

THE VISEGRAD GROUP AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE: FROM VETO BLOC TO VOID

Yassine Guennoun
Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University
Fez, Morocco
yassine.guennoun@usmba.ac.ma
<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8777-9781>

Abstract *This article asks why Russia's 2022 invasion fractured the Visegrád Group and answers by showing that the cohesion once visible during the 2015 migration crisis rested on a model of negative integration that could resist supranational pressure yet could not be translated into the demands of war. When faced with a proximate conflict that required convergent threat perception, collective risk-sharing and credible military capacity, the four states moved along divergent paths: Poland recast sovereignty as survival and bound itself more deeply to NATO and United States' guarantees, Hungary treated sovereignty as autonomy and used veto power while maintaining energy ties with Moscow, Slovakia balanced cooperation and restraint within a polarised domestic arena, and Czechia consolidated an Atlanticist line alongside Poland. These trajectories produced a structural split that removed the V4 from the centre of Europe's security debates and revealed a deeper mechanism: coalitions forged in opposition can endure in institutional disputes but falter once coercive shocks demand common strategy. What remains of the Visegrád format is protocol and symbol only, while effective agency has shifted to NATO, to coalitions of the willing within the EU, and to minilateral formats that reflect the real distribution of threat, capacity and political will across the continent.*

Keywords Visegrád Group; Ukraine war; Sovereignty; NATO; European Union; Strategic autonomy; Central and Eastern Europe.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Visegrád Group was created in 1991 as a platform for coordination among Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. In the EU era it evolved into a recognisable regional actor, most visible when the four governments converged against common pressures from Brussels (Dangerfield, 2008, 2012). The 2015 migration crisis crystallised this posture. V4 leaders framed quota schemes as an intrusion on sovereign decision and issued joint statements that linked security to border control and national discretion (Visegrad Group, 2015). This pattern produced a durable image: a bloc capable of acting together when the issue was sovereignty vis-à-vis the EU. The V4's pre-2022 unity is best understood through the lens of negative integration (Scharpf, 1999), a mode of coordination that resists transfers of competence to the centre and concentrates on blocking or diluting EU mandates rather than on constructing joint institutions or capabilities.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exposed a different structure. The war placed the four states inside a security environment defined by proximity to Russia's offensive power and dependence on external guarantors. In terms of regional security-complex theory, this was a textbook case of small states embedded in a contested neighbourhood where survival depends on alliance configuration (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Lake, 2009). Yet under this pressure, the V4 did not convert its earlier migration-era unity into a coherent security line. Instead, pre-existing differences hardened into incompatible strategies. Comparative analysis confirms the arc: the migration crisis activated cohesion, but the pandemic and the Ukraine war exposed fragmentation (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2025). Contemporary policy commentary reaches the same conclusion: V4 cooperation on high politics has effectively withered (Beck, 2024).

This article addresses a precise question: Why did Russia's invasion of Ukraine fracture the Visegrád Four? The answer lies in how each member redefined sovereignty and security under wartime pressure. Poland treated sovereignty as survival against Russia and built a forward defence posture anchored in

NATO and the United States. Hungary treated sovereignty as insulation from alliance pressure and doubled down on a defiant balancing line towards Brussels and Moscow. Slovakia alternated around domestic polarisation, signalling support for Ukraine in some domains while restraining it in others. Czechia aligned clearly with EU and NATO policy and moved institutionally and discursively closer to Poland. These divergent logics left the bloc without a common strategic language, producing a split that renders the V4 ineffective on Europe's central security question.

The paper contributes three things. First, it reframes V4 cooperation as a case of negative integration that translated poorly to war. Unity formed around resisting EU mandates did not translate into shared strategy once coercive external threat set the agenda. This clarifies why a once-cohesive group failed to act as a regional security pole in 2022–2025 (Beck, 2024; Kaniok & Hloušek, 2025; Visegrad Group, 2015). Second, it links regional security-complex dynamics to hierarchy: Poland's ascent as a frontline state deepened reliance on United States power and NATO command structures, while Hungary asserted autonomy against those same structures, creating a structural cleavage inside the bloc (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Lake, 2009). Third, it traces the institutional consequence at EU level. As unanimity faltered on sanctions, financing, and accession questions, EU practice shifted towards flexible “coalitions of the willing,” a move with direct implications for debates on strategic autonomy and alliance cohesion (Rankin, 2025; Roos, 2020).

