is extremely concentrated in the V4. As much as 80% of manufacturing value is accounted for by Poland and Czechia, where the region's traditional industrial areas are situated, including Upper Silesia (Katowice), Czech Silesia (Ostrava) and the industrial regions around Prague, Plzeň and Northwest Czechia. The remaining 20% of V4's total manufacturing value added is divided between Hungary and Slovakia, with the per capita value added to the GDP by manufacturing being the lowest in Hungary. Further, uniquely among the V4 countries, the share of manufacturing in the GDP is less than one-third in Hungary (The World Bank 2021). Within industry, the automotive industries are particularly significant, especially in Czechia and Slovakia: the V4 countries account for 4% of global vehicle production, with 3.7 million vehicles being manufactured annually, the equivalent of 80% of vehicle production in Germany (OICA 2019).

The share of the services sector in the economy is the highest in Hungary, where the region's most populous city – Budapest – is situated. Rural areas are particularly significant in Hungary and Poland in view of the favourable natural attributes, the lowland location and the social conditions, but only in Hungary is this reflected in the GDP figures. Despite the unfavourable natural conditions, Slovakia exhibits – like Hungary – a high share of GDP from agriculture (The World Bank 2021).

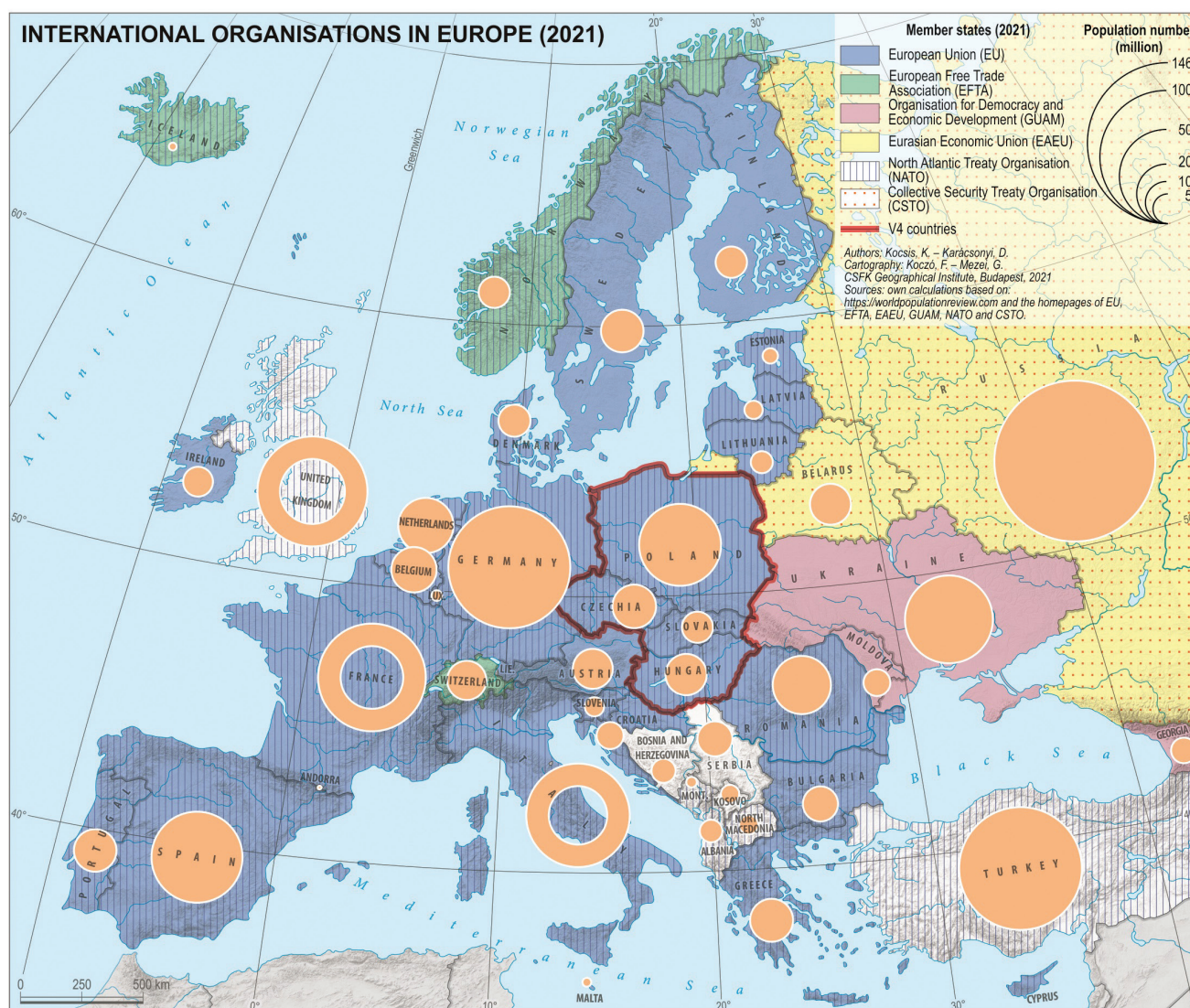
**Communication**

Within the V4 region, the main transport corridors tend to run from east to west rather than from north to south (Figure 1). This reflects former and current economic links. In the past, priority was given to the development of transport infrastructure linking the region with the Soviet Union or, in Czechoslovakia, linking the eastern areas of the long and narrow country with Prague in the west. More recently, east–west transport links with Germany and Western Europe have been prioritised. A secondary factor is the natural environment: the mountain ranges that divide the V4 countries (Carpathians and Sudetes) significantly increase the cost of any north–south transport infrastructure investments. Moreover, the long-term economic returns on such investments are questionable, in view of the weakness of north–south economic links.

Road and rail infrastructure in Czechia and Hungary forms a radial network, reflecting the dominant role of their capital cities in the middle of the basins where the

two countries are located. In both countries, motorway connections to the west have been prioritised in recent times. In Slovakia, the Bratislava–Košice corridor has determined the motorway development, thus reinforcing the east–west links. Poland alone has major north–south corridors linking Gdańsk in the North with Katowice and Kraków in the South. Even so, their development has lagged behind that of the east–west transport axes that link Germany with the post-Soviet region, above all with Moscow (via Belarus) and with Ukraine. The highway network of Poland is a consequence of the spatially dispersed urban centres where the role of Warsaw is less significant compared to Prague and Budapest in their respective countries.

