

By Csilla Varga

The Visegrad Group as a regional alliance of four Central European countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, defined itself as a cooperation representing and promoting the region's interests in Europe and beyond. In 2004, the V4 reached one of its main objectives, as the four countries became members of the EU and NATO. Followingly, the cooperation worked together on wide-range of issues from economic areas to the engagement with the European Union. However, after decades of cooperation, differing views came to the foreground between certain countries and the V4, in general, and recently it seems that “working together” and representing views of the named Central European countries is more theoretical than practical. This short overview tries to answer the question whether the cooperation in V4 – especially between Hungary and Poland – still exists and formulate a few recommendations how its work could be improved.

Introduction

The Visegrad Group, named after the Hungarian town Visegrad where summit meetings of the Hungarian, Polish and Bohemian kings took place in 1335, originally has the aim of settling disputes and launching economic and political cooperation. After struggles of the 20th century including decades under unwanted Soviet influence, the Visegrad countries decided in 1991 to find new forms of political, economic and cultural cooperation, as they expressed their joint intention to become part of the European and Transatlantic communities that has become reality for all the four countries in 2004.[\[1\]](#)

Addressing regional challenges, such as migration, security, and economic development, and advocate for their shared interests within the European Union, the V4 during the first phase after its establishment can be characterized as a successful cooperation in Europe. The reason behind its relative success was and could be that on their own, the four countries could easily be ignored on contrast to Germany and France, but unified, representing nearly 65 million citizens, they shaped European policies on various fields such as immigration, agriculture and even foreign policy.

In frame of economic cooperation all countries benefitted from enhanced trade and investment opportunities, promoting economic growth and regional development. The shared cultural heritage and history between the states was a powerful basis that, at the beginning, embedded cooperation fostering mutual understanding and synergies regarding education, language, and cultural exchanges. The four states, after the establishment of the V4 prioritized regional security, particularly in the context of NATO, and cooperated on

defense strategies to address common threats. It has to be emphasized as well that the political collaboration of countries initially included aligned political interests, especially concerning EU policies, migration, and sovereignty, advocating for national interests within the larger European context, however, these common political lines have crucially changed, mainly in recent years. Besides the above, energy security, cooperation in energy diversification and infrastructure projects, such as pipelines and energy networks, was also a mutual goal of V4 enhancing energy independence, similarly to regional stability of the region. V4 states sought to maintain stability in Central Europe and the neighboring regions, addressing issues like the rule of law and democracy^[2].

However, already from the beginning of the cooperation, there have been some challenges and differences among them, particularly on issues as the latter, rule of law, democratic values, and responses to EU policies. The V4 from its establishment held and holds regular summits and meetings aiming to maintain and develop their cooperative efforts, as well as established the system of rotating presidency in which framework one of the countries fulfills the tasks of presidency for a year.

Relations between Poland and Hungary in the V4

During the past decades of V4 cooperation, it could be observed that while Poland and Hungary shared many interests within the Group, there are also notable differences in their priorities and approaches that became more and more accentuated in recent years. However, it is often considered that the major dividing line in their relationship has been the recent Ukrainian-Russian war starting in 2022, other issues of non-agreement can also be mentioned in which countries follow different political lines.

Regarding EU relations, Poland generally seeks a strong EU presence and influence, focusing on maintaining beneficial relations with Western Europe, particularly on the area of economic cooperation and political alignment. Hungary represents a more nationalistic stance, often prioritizing sovereignty over EU regulations and sometimes pushing back against European institutions on issues such as migration and rule of law. However, both countries face criticism from EU for their judicial reforms perceived as undermining judicial independence and democratic institutions, the answers of countries to the criticism is different. While the Polish government has been and is more assertive in defending its reforms, Hungary has a more established narrative of defending its policies as part of national identity and sovereignty, often framing it as a cultural and ideological battle.

Migration, mainly after the beginning of the war between Ukraine and Russia from 2022, became one of the major differences and disagreements between the two states. Poland has

shown a willingness to accept Ukrainian refugees, emphasizing humanitarian assistance while maintaining a strict stance on immigration from other regions. Hungary represents a hard-line stance against immigration overall, focusing on border security and resisting EU relocation quotas, which sometimes puts it at odds with Poland's approach to humanitarian crises. Not only Hungary and Poland, but the V4 grouping has come unstuck after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, the Czech Republic and Poland, as two of the strongest supporters of Kyiv in terms of political and military support, argue for even more and faster arms deliveries to the country. On the other hand, Hungary and Slovakia refuse to send weapons to Ukraine and argue for the importance of peace. Especially Hungary has developed a distinct policy of watering down Russia sanctions, questioning Ukraine's EU integration and at one point blocking EU aid for Kyiv.^[3] The aim of Hungary is to maintain peace in all circumstances that cannot be realized when sending troops for Ukraine. According to many experts, absent of a major change in the policy of Hungary, being at this point highly unlikely, the unity of V4 will remain in tatters for the foreseeable future.

Another significant contrast between the two countries is their economic focus, since for Poland economic development, trade relations, and infrastructure projects, EU funds, as well as seeking partnerships with Western countries belongs to major political priorities, Hungary – besides the above – also pursues unique partnerships with non-EU countries and emphasizes a more nationalist economic agenda. Last, but not least, political lines of conduct of the two countries towards Russia also shows different picture: Poland generally views Russia as a primary threat, advocating for a strong stance against Russian influence and seeking closer alignment with NATO. Hungary, on the contrary, maintains a more conciliatory approach towards Russia, often emphasizing the importance of economic relations and energy cooperation with Russia leading to tensions with Poland's more hardened stance. Therefore, it can be certainly stated and shortly concluded that Hungary's position vis-a-vis Moscow from spring 2022 significantly worsened the relations with Warsaw. For Poland, Orbán's pro-Russian stance was unacceptable and regarded Russian aggression as a fundamental threat, much more dangerous than any claim coming from Brussels. The relations between Warsaw and Budapest deteriorated rapidly, and these differing and conflictual views shadow, among other issues, the general activity of the V4.

Cooperation or only certain toleration between Hungary and Poland?

The second. However, countries criticise each other more and more often and openly. As already highlighted, differences presently are more characteristic than cooperation. Besides the above, as a crucially important additional aspect it has to be noted that the Polish

elections in October 2023 also resulted in systematic change in Polish politics with the ascension to power of the former opposition parties to the long-serving, populist, conservative PiS government. The new centrist government, led by former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, immediately began a program of “de-PiS-ification” of the country’s media, courts, and economy in an effort to return the country to normative congruence with EU standards^[4]. In the process, the new Polish leadership moved even further away from certain views of Budapest, shortly explained above.

Not only between Budapest and Warsaw, but in the V4 two camps have developed, in general, as mentioned regarding their views on the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as in connection with other issues. On the one hand, Slovakia and Hungary represent almost the same opinions, Robert Fico, the Prime Minister of Slovakia and Viktor Orbán stick to their pro-Russian rhetoric. On the other hand, the Czech Republic and Poland support Ukraine in the war, for instance to purchase up to 800,000 artillery rounds for Ukraine from suppliers outside of Europe. Concerning other topics, it can also be stated that Prague and Warsaw often promote Western efforts, views and political lines. By contrast, Bratislava and Budapest belong to the minority of Member States often being in opposition with the views of Brussels and being openly on the side of Moscow. Consequently, V4 unity is presently not able to show up short-term prospects of meaningful cooperation. In conclusion, with the eruption of the war in Ukraine, cooperation among Visegrad countries has come to a standstill, and the most significant division arose between Poland and Hungary. It is highly likely that in the upcoming period the success of the format will largely hinge on the ways and issues on which Donald Tusk and Viktor Orbán can collaborate, also strongly influencing the success of Central Europe in defending and promoting the region’s interests.

