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Position of V4 countries toward Ukraine in the context of the military conflict

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Executive summary

This policy paper, elaborated by representatives of all Visegrad countries except for Poland, demonstrates the V4 positions towards the war in Ukraine. After more than 9 months since the start of the conflict, it is clear that Russian aggression is affecting not only Ukraine but also the European Union and the entire Visegrad region. Citizens of all Visegrad countries showed solidarity with the Ukrainian people and provided support as well as humanitarian aid and safe shelter for the refugees from the very beginning of the conflict. However, Ukraine needs much more than humanitarian aid to win the war and the majority of V4 countries are aware of that. Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary supported the sanctions against Russia crafted to weaken their imperialistic activities. Almost all countries from the region are also trying to get rid of their dependency on Russian energy products and are seeking alternative sources.

However, V4 countries cannot forget about their own security. The modern history of the Visegrad region hasn't witnessed the conflict occurring so close to their borders. In the situation when the missiles are landing right next to the border, V4 countries need to strengthen their defence to provide security for their citizens. After 9 months of the conflict, we can declare that Visegrad countries fully recognize the threat and are investing more in defence and are finally allocating 2% of GDP to defence spending as NATO requires. Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland are not only investing more in defence, but they are also modernizing their armies, strengthening cybersecurity and building efficient strategies to counter hybrid threats.

However, V4 countries still have to find more unity within the group. Even though all Visegrad countries condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine, not all of them are undertaking the necessary steps to stop cooperating with Russia and provide Ukraine with their firm support, which causes turmoil inside the group. We believe that the V4 countries can find common ground for cooperation and use it to improve their mutual relations as well as to set a common approach to the most important external issues. Thus, the authors of this policy paper decided to suggest the following policy recommendations for V4 countries. They should:

- continue and intensify the support for Ukraine in the diplomatic, material and military dimensions,
- seek alternative sources of oil and gas to reduce dependency on Russia,
- strengthen the defence capabilities of V4 countries,
- seek unity and cooperation in all areas of common interest.

1. Introduction

Visegrad countries are in a situation, where the war is right next to their borders and missiles are falling just a few kilometres from their territories. This situation needs firm positions and plans to ensure not only the security of their own citizens but also the war to stop as soon as possible. V4 countries have the tools to contribute to the end of the war or at least minimise its consequences. One of them is humanitarian, technical and military aid for Ukraine, which is not fighting only for their future, but also for us by keeping the aggressor far from our borders. The second tool is shifting from the import of Russian oil and gas and seeking alternative sources of energy to stop financing the Russian war and decrease V4 energy dependency. Plans and positions from V4, Ukrainian and Russian youth are set now in this paper and it is time for our voices to be heard.

2. The Czech Republic

Czech Republic, as all the V4 countries, is deeply connected with Ukraine. According to the Czech Statistical Office even before the war Ukrainians had taken the biggest share among migrants. 32% of all job seekers registered at labour offices were from Ukraine constituting the main source for labour market in the country. That all formed a specific attitude and perception of Ukrainians.

It should also be acknowledged that the country in the recent history was occupied by Moscow and forced to be a Soviet satellite, that shaped subsequent unsympathetic view of Russia. Here we should as well consider the fact, that people who witnessed brutal suppression of political liberalization and mass protests during the Prague Spring are still voters and express some part of the population will.

Even more recent event, which contributed to the Czech view of Russia, is the Vrbětice case, when it was investigated that two agents of the GRU, the Russian military intelligent service, were involved in the explosion at ammunition depot in 2014. As a result, a political conflict between two countries broke out, causing mutual expulsion of diplomats and shutting down connections.

It is important to note that the position of Czech Republic can be also distorted by its high dependence on Russian oil and gas. According to Sikela 98% of annual gas consumption is covered by pipelines coming from Russia.



