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Research Article

HUNGARY'S POSITION ON THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATION IN THE VISEGRAD GROUP

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ABSTRACT

Visegrad Group (V4) composed of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia is a significant subregional partnership that has influenced the European Union's policies particularly in the area of migration policies. Although the group does not always speak with one voice in every policy area, Hungary became particularly estranged from the V4 due to its differing position on the Russia-Ukraine war. This study analyses the implications of Hungary's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war for the V4 cooperation. With this aim, it overviews the importance of the V4 in furthering Hungary's interests, searches for economic and political considerations influencing Hungary's position on the Russia-Ukraine war, and discusses the diverging positions of the rest of the block on the war with its implications for the V4 cooperation. The study benefits from the analysis of primary sources such as the V4 declarations and official statements, Hungarian presidency programs, Orbán's statements as well as the news and the secondary research. The study finds out that Hungary endorses the unified EU stance as long as it does not contradict its core interests among which its energy security prevails. Yet, Hungary's differing position on the war from that of the EU and the V4 by being pro-Russian as a result of being pro-Hungarian stems from its divergent views on security and foreign policy objectives. Although Hungary's stance on the war has affected the V4 cooperation adversely at the beginning, as there is no clear end to the Russia-Ukraine war soon, Hungary's partners shifted their attitudes to focus on their shared interests inside the V4 bloc rather than on what separates them.

Keywords: Hungary, Visegrad Group, Russia-Ukraine war, foreign policy, European Union.

INTRODUCTION

The Visegrad Group (V4) was founded in 1991 by Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (Czechoslovakia until 1993) to promote state-buildings through the establishment of independent and democratic systems free from the totalitarian elements of the Soviet era, and free market economies (Visegrad Group, 1991). Although collaboration was weak in the 1990s, they supported each other's integration process to the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Griessler, 2018: 146). Cooperation was improved once all four V4 countries were admitted as full members of the EU and NATO. Following that, they expressed a wish to continue their post-enlargement engagement with the EU and NATO on matters of mutual concern. In the Visegrad Declaration of 2004 (Visegrad Group, 2004a) and the Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation (Visegrad Group, 2004b), they reaffirmed their commitment to future EU enlargements for a "reunited" Europe and to increased cooperation in the Central European region by contributing to the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the Wider Europe.

Subregional partnerships are of significance to further their interests in EU politics. As a framework for cooperation among the four Central European states, even though it does not have a permanent institutionalized structure, these countries have found ways for regular collaboration both within the V4 and the EU which is their higher priority. It has become a routine for the heads of the V4 governments to come together ahead of the EU summits. There is a wide range of policy areas for collaboration among which energy policy, the Eastern neighbourhood and defence policy prevail. This subregional partnership has proven to be a valuable platform for their common needs and goals to be better represented and articulated. Yet, it is not always the case for the V4 countries to agree on common bargaining positions and speak with one voice (Toro et al., 2014: 368-377).

The Russia-Ukraine war of 2022 has emerged as a significant cleavage among the V4. Since the beginning of the war, the EU has emphasized the necessity of acting with one voice and solidarity in its policies towards Russia to protect the security interests of the Union and the continent against which Russian aggression has been identified as a threat. However, due to several reasons such as economic ties with Russia, Euroscepticism and the rise of populism, Hungary under the rule of Viktor Orbán has been reluctant to join the EU's united front. This study revolves around the question of how Hungary's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war affects the V4 cooperation. Firstly, it searches for Hungary's position on the V4's collaborative initiatives and common interests under the rule of Viktor Orbán since 2010. Then, it ascertains the economic and political considerations influencing Hungary's initial response and evolving stance on the war. Lastly, the study evaluates the diverging positions of the V4 countries on the Russia-Ukraine war as a potential but suppressed area of conflict on the basis of these countries' diverging security approaches. The study benefits from the analysis of primary sources such as the V4 declarations and official statements, Hungarian presidency programs, Orbán's statements as well as the news and the secondary research. This study seeks to contribute to the contemporary literature

by providing an in-depth analysis of Hungary's position on the Russia-Ukraine war and its implications of the V4 cooperation with the inclusion of its populist and Eurosceptic national policies and their reflections on foreign policy.