Conclusions and recommendations for improving bilateral relations

As shortly explained above, V4 as a cooperation still exists, however, currently it became a more formal alliance where the four states are divided into two groups. Disagreements came to the forefront mainly after the break out of the current Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as after the Polish elections of October 2023 that resulted in fundamentally different political lines of the two political leaders. In spite of conflicts and differing views, V4 formally exists, but their cooperation should be continued more effectively and practically in the future. It cannot be neglected that since its establishment, V4 brought with itself significant results for member countries, and in the past, it could effectively represent the interests of these four states in Europe. The possibility to enforce their interests is a powerful tool that could not be left behind and neglected in the future, however, cooperation in the V4 should be reformed and laid on renewed foundations.

As practical recommendations for the Visegrad Group, as well as the cooperation between Hungary and Poland, the following steps, objectives could be realized:

1. States and V4 should continue cooperation on those areas that are slightly “more neutral” or void of conflicting opinions, such as certain economics issues, culture, science, infrastructure, business, etc. and that represent the interests for all V4 countries in the EU;
2. In spite of differing views on “high political issues”, countries should hold bilateral and V4 meetings in the future as well in order to try reconciling interests, taking stock of problems and mainly for maintaining their relations;
3. Discussing their motivation behind their policies and decisions in order to find common understanding that leads to a more successful cooperation.

[1] Official website of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2021/2022:
<https://v4.mfa.gov.hu/page/visegrad-cooperation>

[2] See the objectives of the V4 in Visegrad Declarations available at the official website of the Visegrad Group: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations>

[3] See for instance: RadioFreeEurope: The Visegrad Group: When 2 + 2 Doesn't Equal 4, February 27, 2024:
<https://www.rferl.org/a/visegrad-hungary-poland-czech-slovakia-disunity/32837670.html>

[4] Robert Beck: The Visegrád Four: Disunity in Central Europe, February 23, 2024, Foreign Policy Research Institute:
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/02/the-visegrad-four-disunity-in-central-europe/>.



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By Viktória Lilla Pató

This analysis examines the priorities of Hungary and Poland during their presidency of the Council of the European Union, highlighting shared interests and

differing approaches. During its 2025 presidency, Poland would focus on strengthening transatlantic relations, EU enlargement, and achieving a just energy transition, while Hungary primarily aims to enhance European competitiveness, strengthen energy security, promote enlargement and neighborhood policy, and develop the EU's defense capabilities. The paper also provides recommendations for potential cooperation between the two countries to effectively represent Central and Eastern European interests.

Introduction

Hungary and Poland, as two important members of the Central and Eastern European bloc, play a significant role in the political life of the European Union. With a population four times that of Hungary and an area three times larger, Poland falls into the category of large countries. Hungary's GDP in 2023 was 217 billion USD, with a per capita GDP of around 22,000 USD, which matches that of Poland; however, due to its territorial and population advantage, Poland's GDP approached 750 billion USD in 2023. Despite these differences, the two nations share numerous common interests and identity elements due to their historical past and geographical location. The V4 cooperation and the Three Seas Initiative further strengthen regional cooperation with political, economic, and social dimensions. Since the Russia-Ukraine war, relations between Poland and Hungary have weakened compared to previous years, a trend intensified by the government restructuring following the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections. While Poland found a way out of the EU's rule of law debate, Hungary remains affected, leading to significant economic impacts through the partial freezing of cohesion funds and withholding of the RRF. Starting in early 2024, Poland has advocated for a stronger Europe and transatlantic-friendly policy, preparing for its EU Council presidency beginning on January 1, 2025, as the first member of the Polish-Danish-Cypriot trio, led by former European Council President Donald Tusk. Hungary took over the baton from Belgium on July 1, 2024, as the last country in the Spanish-Belgian-Hungarian presidency trio, whose effectiveness was strongly influenced by the institutional turnover and the summer recess of eurocracy.

Advocacy during the Presidency

The rotating presidency of the Council is strategically important not only because it allows the presiding country to influence the EU's political agenda but also because it provides an opportunity to advance national priorities and interests on the European stage. The presidency gives Hungary a chance to improve relations with EU partners and consolidate the rule of law debate. Additionally, Hungary seeks an agreement on Hungarian universities

excluded from directly managed EU funds,[\[1\]](#) which would be an important step in supporting domestic scientific life, as the December 2022 European Commission decision restricting access to some RDI funds remains a challenge.[\[2\]](#) Resolving this issue is particularly important for the European political agenda, as the second von der Leyen Commission aims to ensure the free flow of science and knowledge as a fifth freedom of the single market.[\[3\]](#) However, if 21 higher education institutions and their students in one Member State remain excluded from EU mobility and RDI programs, this goal remains an empty phrase.

Poland and Hungary both joined the Club 20 years ago, and thus belong to the widening category regarding directly managed EU funds—such as Horizon Europe, the largest RDI fund. Preparing for the next MFF, the two countries can jointly advocate for further strengthening of the widening conditions. A good example of this is the “Declaration of 15,” signed by ministers from the region, insisting that FP10 retains the “Widening participation and spreading excellence” component and continues to promote research excellence in the EU.[\[4\]](#)

Analysis of Polish and Hungarian priorities

Hungary presented its 2024 EU presidency priorities on June 18, 2024, by the Minister for European Union Affairs, under the motto “Make Europe Great Again.”[\[5\]](#) Hungary describes itself as an “honest broker” in international relations and aims to pursue a policy of economic neutrality. At the start of the presidency, the Hungarian Prime Minister embarked on a peace mission, which was not positively received by all Member States and was criticized by the EU.

Hungary identified seven priorities that align with the objectives of the reports on the EU internal market by Enrico Letta in 2024[\[6\]](#) and on EU competitiveness by Mario Draghi[\[7\]](#); however, the tools differ on some points. Poland’s priorities were unknown at the time of writing, but based on the policies and stance of the government led by Donald Tusk, we can infer areas likely to feature on the Polish political agenda.

Migration policy

Poland and Hungary are geographically similarly affected by the issue of migration, as some of their borders are also the EU’s external borders. The two countries’ migration policies differ from the EU’s central approach, opposing the mandatory quota system for distributing immigrants among Member States, instead supporting voluntary contributions.[\[8\]](#) The aim of the Polish and Hungarian leadership is to combat illegal migration, strengthen border

security, and address the root causes of migration, particularly through development aid in African and Middle Eastern regions. According to Viktor Orbán, cooperation on migration is important, but Member States have the sovereign right to shape their immigration policy. Donald Tusk retained his predecessor's official stance and rejected the new pact, and on October 15, Poland adopted its migration strategy for the period 2025–2030.[\[9\]](#)

On August 5, 2024, the Commission issued Implementing Decision 2024/2150 on the Migration Pact, which requires Hungary to register 7,716 border crossers from June 2026 to October 2027, and Poland—highest number from the Baltic region—to register 1,564, while Denmark, which will follow the Poles in the presidency, is exempt from the Decision.[\[10\]](#) The place of registration is important because if another EU Member State does not admit the registered person, they must remain in the registering country if they wish to stay within the EU. This will lead to a significant increase in the number of relocated migrants. In this area, the two countries can jointly represent the strengthening of the external dimension of migration, such as effective cooperation with third countries, developing innovative solutions in asylum rules, and the importance of EU funding for external border protection.

Enlargement policy

Poland strongly supports Moldova and Ukraine's EU accession process and pays particular attention to strengthening cooperation between the EU and Serbia.[\[11\]](#) This area is also important for Hungary, which pursues a merit-based enlargement policy, particularly promoting Western Balkan integration and organizing an EU-Western Balkans summit during its presidency. The two countries agree that fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria is essential and that enlargement objectives should consider the internal market's capacity to absorb new members. Poland places greater emphasis on Ukraine's accession, while Hungary focuses on the Western Balkans and Serbia and considers the protection of national minorities important in accession negotiations.