However, in early phase of war the position of Czechia was not as clear as it is now. President Miloš Zeman had a very controversial opinion and was associated with support of the Russian regime and its elites. Before the invasion started Zeman was convinced that “Russia isn’t crazy enough for war” and that it will bring more harm than benefit to Russians, that’s why Moscow will not risk. He called the warning from the US officials another embarrassment of the American intelligence services. Nevertheless, his opinion on the situation changed. Now the President fully supports Ukraine and thinks that unprovoked Russian attack on Ukraine must be resolutely condemned not only by words but also by deeds. However, in general Czech authorities come out in support of Ukraine but trying to defend the interests of Czech exporters. Czech Republic was willing to sacrifice a part of economic prosperity to show its attitude to the Russian occupation.

Czech politics understand how crucial is to support Ukraine, as they don’t want to have this kind of aggressive, unpredictable neighbour near their borders. Therefore, the Czech Republic was one of the first countries offering military support to the victim of the oppression.

The country’s position towards Ukraine goes mostly along with European Union approach towards the situation, apart from gas and oil issue.

The Czech Republic is willing to take refugees. There are about 300 thousand refugees in the country now. Data shows that by the end of May 2022 the Czech state, municipalities and regions had spent CZK 7.2 billion (approximately EUR 291.5 million) on assistance to refugees from Ukraine. The largest cost was social support, for which the state paid out four billion crowns. Further, Czechia supports Ukraine by sending regular humanitarian, medical equipment for hospitals as well as financial support. As for the military support the Czech Republic has sent dozens of attack helicopters, Soviet-designed T-72M tanks, alongside 10,000 rocket-propelled grenades, howitzer artillery pieces and BMP-1 amphibious tracked infantry fighting vehicles. Regular citizens donated to Ukraine already more than CZK 2 billion, which surpassed all previous records.



The Czech Republic is willing to support the end of Russian oil imports, which will help to block the funding of ongoing war and is a part of the 6th package of sanctions. However, Czechia is a landlocked country and does not have any direct access to LNG terminals. In order to get rid of oil dependence on Russia the country needs to build new pipeline’s

infrastructure or find alternative way to cover the needs. That's why despite the EU requirements on blocking Russian oil import Czechia can't do it immediately and is trying to pad out the decision in time.

3. Hungary

The Hungarian Energy and Public Utilities Authority (HEA) and the Ukrainian National Energy and Utilities Regulatory Commission (NEURC) discussed the regulatory preconditions for electricity trading on the Hungarian-Ukrainian border and the harmonisation of the necessary rules. On 16 March 2022 the electricity grids of Ukraine and Moldova have been successfully synchronised with the Continental European Grid, which also includes Hungary. Currently, there is no trade flow between the two countries, despite significant electricity imports from Ukraine to Hungary in previous years. The parties discussed the capacity allocation procedure, the approval of related methodologies and joint coordination agreeing that they will strive to transplant the regulations already introduced and successfully implemented at the EU borders, including guidelines on forward capacity allocation and the Harmonised Allocation Rules (HAR) for long-term transmission rights (Daily News Hungary, 2022).

Hungary has signed an agreement with Ukraine to supply a guaranteed capacity of natural gas to Kyiv from 1 January 2022. OGTSU signed the cooperation agreement that will allow Ukraine to import up to a daily 8 million cubic meters of gas from Hungary with Hungarian transmission system operator "FGSZ Földgázszállító". I think that the most important aspect of the deal was that it gave Ukrainian gas traders access to Croatia's LNG terminal on the island of Krk and help Ukraine diversify its gas supply sources (Reuters, 2021).

Defense Minister Tibor Benkő discussed regional security and military cooperation with his Ukrainian counterpart Oleksii Reznikov on 21 December 2021 in Budapest. Minister Benkő said that Hungary considers all forms of aggression unacceptable and urges dialogue and political solutions. During the talks, the parties also discussed the threats to the security of Europe, which also affect the Central and Eastern European region. They agreed that the stability of the Western Balkan region and the factors affecting it, such as mass illegal migration, strongly influence Hungary's security. Reznikov informed Benkő about the threats Ukraine was facing on its border, such as the build-up of troops from the east and illegal migration. Minister Benkő emphasized that Hungary supports the



independence, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine. Regarding bilateral military cooperation, Minister Benkő said that Hungary is ready to deepen the practical cooperation between NATO and Ukraine, and highlighted Hungary's participation in the training of Ukrainian special operations forces, as well as the exploration of practical cooperation opportunities in many military fields (Hungary Today, 2021).