Methodologically, the analysis integrates primary statements and communiqués, national security strategies and official speeches, and secondary assessments from peer-reviewed scholarship and leading policy institutes. The periodisation runs from the 2015 migration crisis through mid-2025, relying on primary statements, national strategies, communiqués, and secondary assessments published and available at the time of writing. Section II reconstructs pre-war V4 unity on sovereignty and migration, drawing on official statements such as the September 2015 joint statement (Visegrad Group, 2015) and scholarship that tracked how the bloc acted as a collective veto against EU relocation schemes (Ivanova, 2016; Nagy, 2016). Earlier analyses of the V4's institutional role within the EU provide useful background on the group's integration trajectory (Dangerfield, 2008, 2012), but the empirical focus here is on the decade of crises that ultimately fractured the bloc. Section III examines Poland's shift to a NATO-anchored security pivot. Section IV analyses Hungary's sovereignty-through-defiance line and its effects on EU decision-making. Section V contrasts Slovakia's two-track adaptation with Czechia's consolidation of Atlantic alignment. Section VI draws out the implications for EU security governance and the autonomy debate. The conclusion returns to the argument: The V4's coherence was contingent on opposition to Brussels; the war forced real security choices and dissolved that contingency.

2. THE V4 BEFORE 2022: SECURITY THROUGH UNITY

The Visegrád Four entered the EU as a coordination platform with flexible aims, but its most cohesive phase came during the 2015 migration crisis. In that moment the four governments converted a diffuse cooperation forum into a disciplined bloc that tied security to sovereign control of borders and policy discretion. The September 2015 joint statement rejected any mandatory and permanent redistribution scheme and cast solidarity as voluntary, within national competence (Visegrad Group, 2015). This was more than just posturing as Budapest securitised asylum through law and policing, constructing physical barriers, criminalising unlawful entry, and restricting access to procedure in ways that courts and monitors later scrutinised (Nagy, 2016). Warsaw, Prague and Bratislava refrained from replicating Hungary's legal architecture; instead, they adopted the same political grammar, framing sovereignty, order, and territorial control as the core of national security and treating Brussels' relocation design as the foil.

The legal confrontation fixed this alignment into a recognisable pattern. When Slovakia and Hungary challenged the Council's emergency relocation decision, the Court of Justice dismissed the actions in September 2017, upholding the scheme's legality (Court of Justice of the European Union [CJEU], 2017). Compliance did not follow. In April 2020, the Court found Poland, Hungary, and Czechia in breach of their obligations under the relocation decisions (CJEU, 2020). The rulings clarified law. The politics clarified the bloc. Across 2015-2020, the V4 treated EU intrusiveness as the principal security problem and presented

their resistance as a defence of constitutional self-government. This fused discursively with themes of cultural protection and risk containment, producing a negative-integration coalition that acted together precisely when it refused to share competence with the centre.

Three features of this phase set the baseline for the war period. First, the V4 defined its common enemy as institutional pressure from the EU's legal and administrative machinery rather than an external military adversary. Security was internalised as the preservation of decision authorship, with migration as the arena where that authorship was most visibly contested (Nagy, 2016; Visegrad Group, 2015). Second, the choice of instruments. The tools of unity were domestic: legislative change, policing, constitutional arguments, and coordinated announcements. Even where the Court validated the Council's authority, the four governments showed that prolonged contestation could blunt implementation, creating space for national manoeuvre despite adverse jurisprudence (CJEU, 2017, 2020; Gkliati, 2022). Third, rhetorical convergence. Leaders across the four capitals narrated their stance in the same style: defence of sovereignty, protection of citizens, and rejection of imposed burdens. This produced what external observers read as a coherent bloc shaped by migration and rule-of-law conflict rather than by joint military planning (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2025; Ivanova, 2016).