Competitiveness and Cohesion

Hungary has announced a policy of economic neutrality, while Poland supports following the EU's transatlantic direction.[\[12\]](#) Poland focuses on linking industrial policy to common trade policy, access to critical raw materials needed for the green transition, and the challenges of energy-intensive industries.[\[13\]](#) The Polish and Hungarian governments agree that competitiveness and innovation are fundamental to strengthening the internal market and simplifying EU regulations and reducing administrative burdens, which currently limit the potential of European companies, especially SMEs. Thus, cohesion policy is a central

element of competitiveness, based on convergence between regions. In line with these values, Hungary's main goal is the adoption of the Competitiveness Pact, which could serve as a basis for Poland's presidency to establish the Competitiveness Fund. Poland will play a more significant role in advancing legal dossiers as the institutional cycle change will be completed by then. During the Polish presidency, the Competitiveness Fund, along with the Clean Industry Agreement, the Chemical Package (REACH simplification), a new Circular Economy Bill, public procurement reform, and the Clean Trade and Investment Partnership are also likely to be on the agenda.

Energy

Poland advocates for reducing the economic burdens of fossil energy, especially coal, and delaying the implementation of ETS2, rejecting its current form, as the system would significantly increase heating costs.[\[14\]](#) During its 2025 EU presidency, the Polish government is expected to push for ETS2 modification and the national scheduling of the energy transition. Hungary prioritizes the development of renewable energy sources, especially geothermal and nuclear energy, as well as diversifying energy supplies, with the development of the gas network also important to the country.

Recommendations for cooperation areas between the two presidencies

1. Cohesion policy: Joint support for cohesion policy reform, advocating cohesion protection during MFF negotiations to promote territorial convergence within the EU.
2. Competitiveness: Coordinating between the two presidencies on the creation of the Competitiveness Fund, jointly defining the strategic directions for implementing the Competitiveness Pact, with particular emphasis on developing SME competitiveness, on which both countries share the same position.
3. Migration, border protection: Supporting border protection investments and jointly opposing mandatory quotas.
4. Just Energy Transition: Cooperation in the green transition could contribute to the economic and environmental sustainability of the Central and Eastern European region.
5. R&I: The Central and Eastern European region draws down fewer directly managed EU funds than Western Europe, which is a significant challenge. Hungary and Poland have a common interest in increasing R&I funding absorption. The two countries share the goal of maintaining the “widening country” category and increasing the “widening budget,”

especially during negotiations for the next budgetary cycle. It would be essential to maintain a balance between cohesion funds and directly managed EU funds and represent the interests of the Central and Eastern European region in terms of strengthening widening.

Although they differ in territorial size and population, Hungary and Poland, as states of the Central and Eastern European region and, due to their geographical position, as countries forming part of the EU's external borders, face similar challenges. It is an exciting question whether the above policy recommendations can move beyond high-level political battles and whether substantial cooperation will emerge between the two presidencies, which is a rare, yet excellent opportunity for representing the region's interests.

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<https://sciencebusiness.net/news/research-and-innovation-gap/hungary-bypass-brussels-bid-resolve-silence-over-funding-ban>

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[6] Enrico Letta 2024: Much more than a market. Online:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta>

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[7] Mario Draghi 2024: The future of European competitiveness. Online:
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By Bernadett Petri

The Migration Pact has entered a new phase with the adoption of its first Implementing Decision, which now includes concrete figures and rates for migration. The apparently politically motivated decision has established an unfair and disproportionate methodology that severely penalises the most vocal critics of EU migration policy. At the same time, internal tensions are growing, with Poland recently becoming a vocal critic of the Migration Pact, which is an opportunity for the Hungarian government to more forcefully represent its own interests (changing migration policy, maintaining and financing border closures, reviewing fines, unblocking funds) and could open the way for a regional (V3 / V4) position to be developed and represented.

Introduction - State of play

The Migration Pact was voted by the European Parliament in April 2024, with the aim of supporting Member States facing significant migratory pressure and protecting our external borders^[1] – at the expense of other Member States. The Pact aims to strengthen trust and to strike a balance between collective responsibility and solidarity, even if there are some states, certainly Hungary, that do not want to take on the responsibility imposed on them. So far, no quantification has been made of the proportion of solidarity and fairness in the distribution of asylum applications to be examined under the border procedure.

This may have been changed by Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2024/2150^[2] (5 August 2024). The Implementing Decision, which applies from 12 June 2026 until 14 October 2027, determines (i) the corresponding border capacity of each Member State and

(ii) the maximum number of applications per year to be examined by Member States in the border procedure. The capacity and maximum number of applications for the period after 14 October 2027 must be adopted by the Commission every three years on 15 October, with the next adoption in 2027. The corresponding capacity and the maximum number of requests per year to be examined by Member States in the framework of the border procedure should be calculated on the basis of the irregular border crossings, including arrivals following search and rescue operations, and the refused entries at the external borders, as reported by Member States to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).

Problem statement

According to the Implementing Decision, the total number of irregular border crossings and refused entries in the EU as a whole is 1,318,040, of which Hungary accounts for 338,978 and Italy for 352,191, representing 25.7% and 26.7% respectively. On this basis, the Implementing Decision concludes that Hungary has a “sufficient capacity for border processing” of 7,716 persons and Italy of 8,016 persons. The “adequate capacity for border management” of the other EU Member States totals 14,268 persons, i.e. less than the combined capacity of Hungary and Italy. Annex 2 to the Implementing Decision sets out the maximum number of applications per year to be examined by Member States in the framework of the border procedure for the period 12 June 2026 to 12 June 2027 and 13 June 2027 to 14 October 2027. For the one-year period starting in two years’ time, the maximum number of applications per year to be examined under the border procedure was capped at twice the “corresponding capacity” described in the previous paragraph, and for the following quarter at three times the “corresponding capacity”, i.e. approximately twelve times on an annual basis. In other words, Italy and Hungary together “received” 52.4% of the applications to be examined, while all other Member States received 47.6%. For the quarterly period from 13 June to 14 October 2027, Hungary and Italy will have to examine a maximum of 23,148 and 24,048 applications respectively, while Germany will have to examine a maximum of 1,122, Austria 123, Belgium 318, France 1,845, Spain 9,903 and Greece 6,564.

The situation will not be any better after 2027 when the review takes place. Due to the specificity of the calculation methodology, the more (and registered!) a Member State protects itself, i.e. protects the security of its citizens, the higher its share of the number of applications to be examined will be. And the reverse is also true: a Member State that is not defending, or is defending but reporting low numbers to Frontex, will have a low share.

In the case of the Implementing Decision, the breaking points were already visible at the

time of its adoption: in 2023, during the last round of negotiations, Hungary and Poland (the former right-wing government) took a negative position, but it should also be stressed that four Member States, Lithuania, Slovakia, Malta and Bulgaria, abstained. Earlier, however, at the EU summit, EU heads of state and government decided that they would seek full consensus on the migration pact. Any deviation from this would violate the principle of loyal cooperation enshrined in the treaties, which binds the parties both in their relations with each other and in their relations with the EU.[\[3\]](#)

Although the Migration Pact is declared to be a confidence-building instrument, and to strike a balance between collective responsibility and solidarity, the first Implementing Decision of the Pact does not even show solidarity, nor does it show any alignment with reality. The calculation methodology places a disproportionate burden on those Member States, including Hungary, which are the most vocal in their opposition to the current EU migration policy and already bear the greatest burden of migratory pressure. Unfortunately, such legislative products will not change migration, will not improve public security and will not strengthen the EU in the world, but will certainly increase internal tensions.

On 12 October, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced at his party's congress that they will reject the Migration Pact. Poland will be tough and relentless on illegal migration, and will only enforce European migration laws that do not endanger the country's security. If you want to work or study in Poland, you must respect Polish norms and customs, you must integrate. This is the spirit behind the new Polish migration strategy, which will be presented on 15 October[\[4\]](#).

The Hungarian interest is simple and clear:

- the Migration Pact should be completely rethought, and its Implementing Decisions should be in line with reality and Member States' interests. Those who disagree with the Migration Pact should be exempted.
- In the name of the much-vaunted solidarity, the EU funding of border protection costs in Hungary should be resolved – also retroactively – and the solutions and efforts used there should be recognised.
- Hungary should not be disproportionately and unfairly punished by court judgments using migration as a pretext.