The foreign minister said that it is in Hungary's interest that Ukraine develops into a country that provides security. Three decades ago, Hungary was one of the first to recognize Ukraine's independence. As a neighbouring country, Hungary has always been interested in the security and development of Ukraine (Hungary Matters, 2021).

Here in Central Europe, we live in close cooperation and depend on each other, said Minister Szijjártó, greeting his Ukrainian counterpart, Minister Dmitro Kuleba. We are pleased that the Ukrainian government is planning significant developments in Transcarpathia, we are happy to contribute to this, which is why an agreement was reached on the extension of the Hungarian loan agreement, which provides a 50 million dollars loan for Transcarpathian developments. The minister pointed out that Hungary supported 33,000 tenders and provided 14.3 billion HUF budget supports for a total of 19 billion HUF investments in Transcarpathia. The Hungarian government continues the reverse gas supply to Ukraine, which has so far reached 14 billion cubic meters, and the two countries also cooperate in the field of renewable energy, which is guided by an agreement. Large Hungarian companies like OTP and Richter consider Ukraine an important market for economic cooperation. The Hungarian Eximbank has opened a credit line of 66 million dollars for Hungarian companies to enter the Ukrainian market (About Hungary, 2020).

From the very beginning, Hungary has supported Ukraine's obtaining EU candidate status, since it is in Hungary's interest that neighbouring Ukraine becomes a sovereign, balanced, democratic state of law, where national minorities, including Transcarpathian Hungarians, can live in peace and security in their homeland. The support of Ukraine's EU candidate status is therefore also a national political interest, and therefore at the EU summit which took place between 23 and 24 June, Ukraine could count on Hungary's support in the matter of EU candidate status (Hungary Today, 2022).



4. The Slovak Republic

Russian aggression in Ukraine has affected the entire Europe and changed the security environment to a large extent. We cannot live anymore in the faith, that the conflicts between the modern European countries will be solved exclusively by diplomacy. European Union and the Visegrad Group must adapt to the new security environment and prepare to be challenged by modern threats.

All V4 countries are valuable NATO members and contribute to the common security and deterrence with their respective armies to prevent any attack on the Alliance. However, new threats require also new approaches and changes, such as fulfilling the condition to increase the share of military expenditure to 2% of GDP. Only Poland among all V4 countries allocates 2% of GDP to military spending, but we can expect changes in this approach among other V4 partners. The Slovak Republic and other V4 countries welcome the NATO enlargement by Finland and Sweden since it will strengthen the Alliance, but also strengthen the European Union. We believe that a stronger and more resistant Union can help Ukraine to end this unnecessary conflict, as well as assist in the post-war recovery of Ukraine.

Since the start of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, we can see the steps of all V4 nations to increase their military spending and to increase the security in the region. Poland declares its goal to increase military expenditure and Hungary established the fund for modernisation right after the recent elections. The Slovak Republic wants to increase its spending by modernisation of its military equipment and by investing in new technologies. One of the main goals is the modernisation of Air Defence forces to secure the sky above us. However, Slovak Republic must be ready not only in the physical world, but also in cyberspace. War in Ukraine affected the Slovak approach to the disinformation inflow from Russia and China. National Security Authority first time blocked the websites and Facebook pages financed by hostile parties and the Ministry of Interior is investing more effort, time and money to disprove the hoaxes. A sustainable effort such as this one will surely strengthen the unity in the society and will make it easier to help Ukraine to achieve its peace objectives. Not only Slovakia, but the entire V4 group should seek the possibilities to improve its cybersecurity infrastructure. One of the ways is to establish more intensive transfer of know-how from other NATO members, as well as from allied countries such as South Korea, which is one of the countries with the most robust and effective



cybersecurity.