The V4's coherence was real but conditional, built on an alignment of negative aims. It could speak with one voice when blocking quota designs or diluting enforcement without needing to harmonise broader threat assessments beyond the shared conviction that Brussels was overreaching. That single claim sustained summits, joint texts, and tactical coordination, and it was enough to anchor the bloc's reputation: by the end of the 2010s the V4 had come to represent, in EU debates, a Central European veto cluster on migration and sovereignty. Its unity was therefore a function of institutional conflict structures rather than a shared external security doctrine.

This matters for two reasons. First, the V4's pre-war record does not constitute an emergent security alliance, since its instruments and targets were inward-facing and its operational expertise was legal and administrative rather than military. Second, it shows why the bloc would later fail the stress test of regional war. When Russia attacked Ukraine, the problem set shifted from competence defence to deterrence, logistics, energy exposure and alliance posture, and the tools and narratives that bound the V4 in 2015–2020 could not carry over because they had never been designed for that purpose. Later sections trace how Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia each reinterpreted sovereignty under war pressure, but the pre-2022 terrain explains their starting positions: unity rested on resisting Brussels, and no joint doctrine existed for handling Moscow.

This section therefore establishes a baseline: the V4 was cohesive when it could translate a domestic legal-political agenda into a collective stand inside EU institutions, acting as a security community only in the thin sense of guarding national control against supranational allocation. The Court's 2017 and 2020 decisions mark the boundary between law and politics, the 2015 joint statement captures the bloc's self-understanding, and scholarship records both the effectiveness and the limits of this mode of cooperation. What appeared to be a durable regional alliance was in fact a contingent coalition organised around a single set of institutional conflicts, a contingency the war would later expose.

3. POLAND: FROM REGIONAL ALLY TO NATO'S SECURITY PIVOT

Poland entered the war period with a strategic doctrine already oriented towards the Atlantic alliance. The 2020 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland codified Russia as the primary threat, the United States as the pivotal security partner, and NATO as the framework through which Poland would build regional leadership on the eastern flank (Government of Poland, 2020). It also stressed coalitional formats that amplify Central and Eastern European voice, including the Bucharest Nine and the Three Seas Initiative, as instruments that complement the alliance rather than replace it (Janulewicz, 2020). Thus, this pre-war alignment mattered because, once Russia expanded the war, Warsaw did not seek a V4 position but instead accelerated its existing trajectory that placed NATO at the centre of Polish sovereignty and deterrence.

The Russian invasion recast sovereignty in Warsaw as survival against a proximate adversary, and the policy response was immediate and structural. Poland expanded its force posture, accelerated modernisation, and raised defence spending to about four per cent of GDP, a level unmatched among major European allies in 2023 (Jones, 2023). This was not meant to be a symbolic benchmark: the acquisitions pipeline and force design aimed to generate mass and lethality for a high-intensity contingency on NATO's north-eastern front, prioritising heavy armour, integrated air and missile defence, combat aviation, and munitions depth to shape the Polish Army into a large, manoeuvre-capable force able to hold ground and absorb shocks while allied support arrived (Jones, 2023).

Operational practice reinforced the procurement drive. Poland became a critical logistics corridor, training and staging platform, and frontline donor for Ukraine. Parliamentary and official accounts from 2023 document Warsaw's role in rallying allied assistance and embedding reconstruction and accession goals for Kyiv within Euro-Atlantic agendas. They also show how support was positioned within a larger strategic design: sustained deterrence on the eastern flank, accelerated Ukrainian integration with Western institutions, and a long-term tightening of transatlantic defence ties (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2023). In this context, sovereignty is defended through depth of alliance rather than distance from it. Consequently, the regional geometry shifted. Instead of treating the V4 as the default vehicle for Central European coordination, Poland invested political capital in formats that map directly onto the alliance's eastern defence line. By early 2025, Poland was openly reorienting its regional strategy, seeking "more effective regional formats" after the Visegrád Group fractured over Russia (Bugajski, 2025). The government emphasised the Bucharest Nine, the Three Seas Initiative, closer ties with the Baltic and Nordic states, and other minilateral arrangements aligned with NATO planning cycles. The logic was functional: groupings that reproduced NATO's threat picture and readiness requirements were elevated, while a bloc unable to agree on the adversary was deprioritised (Bugajski, 2025).