Summary

Contrary to previous efforts, the Migration Pact was not adopted by consensus. Its Implementing Decision, applicable from 12 June 2026 to 14 October 2027, sets out (i) the

respective border capacity of each Member State and (ii) the maximum number of applications per year to be examined by Member States in the framework of the border procedure. The data show that it does not include the solidarity principle that has been invoked before. The calculation methodology places a disproportionate burden on those Member States, including Hungary, which are the most vocal in their opposition to the current EU migration policy. According to the Implementing Decision, the total number of irregular border crossings and refused entries in the EU as a whole is 1,318,040, of which Hungary accounts for 338,978 and Italy for 352,191, representing 25.7% and 26.7% respectively. The disproportionality and unfairness of this calculation is unsustainable and needs to be corrected immediately.

Forcing Hungary to handle a quarter of the applications would place an enormous burden on the Hungarian border and authorities, including the need to build the necessary (but unspecified) capacity. The mass of people accumulated in camps on the Hungarian side of the border would also pose security, health, administrative and logistical challenges, which the EU is also afraid would tie the hands of the Hungarian government in dealing with them. It is also unclear what financial framework the EU will allocate to address this issue.

For other reasons, but fundamentally because of the security issue, Poland is also becoming increasingly vocal in its opposition to illegal migration, which could pave the way for a common V3 / V4 position on migration and joint action.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán recently presented the priorities of the Hungarian Presidency in the European Parliament. One of the priorities he highlighted was the seriousness of the migration crisis, the importance of protecting external borders and the need for the EU to provide substantial support, noting that “the EU asylum system is not working today”. He then proposed a regular summit of Schengen leaders and the full extension of the Schengen agreement to Bulgaria and Romania.

The main objective of the European Council meeting on 17 and 18 October was to reinforce and accelerate operational measures in line with and feeding on the comprehensive approach^[5] negotiated and adopted in 2023. The main points of the meeting were enhanced external action, reinforcing control at the EU’s external borders, increasing and accelerating the number of returns and the use of migrants as a tool, and combating trafficking and smuggling of human beings.

The increasingly visible increase in migratory pressure is, understandably, having a significant impact on the domestic policies of individual Member States. One after the other, increasingly radical measures are being taken. Almost day by day, taboos are being broken

down. On the one hand, because voters are voicing their concerns about the deterioration of public safety and the ‘gradual loss of their cultural values’ in general, and are doing so with increasing intensity, as they vote for radical parties classified as extreme right-wing, in increasing numbers year after year. On the other hand, the leaders who have thus come to power, responding to the main demands of their citizens, are presenting their fellow citizens with increasingly radical proposals to solve, or at least alleviate, a gradually growing problem.

Attitudes in Western European countries have also changed significantly in recent times. The French legislature also seems to be hardening its tone on immigration policy. The threefold objective of the situation, which calls for concrete and immediate action, is to strengthen controls, increase controls on the issuing of legal residence permits and reduce them, and increase the number of expulsions. It is significant that 40 of the 86 articles of the immigration law^[6] initially proposed by the French National Assembly in December 2023, which was only voted on with great difficulty, were immediately annulled by the Constitutional Court. Ursula von der Leyen herself is also taking a more assertive stance in calling for improved cooperation with countries of origin and transit. In addition to reinforcing the refugee camps in Albania, the Commission President is also pushing for agreements with Senegal and Mali to open new “return centres”, along the lines of the migration conventions with Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon. It can also be assumed that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz did not express his personal convictions when he ordered the closure of the borders. The state elections and the increasingly spectacular success of the AFD, reflecting the increasingly radicalised preferences of the German electorate, have clearly played a role in this decision^[7].

Recommendations

1. the Implementing Decision in this form penalises those Member States who protect the EU borders, therefore the EU must fundamentally rethink its own migration policy and change the flawed way of calculating
2. the Hungarian government needs more allies among the Member States, recognising that the common interest
3. Hungarian and Polish experts should draw attention to the dangers of EU migration policy in every possible forum, and argue their case with data to support their own case
4. in the case of migration, the political positions of Poland and Hungary have visibly converged, and there is a need to open up discussions and exchanges of experience at expert level in order to take joint action.

[1]
https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_hu

[2] <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/HU/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32024D2150>

[3]
https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2023/06/a-migranskvotanak-az-unios-egyseg-latja-karat#google_vignette

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<https://hu.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/10/12/ideiglenesen-felfuggeszthetik-a-menedekjog-ot-lengyelorszagban-belarusz>

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[7]
<https://www.ludovika.hu/blogok/ot-perc-europa-blog/2024/10/17/a-migracio-kerdese-az-europai-politika-homloktereben/>



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By János Matuz

Poland has consistently opposed the Nord Stream projects, viewing them as contrary to its national interests, while Hungary has maintained a neutral stance. Due to the current geopolitical climate, including sanctions on Russia, it is unlikely that the pipelines will be recommissioned anytime soon. The article highlights wider concerns about the loss of Europe's global competitiveness, especially compared to the US and China, to which high energy prices are unfortunately a major contributor. Both Poland and Hungary are urged to diversify their energy sources and expand renewable energy and nuclear power capacities in response to the present challenges.

Nord Stream

Poland has always opposed the construction of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines linking Germany to Russia and, as Rafał Libera summarizes in his study of 11 September 2024^[1], would consider it contrary to Polish interests to restart them: "The recommissioning of the Nord Stream gas pipelines poses significant strategic risks that outweigh any potential short-term economic benefits."

Hungary has always taken a neutral position on the construction and operation of the Nord Stream pipelines. Germany has the right to decide on its energy mix and the sources (domestic production or imports) of its energy mix, of course taking into account its international commitments, most importantly the sanctions against Russia. Subsection 2 of Article 194 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) declares that it is the Member State's right to determine the conditions for exploiting its energy resources, its choice between different energy sources and the general structure of its energy supply.

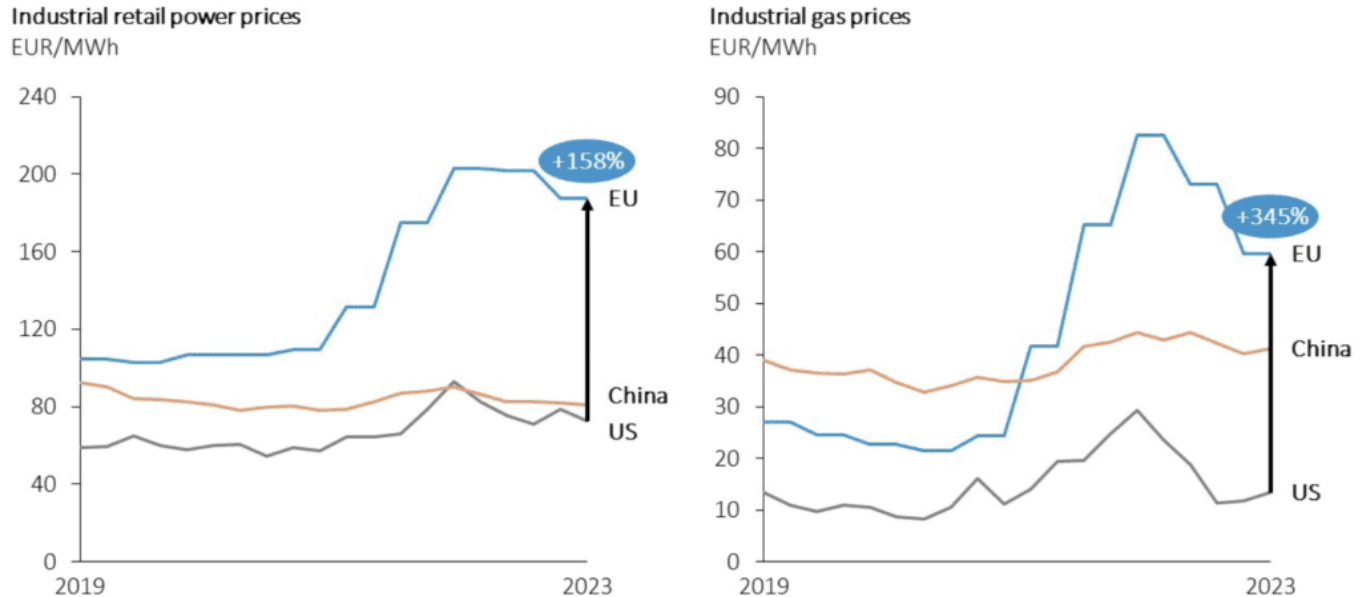
I do not think that in the current environment of sanctions, the recommissioning of the Nord Stream pipelines could be on the agenda in the foreseeable future. This would require significant changes in the war in Ukraine, in the international landscape and in the sanction packages currently in place. Hungary has always taken a cautious stance on sanctions against Russia but has not blocked their adoption, and Hungary also voted for them. Hungary has defended and is defending its energy security, and its position is that the EU should not adopt sanctions that would punish the EU primarily for its own sake and would not contribute in any meaningful way to ending the war.