The V4 countries have access to the sea only by way of Poland, but the main Polish ports, including Gdańsk, Gdynia and Szczecin, are geographically closer only to areas within Poland, to Prague, to Czech Silesia and to the northernmost parts of Slovakia than Trieste or Rije-



**Figure 5** | International organisations in Europe (2021)  
 Source: own calculations based on: <https://worldpopulationreview.com> and hompages of EU, EFTA, EAEU, GUAM, NATO and CSTO

ka. Furthermore, Trieste and Rijeka, both of which lie outside the V4, but are historically connected to all V4s but Poland as main ports of Austria-Hungary, offer a shorter route to the Suez Canal and thus to the economic hubs in East Asia. This represents a competitive advantage over the ports in Poland. Moreover, the Polish ports lie on the Baltic Sea, where a long detour is required to reach the route to East Asia.

Compared with the Baltic Sea ports, which in essence are of sole importance to Poland, river transport is far more significant for the internal cohesion of the V4 countries. Although the Danube, the Labe/Elbe and the Odra/Oder provide east-west links towards the Dutch, Belgian and German ports on the North Sea, the idea of connecting the waterways of the Morava-Danube and the Odra/Oder in Czech-Silesia has been raised from time to time. While this idea has still to be developed (and the opening of the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal, which has benefited Germany, has removed the motivation in many respects), this alternative route would not only increase the role of river transport as a cheaper alternative; it could also become the largest common infrastructure project connecting the V4 countries.

#### *Military relations and military power*

The V4 countries first became grouped in one single *military alliance* in the period 1955–1991 as members of the *Warsaw Pact* (Warsaw Treaty Organisation, WTO), which was founded by the Soviet Union. After the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its military and economic blocs, the

V4 countries sought, in line with their security interests, membership of the world's most powerful military alliance, *NATO* (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). This was accomplished by Czechia, Hungary and Poland on 12 March 1999 and by Slovakia on 29 March 2004. At present, the V4 countries are neighboured (except for neutral Austria and Serbia which is not seeking NATO membership) by NATO countries both to the west and to the south. To the east, however, lie the post-Soviet states, among which Russia and Belarus are members of the Moscow-led Eurasian military alliance, the *CSTO* (Collective Security Treaty Organization) (*Figure 5*).