This reconfiguration reshaped V4 cohesion in two ways. First, it removed the centre of gravity that had given the bloc leverage inside EU debates: Poland's mass, economy, and diplomatic reach had anchored every push, but once Warsaw tied its security authorship to NATO formats and coalition leadership with frontline states, the incentive to invest in V4 consensus declined. Second, it turned the latent Poland–Hungary divergence into an open structural split. Hungary recoded sovereignty as insulation from alliance pressure, while Poland recoded it as deep integration with the alliance. These logics imply different risk tolerances, instruments, and audiences, leaving no basis for a common security policy under wartime conditions.

Thus, Poland's approach reshapes the role of European instruments, maintaining their importance for financing, sanctions, and reconstruction while locating the military core of sovereignty where Warsaw judges credible power to reside in NATO force structure, bilateral commitments from the United States, and regionally nested coalitions able to act at speed. This approach aligns with the 2020 strategy's hierarchy of guarantees and with parliamentary narratives that link Ukraine's defence and accession prospects to Poland's own security horizon (Janulewicz, 2020; NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2023). It also matches the procurement and spending profile that by 2023 marks Poland as the alliance's land-power outlier in Europe (Jones, 2023).

The consequence for this paper's broader claim is direct. Poland's shift from regional ally to NATO pivot was more than rhetorical. It represented a redistribution of institutional trust and material power that reduced V4 solidarity to a secondary asset in the domain that now defines European security. The bloc had amplified Poland's leverage against Brussels on migration, but it offered no leverage against Russia on deterrence. Warsaw's Atlanticist orientation, already evident in its consistent alignment with NATO and the United States, was amplified by the war in Ukraine, which reinforced the primacy of alliance formats over regional consensus. Poland's leadership therefore migrated to the coalitions that could deliver.

4. HUNGARY: SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH DEFIANCE

Hungary carried its sovereignty doctrine from the migration decade into wartime Europe and hardened it. The government condemned the invasion at the level of principle, then organised practice around insulation from alliance pressure and preservation of economic ties with Russia. In EU forums this produced a pattern of obstruction on Ukraine files. Budapest refused to endorse European Council conclusions on support to Kyiv, stalled sanctions rollovers, and blocked collective instruments such as reimbursements for military aid, conditioning movement on concessions to Hungarian priorities (Gizińska & Sadecki, 2025). The position was packaged domestically through “peace” messaging and national consultations that portrayed sanctions and financing as threats to Hungarian welfare, thereby fusing the external war with an internal claim to protect sovereignty against Brussels (Gizińska & Sadecki, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Hungary’s stance rests on two pillars: the first is a consistent use of veto power within unanimity procedures; Budapest leveraged institutional rules to force issue linkage across dossiers, including Ukraine’s EU track, sanctions design, and budgetary instruments, creating recurrent blocking points in 2023–2025 where the other twenty-six had to work around or buy time. The second is a refusal to treat Russia as an existential adversary. Hungarian leaders argued that the war’s costs to Europe outweighed its benefits, that escalation risk was high, and that energy dependence required pragmatism. Prime Minister Orbán’s claim that financing Ukraine’s war effort would “ruin Europe” condensed this posture into a single line of political economy (Reuters, 2025). In practice, Hungary maintained its energy relationship with Moscow and presented this continuity as rational stewardship of national interests (Gizińska & Sadecki, 2025). A further dimension is the securitisation of Ukraine’s ethnic Hungarian minority, which Budapest portrays as vulnerable to assimilationist pressures. This narrative has been used to justify obstruction of Ukraine’s EU accession path and to sustain a narrative in which defending co-ethnics becomes part of Hungary’s sovereignty doctrine (Balogh & Kovály, 2025).