I do not think that Poland, or even the V4 countries together, would have a significant influence on the recommissioning of the Nord Stream pipelines, just as Poland did not have

a significant influence on the construction and operation of them. However, a recommissioning is a theoretical issue in the foreseeable future and a lot should be changed in the World to get it on the agenda.

It is obvious that the blowing up of the Nord Stream pipelines has caused legal, financial, political, reputation, and in every other aspect damage to Germany in the first place. Looking at the graph of energy prices, it is also obvious that the war in Ukraine and the replacement of Russian pipeline gas with LNG gas has caused enormous damage to the European Union as a whole. As Mr. Mario Draghi, the former president of the ECB worded in his Report, which was published in September 2024: “But this source of relatively cheap energy has now disappeared at huge cost to Europe. The EU has lost more than a year of GDP growth while having to re-direct massive fiscal resources to energy subsidies and building new infrastructure for importing liquefied natural gas”[2].

Electricity prices are 1.58 times those in the US and China, natural gas prices are 3.45 times higher in the EU than in the US and we are happy that the prices have fallen significantly from their peaks.



Source: European Commission, 2024. Based on Eurostat (EU), EIA (US) and CEIC (China), 2024 (Mario Draghi: The future of European competitiveness, September 2024)

Therefore, unfortunately, it is not the future of the Nord Stream pipelines (over which we have no real impact) that we need to worry about, but the future of Europe! It is in the interest of Poland, Hungary and all Member States to have a strong Europe. Unfortunately,

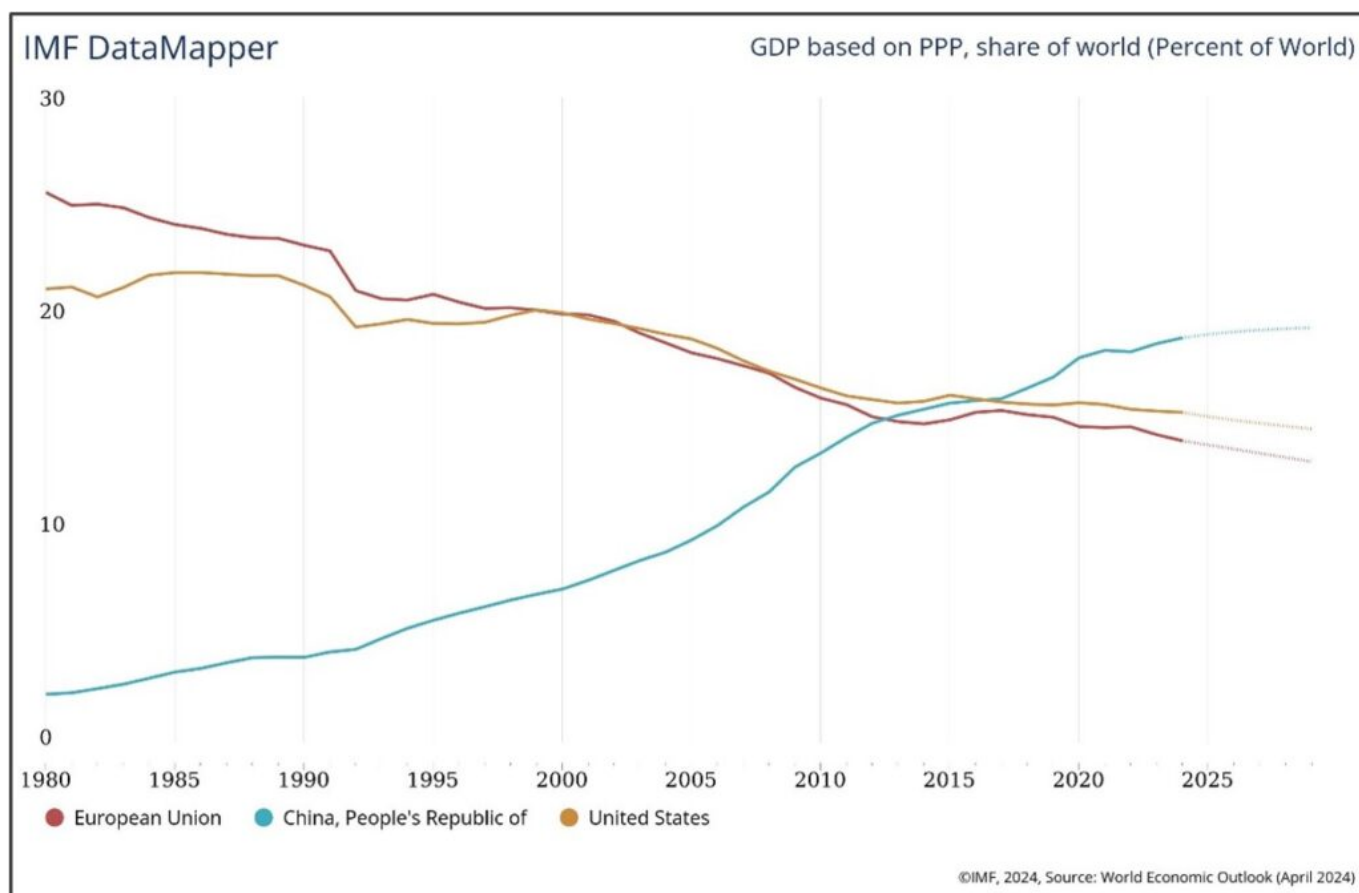
today the opposite is true: Europe has perhaps never been so weak. And unfortunately, the trend is also very negative: Europe is getting weaker every day, while our competitors, the United States and China, are getting stronger!

Falling competitiveness and productivity in Europe

“Across different metrics, a wide gap in GDP has opened up between the EU and the US, driven mainly by a more pronounced slowdown in productivity growth in Europe. Europe’s households have paid the price in foregone living standards. On a per capita basis, real disposable income has grown almost twice as much in the US as in the EU since 2000[3]”. Mr. Draghi in his Report sounded the alarm: we are lagging behind and need to improve our competitiveness mainly by raising productivity! He prescribed three “remedies for the prescription”: (i) Europe shall accelerate innovation and find new growth engines; (ii) Europe must bring down high energy prices while continuing to decarbonize and shift to a circular economy; (iii) Europe can no longer rely on others for its security. He is right in this respect, but we are at least two decades too late, and we need to catch up now!

The largest economy in the world today is China with about 19.01% of world GDP. The United States is the second largest, with 15.5% of world GDP. The EU was in third place, with 14.7%. (Based on PPP standard.). In 1980 the EU was the largest economy with its 25.84% share, the US was the second with 21.31% and China had 2.26% share.[4] China passed us in 2017, and all future estimates indicate the growing share of China in the world GDP. And, unfortunately not only in GDP but in many other areas the Chinese share is growing such as research and innovation, commerce and defense. Neither the Member States, nor the EU is able to defend itself, we all rely on NATO, and within NATO primarily the US military forces. This fact in itself raises the question of the sovereignty of the Member States and the EU, but this topic is beyond the scope of this article. At this point, it should be noted that Poland spends the most on defense as a proportion of GDP in NATO, 4.12%, but still one quarter of the 32 NATO Members are below the expected 2% defense spending[5].

The Visegrad Group – does this cooperation (still) exist? What are the common interests of Poles and Hungarians in the V4?