The relative *military power* of the V4 matches the average of European countries. The V4's total population represents 6% of the total population of the NATO countries, while the total *active military manpower* is 6.3% of NATO's as a whole. The number of total active military personnel per 1,000 people is 2.9 in the V4, 3.7 in NATO, 4.2 in the USA and 6.9 in Russia (*Table 4*). The Poles account for 64.5% of the V4 armed forces, owing to their population size and to the increased risk posed by the proximity of the CSTO. The share of *defence expenditure* in the GDP of the V4 countries in 2021 is 1.8%, which matches the European average but is less than the averages for NATO (2.65%), the United States (3.5%) and the neighbouring Russia (4.3%) and Ukraine (4.1%) (*NATO 2021; GFP 2021*). The 2021 average for the V4 countries conceals substantial differences. Indeed, reflecting their geographical locations and security risks, Poland spends the most on defence (2.1%) and Czechia the least (1.4%). The V4 countries

**Table 5** | Foreign trade of V4 countries with various macroregions of the World (2020)

	Import (distribution in %)					Export (distribution in %)				
	V4	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia	V4	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
<b>East Central Europe (V4)</b>	<b>15.0</b>	<b>16.8</b>	<b>15.3</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>32.7</b>	<b>15.0</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>13.6</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>24.8</b>
West Central Europe	31.6	32.9	32.3	30.8	29.9	34.4	39.0	34.6	32.3	30.5
<i>of which Germany</i>	26.0	28.0	24.5	27.5	19.6	29.0	32.7	28.0	28.9	22.7
Northern Europe	3.5	2.3	1.9	5.7	1.7	6.0	4.4	3.3	9.1	3.4
Western Europe	14.9	15.3	13.3	16.8	10.4	16.4	15.7	13.9	18.5	15.5
Southern Europe	6.8	6.0	6.1	8.0	5.6	7.7	7.0	8.9	7.9	7.3
South-eastern Europe	2.7	2.3	5.6	1.5	3.0	4.8	3.0	10.8	3.5	4.6
Eastern Europe	4.2	1.9	3.7	6.1	3.9	0.7	0.4	2.1	0.4	0.6
<b>EUROPE</b>	<b>78.6</b>	<b>77.5</b>	<b>78.1</b>	<b>76.8</b>	<b>87.2</b>	<b>85.0</b>	<b>86.7</b>	<b>87.2</b>	<b>82.5</b>	<b>86.5</b>
<b>EU-27</b>	<b>71.2</b>	<b>72.9</b>	<b>70.9</b>	<b>67.3</b>	<b>80.4</b>	<b>77.0</b>	<b>79.7</b>	<b>78.3</b>	<b>73.8</b>	<b>79.0</b>
USA	1.7	2.1	1.7	1.8	0.6	2.8	2.3	2.7	2.8	3.7
China	9.4	11.3	8.8	10.3	3.7	1.5	1.3	1.4	1.3	2.7
Japan	0.8	0.9	1.1	0.8	0.1	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.2
Other extra-European countries	9.4	8.2	10.3	10.2	8.3	10.4	9.2	8.3	13.2	6.9
<b>WORLD</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: own calculations based on: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/newxtweb/> and <https://comtrade.un.org/data/>

account for 3.2% of NATO's *total aircraft fleet*, 4.3% of the *total navy fleet*, and 7.4% of the *total combat tank fleet*. The share of Poland in the V4 military equipment categories mentioned above is: 70.8%, 100% and 59.9%. According to the Military Strength Ranking for 2021, Poland is the leading V4 country, ranked 23rd on the global list. It is followed by Czechia (34th), Hungary (55th) and Slovakia (58th). The neighbours of the V4 are ranked as follows (based on the same military strength ranking, GFP 2011): Russia (2nd), Germany (15th), Ukraine (25th), Romania (41st), Belarus (50th), Austria (59th), Serbia (60th), Croatia (62nd).