The Hungarian stance broke the V4 hinge with Poland because Warsaw’s definition of sovereignty runs through NATO mass and forward deterrence whereas Budapest’s definition runs through policy autonomy vis-à-vis Brussels and strategic ambivalence towards Moscow. These logics cannot generate a joint security position under war conditions. The fracture was visible inside the EU, where Hungary forced stalemate and other capitals pivoted to flexible formats to keep Ukraine support flowing. Analysts documented a shift towards “coalitions of the willing” for financing and capability pipelines as a direct response to the Hungarian veto strategy (Rankin, 2025). The institutional result is paradoxical as Hungary asserts sovereignty against supranational pressure and thereby accelerates a Europe of variable geometry on security, a Europe in which decisions move without it.

Hungary’s posture is coherent on its own terms as it prioritises insulation from EU discipline, low exposure to military entanglement, and price stability through Russian energy. It is also isolating. The policy mix places Budapest in direct opposition to the dominant Euro-Atlantic line on deterring Russia and sustaining Ukraine, and it collapses the V4’s ability to speak as a bloc on the continent’s central security problem. In the framework of this paper, Hungary is the fixed point around which V4 unity dissolves once war replaces migration as the agenda.

5. SLOVAKIA AND CZECHIA: BETWEEN ADAPTATION AND ALIGNMENT

Slovakia’s trajectory since 2022 is a study in dual signalling. After early support to Kyiv under the previous government, the return of Robert Fico introduced a rhetorical break: within days of taking office he announced that Slovakia would not back further EU military aid to Ukraine, presenting humanitarian assistance as the acceptable ceiling (Reuters, 2023). This position mobilised a domestically powerful constituency sceptical of the war and wary of escalation, while also fitting a communication strategy that cast sanctions and arms as costly distractions from national priorities. That constituency is anchored in a voter base where pro-Russian sympathies are stronger than the national average and where scepticism of Ukraine’s NATO bid resonates as a defence of small-state prudence. Surveys in 2023 showed that more than a third of Smer voters preferred a Russian victory, while only a marginal share supported Ukraine,

which helps explain why Fico's rhetorical line carries domestic weight even as his government maintains forms of practical cooperation with Kyiv (Dębiec, 2024). The stance appeared to align Slovakia with Hungary, yet the reality has been more complex.

In its first year under Fico, Slovakia pursued a two-track approach. Bratislava declared that it would not provide military assistance and rejected Ukraine's path to NATO, yet it continued forms of support that mattered in aggregate: electricity exports, ammunition produced under commercial contracts, maintenance pathways for Ukrainian equipment, and a steady fulfilment of NATO obligations including the two per cent benchmark (Dębiec, 2024). These measures were coupled with diplomatic assurances on Ukraine's EU track, producing a calibrated stance that preserved ties with the Euro-Atlantic mainstream while sustaining a domestic narrative of restraint. The result kept Slovakia out of outright obstructionism and prevented automatic alignment with Budapest's veto strategy inside the EU, while also keeping doors open in Kyiv. The price was ambiguity: Slovakia avoided clear placement in the coalition's front rank, limiting its influence over the war agenda while protecting space for internal political management.

Czechia moved in the opposite direction, and it did so decisively. The shift began before the invasion with the defeat of Andrej Babiš and continued with the election of Petr Pavel, after which Prime Minister Petr Fiala and President Pavel consolidated a pro-EU, pro-NATO line and treated support for Ukraine as an extension of Czech security. This alignment had two consequences: it loosened the remaining connective tissue with Budapest, as Czech ministers spoke openly about the V4's loss of political coherence and deprioritised the format for high politics, and it tightened operational links with Poland and with Baltic and Nordic partners, reflecting a shared threat picture and a preference for alliance-centric solutions to the war (Beck, 2024).