High energy prices are hindering economic growth and investment, increasing the exodus of Energy-intensive industries (EIIs) (chemicals, basic metals, non-metallic minerals and paper), which can lead to a vicious circle.

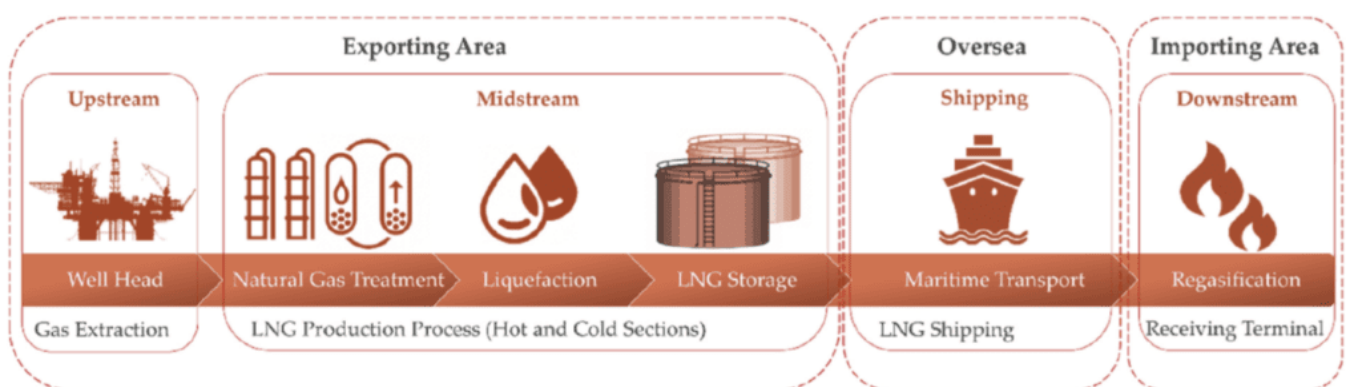
The EU' Green Deal is far more ambitious than the non-binding aims of the US and China, which results higher investment costs in the EU than in the US and China and naturally these higher investment costs burden mainly EU companies. Additionally, the EU is the only major player, who applies significant CO2 price. As a result, the EU must focus more than ever on balancing its decarbonization goals with competitiveness.

Environmental examination of LNG vs pipeline natural gas

The EU is the biggest global gas and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) importer but a systematic review for the sustainability of LNG has not been in focus unfortunately in the Western Hemisphere. There is no holistic life cycle environmental, economic, and social impact assessment for the LNG industry considering the entire value chain activities from gas extraction/processing to final consumption^[6]. In 2022, US LNG shipments were around

The Visegrad Group – does this cooperation (still) exist? What are the common interests of Poles and Hungarians in the V4?

50% more expensive than average pipeline gas imported into the EU, but we do not know the environmental impact difference between the US LNG shipments and the Russian pipeline natural gas import. Mitigating methane emissions is vital in meeting global climate targets, but there is a lack of understanding of emissions and abatement opportunities to enable this. The natural gas supply chain is a key emission source, where methane emissions from liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipping have been just started to be measured[7].



Source: Hussein Al-Yafei, Saleh Aseel, Murat Kucukvar, Nuri C. Onat, Ahmed Al-Sulaiti, Abdulla Al-Hajri: A systematic review for sustainability of global liquified natural gas, Energy Strategy Reviews, 2021

Nuclear energy

Nuclear energy contributes both to the energy sovereignty of the EU and its climate goals. These two factors gave a new impetus to the nuclear industry in the EU in the recent years, which it deserved a lot. There are 100 reactor units in twelve Member States with an average age of 38-years[8]. In 2023 the nuclear reactors contributed 23% of the electricity production in the EU, while in 2004 they produced 34% of the electricity. Out of the 100 there are 56 reactors in France, while the last three nuclear power plants were shut down on 15 April 2023[9] in the largest economy of the EU, in Germany. France intends to increase its nuclear power plant fleet in the future, while Germany has chosen to cover its energy needs with the increase of the capacity of renewables. There are 59 nuclear reactors under construction in the World, 25 are built in China and only three in Europe (France, Slovakia and Hungary). There are serious plans to build new reactors in Poland but we have to note that the average time to build nuclear power plants was over 10 years in 2023 and construction periods are continuously growing.

Key factors in energy policy

Whether a country has access to the sea or not is (also) a key factor in energy policy. Hungary is one of the five EU Member States (along with Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Luxembourg) that does not have one. This is obviously a serious disadvantage in terms of energy sovereignty. Poland has an LNG terminal in Świnoujście since 2015 and it plans to finish its floating FSRU (Floating Storage Regasification Unit) in the Gdańsk region in 2027/2028. In addition to the LNG terminals provided by the seaports, Poland has access to the North Sea gas fields through the Baltic Pipe with a capacity of 10 bcm per year since 27 September 2022, one day after the explosions of Nord Stream 1 and 2. The Baltic Pipe Project was recognised as a Project of Common Interest of the European Union. With this successful diversification, Poland is able to import natural gas from Norway and Russia through Baltic Pipe and Yamal and from any LNG exporter in the World.

In terms of energy policy, Hungary has the advantage of being in the middle of Europe and having seven neighbours. Hungary has bidirectional interconnection points with Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Croatia, and Serbia, as well as a unidirectional entry point from Austria. Our disadvantage is the existing limits of capacities. To develop interconnectors and establish new capacities, the expansion of both the Hungary-Slovakia and the Romania-Hungary interconnectors became part of the latest, fifth edition European Union list of Projects of Common Interest (PCI). Regarding the Romania-Hungary interconnector, expansion of its existing capacity in the direction Romania-Hungary increased to 2.6 bcma in 2023. Upgrading to a level of 4.4 bcma could make a significant contribution to Hungarian supply source diversification efforts, since in the mid-term either Romanian Black Sea gas, gas from Azerbaijan, or Greek and Turkish LNG may arrive in Hungary via this route. Slovenia is Hungary's only neighboring country without a direct natural gas interconnector to Hungary. Negotiations on the Hungary-Slovenia project for a new Hungary-Slovenia interconnection are ongoing between the two countries[\[10\]](#).

The Visegrad Group – does this cooperation (still) exist? What are the common interests of Poles and Hungarians in the V4?



The energy mix of Poland and Hungary is very different from each other. The share of natural gas is more than double of Poland's, while Poland has the highest solid fuels ratio in the EU.

Share of energy products in total final energy consumption, 2021 (in %) Source: Eurostat[\[11\]](#)

	Poland	Hungary	EU
Total petroleum products	35.3%	30.4%	34.6%
Electricity	16.7%	19.1%	22.8%
Natural gas	15.1%	32.6%	23.3%
Renewable energy	12.1%	10.9%	11.8%
Derived heat	8.1%	5.7%	4.9%
Solid fuels	12.7%	1.4%	2.6%

Hungary produces most of its electricity from its nuclear power plant (44.3%), while Poland makes it via fossil fuels (82.5%). Since Hungary is a landlocked country in the Carpathian

The Visegrad Group – does this cooperation (still) exist? What are the common interests of Poles and Hungarians in the V4?

Basin its wind energy potential is relatively low, while wind is the strongest renewable energy source in Poland. Poland has also become a frontrunner of solar energy in the CEE region, it made huge investments in solar energy and through the first seven months of 2023, solar-powered electricity generation in Poland was 11.3 Terawatt hours (TWh) and was 5.8 TWh in Hungary[\[12\]](#).

Production of electricity by source, 2021 (in %) Source: Eurostat[\[13\]](#)

	Poland	Hungary	EU
Fossil fuels	82.5%	35.5%	36.5%
Nuclear	0.0%	44.3%	25.3%
Wind	9.1%	1.8%	13.4%
Hydro	1.3%	0.6%	12.1%
Biofuels	4.3%	5.7%	5.3%
Solar	2.2%	10.5%	5.7%
Other	0.6%	1.6%	1.8%

Both countries are making serious efforts to increase their renewable energy sources. Poland plans to build nuclear power plants for 2035, Hungary works on the lifetime extension of its Paks Nuclear Power Plant 1 and intends to build Paks Nuclear Power Plant 2 for 2033/2034. However, a country's energy mix cannot be changed overnight, but persistent and consistent professional work and a broad social consensus, regardless of changes of government, can change it substantially in the long term. Now the big question how quickly, we can do the change? As Mr. Draghi emphasized – and I agree with him in this respect – the EU face with an existential challenge now. And in order to raise productivity, which is the key to success, „Europe must bring down high energy prices”. Therefore Poland, Hungary and all other Member States shall do everything to bring down the high energy prices to handle the existential challenge we are facing.