Although undertaken steps can be evaluated as positive and beneficial, we cannot stop here. Slovak Republic cannot get satisfied only with Patriot systems borrowed by other NATO countries but needs to build its own reliable air defence which will repel any threat from abroad and will protect more area, not just the capital city. Higher defence investments should bring modern defence equipment which will protect Slovak citizens. However, it also means that the old defence systems and weapons can be transferred to Ukraine, which can use them to protect its cities from Russian attacks. Such cooperation between the Slovak Republic and Ukraine was proven beneficial when Slovak system S-300 was given to Ukraine. Such transfer, among the others, was beneficial for Slovakia too, since it translated into acquisition of new systems from its NATO allies. Thus, we can underline the common solidarity with Ukraine as well as the valuable opportunity to get rid of old Soviet military techniques and modernise the defence arsenal of Slovakia. Another important step will be the acquisition of drones, which seems to be one of the major advantages in the arsenal of Ukraine. We expect that Slovakia and the Czech Republic will follow suit to achieve a safer and stronger V4 region, but also a stronger Alliance.

The Ukraine crisis also affects the dynamics in the V4. On the one hand, all the countries were in favour of NATO enlargement by Sweden and Finland. Even though the relations between Sweden and Hungary are far from perfect, they seem to understand the importance of the Alliance straightening.

Alas, V4 countries seem rather divided with respect to the approach to the Ukrainian crisis. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia strictly condemn Russian aggression and acclaim the steps of the EU to support Ukraine, including its potential EU membership, combined with economic punishment of Russia for its actions. Hungarian attitude doesn't match with the rest of the V4 and pulls this unilateral cooperation to the state of hibernation. V4 group is sometimes called V2+2, referring to the better mutual understanding between Poland and Hungary and on the other side mutual understanding between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. However, now we can call it V3 cooperation since also Poland condemns the Hungarian attitude towards Ukraine and refuses to hold ministerial meetings, and neither Hungary does seem to be open to cooperation.



Although some issues are still present, the Slovak Republic's approach toward Ukraine is completely aligned with the steps undertaken by the European Union. The Slovak government is supporting Ukraine and condemns Russian actions, which can be proven by performances in the national council by president Volodymyr Zelenskyj as well as the Ukrainian ambassador in Slovakia. We support Ukraine in humanitarian and technical means, as well as at the political level. It was mainly the Slovak Republic representatives who were most in favour and made a significant effort to the assignment of candidate status to the EU for Ukraine. However, we still believe that a united V4 approach towards Ukraine can be achieved also on the European level when all four countries will have common foreign policy priorities.

Slovakia should begin with fulfilling the NATO criterium regarding the allocation of 2% of GDP to defence. However, this allocation should be fulfilled by the acquisition of modern, compatible, and effective equipment, not only by maintenance of the old one. In current situation, Slovak republic should seek V4 cooperation in the areas of common interest and compliance. However, when 3 out of 4 countries have the same foreign policy and security goals, they should cooperate to gain these goals although it will be not the common V4 approach. V4 is not a block, but rather the platform for cooperation on the topics, in which the countries have a common understanding. Regarding whole defence cooperation, Slovakia should be surely focused on traditional warfare, but it is not and cannot be enough. Modern threats such as disinformation and cyberattacks are on the rise and can cause the same and even higher damages as the traditional means of warfare. Thus, the Slovak Republic should focus on strengthening its cybersecurity capabilities and to achieve this goal, Slovakia can cooperate more with NATO countries, which have more experience and know-how in this issue, as well as with NATO partner countries, for example, South Korea. The Slovak Republic should also use the occasion of Russian aggression in Ukraine to modernise its defence equipment also via acquiring modern systems from NATO members in exchange for transferring the old ones to Ukraine. This approach can lead to the modernisation of the Slovak arsenal and help Ukraine to defend itself from Russia.