The divergent trajectories of Slovakia and Czechia reshaped Central Europe's coordination geometry. By early 2025, Warsaw invested in formats that mapped directly onto NATO's eastern posture: the Bucharest Nine and the Three Seas Initiative rose in salience, minilateral ties with frontline states deepened, and the V4 receded as a vehicle for security policy (Bugajski, 2025). Within that shift, Czechia emerged as a consistent partner for Poland, while Slovakia became a contingent one. Bratislava could join when the issue was EU financing, reconstruction logistics, or energy stabilisation, but it held back or softened its stance when measures involved ammunition pipelines or deeper alliance entanglement that complicated Fico's domestic strategy (Dębiec, 2024; Reuters, 2023).

The result is a durable 2–2 split on the war's central questions. Poland and Czechia form the Atlanticist core, aligning their security directly with NATO and anchoring support for Ukraine. Hungary and Slovakia sit on the opposite side, ranging from open obstruction to selective cooperation shaped by domestic politics and energy dependence. This configuration ends any expectation that the V4 can act as a regional security pole. What remains is a bloc fractured into two different logics of sovereignty: integration through alliance for Poland and Czechia, and insulation or ambiguity for Hungary and Slovakia. The consequence is structural. EU policy on Ukraine now advances through flexible coalitions, while NATO carries the operational centre of gravity for Central Europe's defence (Beck, 2024; Bugajski, 2025).

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY AND THE EU

By 2024, the Visegrád Four had ceased to function as a security actor, unable to sustain even minimal consensus on war and deterrence. The Prague summit exposed open division and left the group in tatters (Beck, 2024). What persists is residual symbolism and low-stakes coordination, far removed from the hard security questions that dominate Europe's agenda. The significance of this collapse reaches beyond Central Europe, for it reveals where agency in Europe's security order has migrated and how EU institutions adapt when unanimity among member states collapses under pressure.

Institutionally, the most immediate consequence was procedural. Hungary's vetoes and abstentions on Ukraine-related dossiers transformed unanimity from a safeguard into a choke point. In response, European practice shifted towards coalitions of the willing for financing and capability pipelines, allowing like-minded states to carry the policy while holdouts stood aside (Rankin, 2025). This pattern exemplifies crisis governance by design: momentum is preserved at the expense of unity, accelerating the Union's long-standing drift towards variable geometry in foreign and security policy, a trend that becomes most visible

in emergencies when collective action must outrun internal blockage (Costa, Juncos, Müller, & Sjursen, 2024; Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). The workaround in facing Hungary's and Slovakia's obstructions, however, sets a precedent. Normalising variable-geometry coordination in EU foreign and security policy risks bleeding into adjacent fields, from industrial policy to budget governance, where formal unanimity is not required but political cohesion remains essential.

Strategically, the war confirmed a hierarchical order in which NATO remains the operational backbone of European security. Eastern frontline states concentrated credible power and decision-making within the alliance rather than in EU frameworks, reshaping debates on strategic autonomy. These debates now revolve less around institutional ambition and more around the conditions under which autonomy can function within a NATO-centred order, echoing earlier analysis that warned against equating autonomy with separation from NATO or the United States (Howorth, 2019). The trajectory of the V4 reinforces this logic. Even before 2022, the four capitals had expressed a shared preference for NATO centrality and treated EU defence instruments as complements rather than substitutes (Roos, 2020). The war entrenched that preference: as Poland and Czechia anchored an Atlanticist line while Hungary resisted, the space for an EU-first defence project narrowed. What survives of autonomy is confined to capacity building and industrial coordination, without replacing the alliance's deterrent core in the East.