Conclusion and recommendations

Neither the V4 together, nor the V4 individually, have any meaningful influence on the Nord Stream project, nor did they have any when it was built and put into operation. Moreover, I do not consider its relaunch a realistic option in the current international context. On the other hand, Europe's competitiveness gap with the US and China is very worrying and Draghi's expression of an existential challenge is not at all an overstatement. At current European energy prices, it is not possible to produce competitively and the longer they stay with us, the worse the consequence will be. Therefore, reducing energy prices is in the

interest of all Member States including Poland and Hungary.

The primary interests of both Poland and Hungary are (i) to expand all their energy networks and their capacities to diversify supply and to increase the security of supply; (ii) to increase the share of renewable energy sources; (iii) to develop their national energy networks; (iv) to develop their nuclear power plants. On these issues, there is a need for a regular exchange of views among decision-makers, experts and academics.

[1] Libera, Rafał: [Evaluating the potential recommissioning of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines – the Polish perspective – Instytut Sobieskiego](#), 11 September 2024

[2] Mario Draghi: The future of European competitiveness, September 2024

[3] Mario Draghi: The future of European competitiveness, September 2024

[4] Data source: IMF Datamapper

[5] Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024), Press Release, NATO, 12 June 2024

[6] Hussein Al-Yafei, Saleh Aseel, Murat Kucukvar, Nuri C. Onat, Ahmed Al-Sulaiti, Abdulla Al-Hajri: A systematic review for sustainability of global liquified natural gas, Energy Strategy Reviews, 2021

[7] Paul Balcombe, Dalia A. Heggo, and Matthew Harrison: Total Methane and CO₂ Emissions from Liquefied Natural Gas, Carrier Ships: The First Primary Measurements, Environmental Science and Technology, 2022

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[9] The nuclear phase-out in Germany, 31 January 2024, Federal Office for the Safety of Nuclear Waste Management, Germany

[10] [Natural Gas Transmission – Natural Gas Transmission – Our Businesses – MOLGroup](#)

[11] [Shedding light on energy in the EU – 2023 edition – Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)

[12]

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/poland-hungary-become-key-new-drivers-europes-solar-growth-maguire-2024-08-20/#:~:text=Both%20Poland%20and%20Hungary%20-%20the>

[13] [Shedding light on energy in the EU – 2023 edition – Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)



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By PhD Spasimir Domaradzki

Over the past two decades, the European Union's enlargement policy has transformed from an enlargement effort into a tool for managing its immediate surroundings. Thus, the enlargement policy has lost its credibility in the eyes of the candidate countries. Enlargement is not an attractive topic within the EU either, and European societies are cautious about the prospect of new members. Today, in the face of a return to rivalry in international relations, the enlargement policy must regain credibility, both within the EU and towards the countries queuing for membership.

Towards the Polish Presidency

Although the details of the Polish presidency of the Council of the European Union have not been officially presented to this day, it can be concluded from the expose of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski that its main theme will be broadly understood security. Among the main aspects will be the strengthening of the transatlantic community and the emphasis on the inextricable link between the European project and democracy and the rule of law. Enlargement policy is also one of the priorities. Importantly, from the Polish perspective, the eastern and Balkan directions of enlargement reinforce each other. Polish's goal in the context of enlargement policy is to synchronize the foreign policy of the candidate countries with EU values.[\[1\]](#)

Minister for European Affairs Adam Szłapka also mentions among the main priorities Polish strengthening transatlantic cooperation, EU enlargement and broadly understood security, in many dimensions, i.e. m.in energy security, defence and defence industry, border protection, counteracting hybrid threats, as well as mass disinformation.[\[2\]](#)

A brief diagnosis of the weaknesses of the EU's enlargement policy

The enlargement policy is, at least formally, considered one of the most important and successful policies of the European Union. The justification for this argument is the fact that since the 1950s, the process of European integration has consistently included other

countries. It was only the formal exit of the United Kingdom in 2020 that put an end to the belief in the one-way and borderless process of enlargement of the European Union.

However, while Brexit can be considered a shock in the history of the European Union, or an exception to the rule of a permanently effective policy of the European Union aimed at further enlargement, the policy of enlargement of the European Union itself is undergoing a kind of metamorphosis, which is moving it further and further away from its essence, i.e. the process of admitting new countries. There are many reasons for this and due to the narrow scope of this text, I will mention only some of them casually.

Already at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Otton Anastasakis^[3] pointed out that the European Union's enlargement policy was changing its weight. While the main goal of the 2004/2007 enlargements was to complete the process of joining the countries that expressed their desire for membership, after the fifth wave of enlargement, the European Union is placing much more emphasis on the path to membership itself. From the perspective of the last fifteen years, the effects of this change are more than visible. Only Croatia joined the European Union in 2013, and with Brexit included, the Union shrank rather than expanded.

What is more, the “waiting room” for membership, in which the countries of the Western Balkans have been since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, has become a kind of permanent state in which the candidate countries endure. Moreover, with the return to open geopolitical competition with Russia, Ukraine and Moldova were also included among the candidate countries, which in practice even undermined the logic of the enlargement policy itself, which until 2022, even if only formally, had so far differed from the neighbourhood policy.

It is a logical contradiction that in the case of the Balkan states, the conflicts of the 1990s were a justification for their different treatment and a longer path to the EU, while in the case of Ukraine, it turned out that it was the full-scale Russian aggression that led to obtaining the status of a candidate country. A status that even the Association Agreement between Kiev and Brussels did not provide.

An extremely important, albeit scrupulously marginalised, problem of enlargement policy is enlargement fatigue, which has evolved over the last twenty years. At first, it manifested itself in the fear of an influx of workers or impoverishment among the societies of the countries already belonging to the EU. The European elites decided that the best remedy for this problem is silence and time. However, time has not dispelled fears, and subsequent crises have had a negative impact on the prospect of further EU enlargement. The economic

and migration crisis have overshadowed social tensions within the European Union, but have not solved their foundations. What is more, the tangible development of new EU members and the prolonged stagnation in the so-called “old” Union also fuel demanding attitudes. Little has been done to dilute the pre-accession stereotypes that still divide Europe into ‘east’ and ‘west’ or ‘old’ and ‘new’. It is therefore no coincidence that, whenever they are asked, the populations of the ‘old’ Member States in particular are sceptical about the prospect of further enlargements[\[4\]](#).

Another factor is the process of politicization of the integration process. Supporters of deepening integration dreamed of politicising the integration process, which they saw as the most effective tool for transferring further competences to the EU level. However, when it turned out that the Treaty of Lisbon expanded and strengthened the EU institutions in relation to nation states, politicization also took the face of “resistance to the European dictate”. Interestingly, the more resistance to EU decisions, the more fiercely EU institutions try to impose their vision.

Until now, the next stages of the integration process have been determined by successive treaties. However, when it turned out that for over a decade there had been no good will to adopt another treaty, the EU institutions began to implement the policy of *fait accompli*, using all possible non-treaty tools, including blowing up the administration, using judgments of the Court of Justice of the European Union[\[5\]](#) to overinterpret the provisions of the Treaties, or abuse their competences. The enlargement policy fell victim to these actions, and became hostage to political bargaining on treaty reform.

Allegedly, such a reform is necessary for the smooth functioning of the EU, although it completely ignores the fact that the UK’s exit has left an institutional gap that the “waiting room” states could quickly fill. In this sense, the enlargement policy has become hostage to a blind effort to deepen integration and, above all, to weaken the role of the state in the integration process. This can be seen in the proposals of pro-federal think-tanks, combining enlargement policy with treaty reform, which, from promoting qualified majority voting (QMV) to abandoning full integration in favour of staged integration, seek above all to weaken the role of the member states at the expense of EU institutions. As if further EU enlargement without deepening integration was not possible at all.