5. The position of Ukraine towards the EU sanctions

The first international sanctions against Russia were imposed in 2014 in response to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's destabilizing actions in Eastern Ukraine. Sanctions against Russia were imposed by the European Union, the United States, Canada, Japan, and other countries. The restrictions covered the financial, energy and defence sectors and dual-use goods.

Despite this, the EU continued trade relations with Russia. Some countries, as it turned out later, continued to supply Russia with weapons and other dual-use goods to circumvent sanctions.

Therefore, with the outbreak of full-scale war on February 24, 2022, Ukraine strongly demanded that the EU severed its economic links with Russia. The main demand was and still is an embargo on all energy products supplied to the EU by Russia. This requirement from Ukraine is obvious, because thanks to it Russia received about 44 billion euros from the EU for Russian gas, oil, and coal in two months of war only. For the entire year 2021, the EU paid 140 billion euros, or 12 billion euros per month. This money is used by Russia to finance the war effort against Ukraine.

Equally important for Ukraine was to impose embargo on technology, weapons, and dual-use goods. For example, drones and software for drones, software for encryption equipment, chemical substances that can be used in the war against Ukraine.

Similarly, disconnecting Russian banks from the SWIFT system, closing Russia's access to EU capital markets or blocking its foreign currency reserves would help the Ukrainian case. Such step that would prevent Russia from financing the war and would contribute to gradual demise of its economy.



In general, Ukraine is of the opinion that new sanctions packages should come with more regularity. Obviously, the EU has not yet recovered from the Covid-19 crisis and now must enter another, possibly tougher financial and energy crisis. Nevertheless, for Ukraine these issues seem secondary, because the main issue for now is the struggle for the lives of its citizens, its cities, and its future.

To summarize, Ukraine is very grateful to the EU for its cooperation, solidarity, and support in its struggle against Russia. Ukraine authorities understand that the EU is one of its main allies in this fight, which has contributed heavily in supporting its war effort at this difficult historical moment.

6. The position of Russia towards the EU sanctions

The official position of Moscow is that Russia is a strong and independent country, with economy that cannot be easily repressed by sanctions. Putin believes that Russia is surrounded by enemies and that “special military operation” was simply an excuse to put sanctions on the country and punish Russia. According to Putin Russia must isolate itself from “unfriendly countries”, which are meant to be the United States of America and European Union countries.

Authorities published many statements about the economic consequences of war for Russia. Here are some excerpts worth noticing:

- „We have been living under sanctions for a couple of decades and we have got accustomed to this situation. We started to prepare ourselves for these sanctions a year ago, now of course we are in a very tight situation in terms of economy, but the economy is still on its feet, and we may be not safe and sound, but we are safe in terms of macro stability. We are even trying to take advantage of the situation, give a boost to develop our productive sector, our national technology and so on and so forth,” press secretary of the President, Peskov said.
- In May the president Putin stated that ruble is souring.
- „It is obvious that the continuation of the obsession with sanctions will inevitably lead to the most difficult consequences for the European Union, for its citizens,” the Russian president said. „Russia is confidently managing in the face of external challenges.”
- „Sanctions help Russia to support domestic companies and become more independent”.



Russia indeed has taken up real measures to protect its economy. The first step was to prevent a fall of Russian currency. The central bank raised interest rate in the first weeks of invasion, closed Russia’s stock market, and later popped up ruble with strict capital controls. Request for Russian exporters to convert half of their revenues into rubles also created higher demand for the currency. Secondly, Russian government proposed wide measures for supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, which included, for instance, absolution of fines for suppliers to state-controlled companies if they fail to meet contractual obligations

this year owing to Western sanctions. Higher support and freedom were given to the IT companies: for 3 years enterprises are exempted from paying income taxes and from inspections by regulatory authorities. Thirdly, to boost Russian currency Vladimir Putin stated in the end of March that foreign buyers must open ruble accounts in Russian banks and pay for natural gas in the currency starting from the 1st of April.