Poland anchors its security in NATO and the United States because it reads Russia as existential across power, proximity, capability, and intent, while Hungary emphasises cost and energy dependence and therefore resists entanglement. This divergence follows the logic highlighted in alliance theory: allies fracture when they weigh threat dimensions differently (Walt, 1987). Hungary's behaviour fits the pattern described in Pedersen's shelter diplomacy model, where small states navigate abandonment and entrapment risks by calibrating the depth of their commitments (Pedersen, 2023). Poland is not a small state, yet its proximity to Russia generates a similar fear of abandonment, which drives it to over-invest in alliance integration and rapid capability expansion. Hungary, by contrast, treats entrapment as the greater danger, justifying vetoes, hedging, and energy pragmatism. These conflicting equilibria cannot coexist inside a unanimity-based bloc and lead either to paralysis or to fragmentation into minilateral formats.

Subsequently, the EU's adaptation has two layers. At the political level, leaders increasingly authorise sub-coalitions to move first on aid, training, and procurement while keeping the door open for late joiners once domestic conditions allow. At the legal-institutional level, off-budget facilities, enhanced cooperation, and Council conclusions framed to permit constructive abstention carry the load. This pattern reflects the broader logic of EU crisis management, which relies on flexible coordination when speed is decisive (Costa, Juncos, Müller, & Sjursen, 2024), and it demonstrates how EU foreign policy operates as a multi-level process in which coalitions and institutions constantly renegotiate scope and agency (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). The price is greater risk of fragmentation, but the benefit is continuity of support for Ukraine and deterrence signalling to Russia even when unanimity is blocked.

Moscow's view of the Visegrád fracture has been limited and largely instrumental, with Russian officials and media showing little indication that the Kremlin regards the V4 as a meaningful strategic unit in its own right. Russia has long preferred to cultivate bilateral channels with Central European governments rather than engage with the Visegrád format as such, and this tendency only deepened after 2022, when Hungary's vetoes and Slovakia's rhetorical ambivalence created tactical openings that Moscow could exploit inside EU decision-making (Ušiak, 2024). Yet these gestures, however useful in slowing or complicating consensus in Brussels, are counterbalanced by Poland's deliberate Atlanticist attitude and Czechia's consolidation within NATO, which together anchor the region firmly inside the Euro-Atlantic security order. The fracture, in this sense, provides Moscow with a convenient set of talking points and occasional institutional leverage, but it does not alter the underlying distribution of power, leaving Russia with discursive advantages rather than structural gains (Beck, 2024).

For NATO, the V4 fracture scarcely registers. The alliance's command structure, integrated planning, and United States leadership continue to anchor Central Europe's security, with Poland's military build-up and Czechia's alignment bolstering deterrence. Hungary's dissent remains manageable thanks to NATO's focused consensus mechanisms. The war has therefore reshaped Europe's security architecture: NATO defines the hard-power boundary conditions, while the EU handles financing, sanctions, and

reconstruction through flexible coalitions that can operate without unanimity. This outcome deepens Europe's strategic dependence on NATO and the United States. Russia's invasion made Europe's reliance on American political and military support unmistakable (Ratti, 2023) and confirmed that the idea of strategic autonomy remains constrained by this reliance, with Europe still unable to act independently in a high-intensity conflict (Helwig, 2023).

The fracture within the V4 clarifies two strategic consequences. First, European strategic autonomy can only advance when anchored in NATO and translated into capability and industrial delivery, rather than imagined as the EU acting alone. As Howorth makes clear, autonomy becomes possible through strengthening the EU–NATO relationship, which consolidates rather than weakens the transatlantic bond (Howorth, 2019). Second, EU foreign policy will continue to move through minilateral leadership groups that set pace during crises, a mode better understood as the resilient face of collective action under stress, consistent with the EU's ability to adapt foreign policy cooperation despite contestation (Costa, Juncos, Müller, & Sjursen, 2024). The collapse of the V4 as a coherent actor makes both patterns more visible: it removes a once-loud regional brand from the decision table and redirects attention to formats that reflect the actual distribution of threat, will, and capacity.