An equally important problem is the instrumentalisation of enlargement policy at the national level. The politicization of the integration process has caused that today the attitude towards the EU positions voters on the political scene. Recognising the potential of politicising the integration process at the national level, politicians have begun to use the European Union in their political rhetoric. Some, like President Macron, have gone even

further, using EU policies for their own political ends, such as vetoing the start of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in 2019.

Enlargement policy has also become hostage to bilateral relations between member states and candidates. And although this thread is not a novelty in the integration process, it is now a convenient justification for the lack of progress in relations between the European Union and the candidate countries.

Equally important is the decline in public support for membership among the societies of the candidate countries. At the same time, the justification that this is due to Russian propaganda^[6] completely obscures the fact that the societies of the Balkan countries are tired with the prospect of endless enlargement. Moreover, the recent elections in North Macedonia in April and May 2024 have shown that challenging the negotiating framework with the European Union is an effective electoral strategy.

Looking at the EU's relations with the candidate countries of the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova, one can get the impression that today "European values" play the role of a "protective shield" against accession to the Union, rather than an expression of common principles constituting the basis for cooperation. Thus, today we are dealing with the instrumentalisation of enlargement policy as a tool of everyday politics and not as the overarching objective of the European Union. Moreover, the desire to use enlargement policy as a justification for deepening the integration process also makes it a hostage within EU politics.

Until now, the European Union has consistently based its relations with candidate countries on the principle of conditionality, which is justified when there is a sincere desire on the part of the candidate to join. Then, the pressure is a natural consequence of the liberal-institutional conviction that, firstly, the candidate countries uncritically strive for membership at all costs and, secondly, that the European Union is unchangeable in relation to them. From the perspective of the last decade, both of these assumptions seem passé.

Both the new enlargement methodology of 2020 and the concept of enlargement and internal reforms of the European Union of 2024 are not attempts to make the enlargement process more dynamic and implement the enlargement process for countries in the "waiting room" for membership, but steps justifying the lack of enlargement. Emphasising the rule of law in a situation where there are countries in the European Union that have not yet managed to reform the judiciary, fight corruption or organised crime is an example of hypocrisy rather than credibility and has a negative impact on the perception of the European Union in the candidate countries. Moreover, taking into account the current mood

in the European Union countries, linking the reform of the European Union with enlargement depreciates the enlargement policy and deprives it of any subjectivity.

Hungary, Poland, enlargement policy

The current Polish-Hungarian relations are based not so much on separate priorities as on their interpretation. While both countries condemn Russian aggression and advocate for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, they see relations with the Ukrainian authorities in a completely different way. Moreover, there is a public awareness in Poland that the severing of economic ties with Russia entails social and economic costs, while the Hungarian authorities believe that condemnation and cooperation with the Russian Federation go hand in hand. However, the Hungarian veto, blocking the payment of funds to Poland related to the costs made for Ukraine, remains incomprehensible and serves only Russian interests.[\[7\]](#)

A similar discrepancy should be emphasised in the context of the relations between the two countries and the EU institutions. While the European Commission has completed the Article 7 procedure against Poland, relations between Budapest and Brussels remain difficult. Moreover, in specific cases, such as the Georgian “law on foreign agents” and the de facto Hungarian reluctance to support Ukraine, these are serious enough issues that negatively affect the willingness to cooperate between Poland and Hungary. There is therefore a fear that in this case too, the enlargement policy is becoming hostage to different visions not only of integration, but also of relations with Brussels and its neighbours, which will have negative consequences for the efforts to renew the enlargement policy.

Given the nuances in the approach of Poland and Hungary to enlargement policy, it seems realistic to concentrate energy at points of convergence. First of all, it concerns efforts to regain the subjectivity of the enlargement policy, to free it from the muzzle of discussion on the reform of the European Union, and to hold an honest debate on its legitimacy. All the more so because delaying or not enlarging will make candidate countries a source of potential geopolitical instability.

Recommendations

Both Poland and Hungary are among the countries that unequivocally support the policy of further enlargement of the European Union. At the same time, they differ in their attitude towards Ukraine, but they agree on the vision of enlargement to include the countries of the Western Balkans. Since the enlargement policy is a clearly defined priority of the foreign policy of both countries, the successive presidencies of the Council of the European Union

should be used to emphasise the need to increase the importance of this policy in the hierarchy of priorities of the European Union.

1. First of all, it is necessary to return to the subjectivity of this policy, separating it from the discussion for the reform of the European Union. Restoring the policy of extension to the primary objective of the integration process is essential to regaining its credibility. In addition, the lack of a clear vision and political will to change the treaties demotivates candidate countries, which see that the lack of progress in reforming the EU is tantamount to a lack of progress in the enlargement policy.
2. Second, both Hungary and Poland can use the time to emphasise the need to return to clear, measurable and unambiguous membership criteria. This is a necessary step not only to improve the enlargement policy but, above all, to regain the credibility of the European Union among the countries that are on the path to membership for more than two decades.
3. Thirdly, an effort should be made to return to the internal EU discussion on the objectives and limits of the enlargement process. Today, there is no social awareness on this subject, and in Western European countries it is even a taboo subject. This debate must go hand in hand with increased dynamism in relations with the candidate countries.
4. Fourthly, it is necessary to be critical of the current state of relations between the EU and the Western Balkan countries. The situation regarding the fight against corruption or the captured state in the Western Balkans is no better than the one in Ukraine. For more than a decade, the term that best describes the state of these relations has been stabilitocracy, which is equidistant from democracy and membership in the European Union. A return to competition in Europe requires consolidating efforts to complete the process of European unification within the European Union and demarcation of its borders. Certainly, this is an easier task in the context of the Western Balkans than in Ukraine. Nevertheless, an effort should be made to convince societies and elites that a completed community based on the same principles, rights and opportunities consolidates peace in Europe and reduces the possibility of external entities influencing political processes in Europe. Even if not all members are always up to the task of being members of this community.

[1] Information of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the tasks of Polish foreign policy in 2024, available at:

<https://www.gov.pl/web/libia/informacja-ministra-spraw-zagranicznych-o-zadaniach-polskiej-polityki-zagranicznej-w-2024-r>

[2] Senate: Szłapka: preparations for the Polish presidency of the EU Council are going according to the calendar, Local Government Portal, 24.07.2024

<https://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/senat-szlapka-przygotowania-do-polskiej-prezydencji-w-radzie-ue-ida-zgodnie-z-kalendarzem,559220.html>

[3] Anastasakis, O. (2008) 'The EU's political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach', Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 8(4): 365-377.

[4] Fragmentary ECFR surveys published in December 2023 indicate that there is no clear majority support for membership of any of the candidate countries. Mared Gwyn Jones, Public opinion split on EU enlargement as leaders gear up for crunch decisions, Euronews, 12.12.2023,
<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/12/public-opinion-split-on-eu-enlargement-as-leaders-gear-up-for-crunch-decisions>

[5] See. Judgment of the Criminal Code of 5 May 2020, file ref. no. 2 BvR 859/15, 2 BvR1651/15, 2 BvR 2006/15, 2 BvR 980/16, ECLI:DE:BverfG:2020:rs20200505.2bvr085915; Magdalena Baińczyk, Commentary on the judgment of the Criminal Code of 5 May 2020 on ECB bonds, Studia Prawnicze. Dissertations and Materials 2020, No. 2 (27), pp.257-271

[6] Support for Serbia's membership in the EU is declining. "Pro-Russian sympathies are growing", Bankier.pl, 30.04.2024,
<https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Spada-poparcie-dla-czlonkostwa-Serbii-w-UE-Prorosyjskie-sympatie-rosna-8738495.html>

[7] Hungary is blocking billions for Poland. Kaczyński reacted, WP Wiadomości, 11.07.2024
<https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/wegry-blokuja-miliardy-dla-polski-kaczynski-zareagowal-7047949117201312a>



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