### Foreign economic relations

From 1949 until 1991 the V4 countries were members of the *Comecon* (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), a Moscow-based economic organisation founded and led by the Soviet Union. Prior to the dissolution of this organisation and the Soviet Union in 1991, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland established, on 15 February 1991, the *Visegrad Group* with a view to promoting their economic cooperation and Euro-Atlantic integration. After lengthy negotiations, the V4 countries joined Europe's largest economic and political union, the *European Union* (EU), on 1 May 2004. As a result of the growth of political and economic ties with other members of the EU, in 2020, 71.2% of the V4 countries' imports came from the EU and 77% of their exports went to the EU (Table 5). By this measure, EU ties are more significant for the V4 than for Germany (63.2%, 52.6%) or France (66.1%, 53.6%), the two main pillars of the EU (Eurostat 2021). In 2020, the main partner regions for the V4 in terms of imports were: West Central Europe (31.6%), V4 countries (15%), Western Europe (14.9%) and China (9.4%). The main target areas for V4 exports were: West Central Europe (34.4%), Western Europe (16.4%) and the V4 countries (15%). At the level of individual countries, the main import partners were Germany (26%), China (9.4%) and the Netherlands (5.6%), while the main export partners were Germany (29%), France (5.3%) and the United Kingdom (4.6%). The data reveal that in their international economic relations the V4 countries have turned from east to west as the outcome of changes arising from the new political, economic and military alliance system. Germany has clearly replaced the Soviet Union as the main economic partner. In 2020, the combined share of the eastern, post-Soviet neighbours (Russia, Belarus and Ukraine) in the international trade of the V4 countries fell to an extremely low level (4.1% of imports, 4.3% of exports).

## 4. Conclusions

In the course of their historical development, the V4 countries have been in an alliance on several occasions and have been subject for longer or shorter periods to

the rule of a "common" state – usually an empire based outside the present V4 countries. Even so, the historical stability of the internal borders, which contrasts with the historical novelty of the region's external borders, suggests that the establishment of the V4 was primarily rooted in the geographical proximity rather than in similar cultural, ethnic, social and political conditions. The shared destiny of the V4 region derives less from history than from the geographical proximity – and from the fact that the external great powers have treated as a single unit what is in fact a heterogeneous area, namely the "*Zwischeneuropa*". Despite the close proximity but as a reflection of the stable borders, the internal cohesive forces that might forge an organic regional geographical unit, a distinguished region, are absent.

Internal cohesion was inevitably not been helped by the physical geographical "theatre": the national boundaries run along Central Europe's major mountain ranges, which means that the rivers flow in a centripetal pattern. Rather than connecting the region, the waterways flow out of it. Furthermore, the individual countries often have stronger ties with neighbouring regions than with each other. For instance, Poland gives geopolitical importance to its eastern neighbourhood – the "eastern borderlands" (or the *Kresy*), while Hungary focuses its attention on the Carpathian Basin, due in large part to the Hungarian communities living outside its borders. Internal cohesion is strong particularly between Poland and Hungary and between Czechia and Slovakia, but such relationships exist irrespective of the V4. A lack of internal cohesion is best exemplified by the case of Slovakia and Hungary, where until recently the centuries of a common state hindered rather than promoted relations between the two countries. Historically, unity among the V4 countries has tended to be forged either from above by an external power (dependence on the German economy or dependence on the Soviet Union) or by a common challenge or interest (e.g. Soviet rule, EU accession and membership, EU's refugee crisis). Unity has often been no more than temporary, as the weakening of the Visegrad cooperation in the mid-1990s showed.

A major element of internal regional cohesion is an awareness of regional identity, as the region, as a social construct is manifested by the people's consciousness living in an area or place (*Amin-Thrift 1992; Pudup 1988; Murphy 1991; Paasi 1991, 2002*). According to a survey by the Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava (*Gyárfašová-Mesežnikov 2016*), in the largest and most important V4 country, as few as 17% of Poles have even heard about the Visegrad Group. This proportion reaches 50% only in Slovakia, where, however, trust in Hungarians (30%) is much lower than acceptance of Czechs (78%) or Poles (40%). Further, according to the survey, among the V4 nations, the Hungarians are the only ones who have the most confidence, not in one of the other V4 nations, but in the Germans.

The main question is whether these countries will succeed in overcoming their internal differences and con-

trasting interests to move beyond the current political cooperation. Can they develop a strategic partnership like those already existing between Hungary and Poland and between Czechia and Slovakia? This will be possible only in the long term, but the changing geopolitical constellations may also represent a major challenge for the future of the alliance, as signalled by the divergence in the V4 countries' relations with Russia during the past decade (Rácz 2014).

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