Overall, the war compelled Europe to privilege function over form. The V4's negative-integration model offered no tools for deterrence, logistics, or war finance, and quickly became irrelevant. The EU adapted by allowing coalitions of the willing to carry the load, while NATO absorbed the strategic core in the East. Strategic autonomy now takes shape as usable power in industrial capacity, procurement, and coordination, functioning as a complement to the alliance order rather than a substitute for it. The settlement produced by the fracture is therefore unambiguous: the Visegrád Four no longer functions as a strategic bloc, NATO defines the hard boundary of European security, and the EU acts where it can deliver, through flexible formats and functional instruments rather than through regional unity.

7. CONCLUSION

The record of the Visegrád Four over the past decade reveals a recurrent pattern in which external shocks redefined the threat environment, governments recast sovereignty through the prism of domestic political landscapes and material exposures, and these recalibrations translated into divergent institutional choices. When danger was read as proximate and existential, the logic of survival drew governments towards depth in alliances, mass in forces, and readiness at speed; when the calculus was weighted more heavily by energy dependence or fiscal cost, the imperative shifted instead to insulation, veto capacity, and cross-dossier linkage. A grouping designed to coordinate law, procedure, and rhetoric against supranational intrusion thus reached the edge of its architecture once the object of policy became deterring a hostile military adversary, and at that threshold it fractured along incompatible definitions of risk and responsibility.

The V4 fractured under the strain of war because its unity had always rested on resisting Brussels rather than on confronting Moscow, and once security required a shared threat perception and collective risk-taking, that foundation could not hold. This trajectory illuminates the boundaries of negative-integration coalitions. They can deliver coherence in legal contestation and wield agenda-setting power when the field of struggle is the distribution of competence within the Union, yet they cannot be scaled into deterrence, logistics, or war finance, domains that demand both a shared perception of threat and a collective willingness to bear costs and risks. The cohesion that had appeared durable in the migration decade dissolved rapidly once war set the terms, for members weighted proximity, intent, and cost in different ways and relied on instruments that belonged to different institutional families.

The findings carry weight, yet they must be read with caution, for the analysis centres on a single conflict, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which exposed the structural limits of one regional coalition. The eclipse of the V4 under wartime conditions does not prove that all negative-integration groupings will fracture under external pressure, but it does reveal a mechanism whose transferability remains uncertain. Comparative research across minilateral groups such as the Nordic Council, the Baltic Assembly, or the Benelux Union will be needed to test whether coalitions built on cooperative integration can withstand coercive shocks more effectively than those, like the V4, that were forged in opposition to supranational

authority. The study is also bounded by timing: it closes in mid-2025, when alliance planning cycles are still unfolding and politics in Bratislava and Budapest remain unsettled. The findings therefore rest on the best open evidence available, and while refinement will follow as new material emerges, the causal pathway identified here remains stable.

The fracture of the V4 was absorbed by the wider system, as unanimity rules turned into choke points and momentum shifted towards coalitions of the willing, off-budget mechanisms, and Council formulations crafted to permit constructive abstention. This mode of flexible coordination preserved movement at the expense of visible unity. At the same time, the war reaffirmed NATO's primacy as the operational backbone of European security, while the EU retained relevance in financing, sanctions, reconstruction, and industrial scaling only insofar as coalitions could sustain decisions. In this setting, strategic autonomy survives less as a stand-alone project than as a function embedded in the alliance order and expressed through tangible capabilities and industrial delivery.

Although the V4 has ceased to matter as a security actor, it does not vanish altogether. What remains are residual functions that occupy the softer terrain of European cooperation: cultural and educational initiatives, research exchanges, occasional coordination on infrastructure, and the ritualised summitry that preserves the appearance of continuity. These activities sustain a symbolic presence, but they do not alter the structural verdict on security. Rather, they show that the bloc persists as form and protocol even as substance has migrated elsewhere.

The eclipse of the Visegrád Group cannot be reduced to personalities or passing quarrels but reflects the deeper fact that its architecture was built for resisting Brussels rather than for managing war, and once Moscow set the terms that foundation dissolved, leaving behind little more than a shell while strategic decisions moved through NATO, through coalitions within the EU, and through minilateral formats that map more closely onto the actual distribution of threat, will, and capacity across the continent.

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