As for the sanctioned Russian oligarchs, who could theoretically influence Putin, they divided into 2 main groups. The first one consisted of oligarchs who stayed silent despite the sanctions the West put on their assets: Igor Sechin, Chief Executive of energy company Rosneft, Alexei Miller, CEO of energy company Gazprom, Arkady Rotenberg, owner of Mostotrest (i.e. the company that helped to bridge the strait between the Crimean Peninsula and Russia), Sergey Chemezov, head of state-owned company Rostec. The second group of oligarchs expressed modest dismay. Oleg Deripaska, a close ally of Putin, heading the second-largest aluminium business, shortly after the 24th of February posted on his telegram account: “Peace is very important! Negotiations need to start as soon as possible”. Michal Fridman, a Ukrainian-born co-founder of Alfa-Group, a multinational Russian conglomerate, wrote in a letter to staff of his investment company “this crisis will cost lives and damage two nations who have been brothers for hundreds of years. While a solution seems frighteningly far off, I can only join those who fervent desire is for the bloodshed to end”. One more oligarch, who expressed his concerns on the war in Ukraine was Roman Abramovich, former owner of Premier League club Chelsea, that he sold to establish a charitable foundation “for the benefits of all victims of the war in Ukraine”. All in all, neither of those powerful people didn’t accept Russia’s responsibility for the war.

Policy recommendations

The Visegrad Four is experiencing very complicated times. Governments of all V4 countries had to deal with the unprecedented pandemic and its consequences on society, democracy and also to the economy. Moreover, Russian aggression in Ukraine didn’t just end the era of peace in Europe and changed the geopolitical concepts, but it also put the V4 in a tough situation, when leaders must find ways how to decrease their natural resources dependency on Russia and secure stable energy for their citizens. Fortunately, this is the question where all V4 countries have the same goal which is to provide the citizens with stable and affordable electricity, gas and oil. Situation changes when examining the V4 approach to the war in Ukraine. As was declared in this article, Slovakia, the Czech



Republic and Hungary stands with Ukraine and provide it with humanitarian, technical and military aid. All mentioned countries recognise the fact, that strong and resilient Ukraine means also keeping Russia far from their borders, thus increasing their own security. Very wisely, Slovakia, Czech Republic and mainly Poland used this opportunity to increase also their own resilience and deterrence and launched the modernisation of their army. Some of the mentioned countries made the great deal: provide Ukraine with the old soviet systems, which can help them to defend themselves, and obtain the new systems and equipment, which are compatible with NATO equipment and fulfilling the standards. Majority of V4 also seek the ways to shift from Russian energy sources in order to stop financing the war, but also to increase their energy security.

War is still going on and its end is out of sight. However, since the 24th of February majority of V4 countries strengthen their position in the EU and shown, that they are responsible, strong and democratic members of the European Union. Slovakia, for example, was one of the first voices calling for imposing the sanction on Ukraine and one of the first countries, whose PM visited president Zelensky.

We cannot stop now. V4 countries should cooperate in all areas, where they can find compliance. If it can not be found in the issue of Ukraine, countries should concentrate on other topics and ensure, that Visegrad cooperation will persist and will be boosted in the future. The rest of the countries, however, should do what they can to continue and intensify the support for Ukraine in the diplomatic, material and military dimensions, since it increases not just chances for Ukraine to win, but also our regional security.

Nevertheless, security cannot be given only by our Allies anymore. We must allocate 2% for the military to build an efficient and modern army, which will be able to defend our eastern borders. As we can see further cooperation with Russia can continue neither in the energy trade. V4 countries were dependent on Russian oil and gas too long and it is time to seek for alternative sources of these commodities to reduce our dependency. Last but not least, there is a need to find unity among Visegrad group members. 30 years of V4 existence showed us, that this group can cooperate efficiently in various areas and can be a handy tool to advocate for countries' interests by one strong voice before the Council. We can see two scenarios right now: reconciliation of the interests and setting the common approach to Ukraine or attenuating cooperation for now and reviving it in the future, where the compliance



of all V4 countries will be higher. Nevertheless, the one common goal is to secure our citizens and stop the war and it is the responsibility of each of the V4 countries to contribute to this goal as much as possible.

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