THE VISEGRAD GROUP'S ROLE IN FURTHERING HUNGARY'S INTERESTS

When Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia have fulfilled their aims of integrating into Euro-Atlantic structures, the V4 has turned into a platform for an opportunity for its members to pursue their national interests at the regional level as well as the EU level with a view to find supporting partners. Hungary acknowledged "to defend Hungarian national interest at all times" while introducing its programme for the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2011. The Orbán government's 2011 strategy named the V4 as a crucial instrument for Hungarian foreign policy (Arato and Koller, 2018: 91). Besides, the V4 has increased its significance for Hungary under the governments of Orbán since Hungary has departed from the notion of liberal democracy and the values that the EU stands for in terms of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. As its democratic backsliding brought about criticisms by the European Commission and the European Parliament as well the actions taken within the context of infringement cases (Akgul Durakcay, 2023), the Hungarian government has demonstrated a tendency to view cooperation within the V4 as a tool to avoid Western isolation and to balance the "dictate" of Brussels (Sadecki, 2014: 33).

In line with this stance, Hungary uploaded its foreign policy priorities to the V4 agenda during its presidencies of the Group. When the Hungarian presidency programs since 2010 are analysed, it is seen that one of the priority issues in Hungary's foreign policy is energy security. Hungary is a country which is both dependent on the import of energy resources and lags behind the EU's energy policy transformation based on environmental concerns and pressures. For these reasons, the V4 platform is crucial for Hungary and the other members of the Group to develop new energy policy directions and solutions that would enable them to sustain national and regional energy security by decreasing the impairing effects of international interdependence (Dyduch and Skorek, 2020: 1-2). In this regard, during the 2013-2014 Hungarian Presidency of the V4, energy as a key policy area was placed under high-level working groups (Arato and Koller, 2018: 95). Energy security was named as a priority of the Hungarian Presidency of 2013-2014 with a view to reduce energy dependency through energy market integration and energy diversification (Visegrad Group, 2013).

Besides, energy security is an issue where the acknowledged common position of the V4 in the report of the Hungarian Presidency diverged from that of the EU concerning nuclear energy. In its report, the Hungarian Presidency pointed to their desire for the EU to consider nuclear energy as one of the supported low-carbon technologies, and to have their rights over national choices of the energy mix as they find most suitable without the EU's discrimination against nuclear energy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, 2014: 8). During its 2021-2022 Presidency of the V4, Hungary maintained nuclear energy

as one of its key areas for cooperation in its programme (Visegrad Group, 2021). At the meeting of the representatives of the European Affairs Committees of the Visegrad Group countries in April 2022, energy security which is of high significance due to the energy dependencies of the V4 countries on Russia was placed high on the agenda within the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. The V4 countries emphasized the need to gradually end the EU energy dependence on Russia, to diversify energy resources, to include nuclear energy as a green energy, and to take immediate actions to ease the impact of rising energy prices (Visegrad Group, 2022a).

Hungary's foreign policy document of 2011 put forth a value-based composition of national interests emphasizing national belonging that goes beyond the territorial borders of Hungary (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011: 4, qtd. in Griessler, 2018: 147). In this regard, promoting good relations with its immediate neighbourhood and regional interests came forward as a priority in Hungary's foreign policy. Since there are Hungarian minorities in the several countries of the neighbourhood, it is in Hungary's national interest to have good relations with and stability in the region. For this reason, cooperation with the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries is prioritized by Hungary and all the V4 countries making the platform crucial for Hungarian foreign policy priorities since Hungary considers the EU membership as the most successful instrument for stability and development of the region (Griessler, 2018: 141-147).

Within this context, during the 2013-2014 Hungarian Presidency of the V4, the Western Balkans and Croatia were included under the V4 plus (V4+) formats in V4+ meetings in 2013 (Arato and Koller, 2018: 95). Hungary during its 2017-2018 Presidency of the V4 composed its programme with the motto of "V4 connects" emphasizing political, economic, historical and cultural connections among the four countries as well as the role of the bloc in the EU. It underlined cooperation with Austria, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria within the V4+ formats, strengthening cooperation in security, defence and migration as a bloc within the EU to represent regional interests, prioritizing the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, and the Eastern Partnership (Visegrad Group, 2017). The main support for the candidacy of the Eastern Partnership countries came after the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 which coincided with the second half of the Hungarian V4 presidency. At the meeting of the representatives of the European Affairs Committees of the Visegrad Group countries in April 2022, the V4 condemned the acts of Russia, held Russia directly responsible for the war against Ukraine, undertaken to support the unified EU measures against Russia and supported European integration of Ukraine in the form of candidacy (Visegrad Group, 2022a).

Another significant area of concern for Hungarian foreign policy is national sovereignty. This has had utmost reflections on its migration policy. With the EU's migration crisis in 2015, Hungary tackled the issue of migration as a security threat requiring Hungary to protect its borders and the nation which brought about a stance that has been Eurosceptic due to contrary attitudes and policies (Canveren and Akgul Durakcay, 2017: 864-866). Arguing in favour of national-level immigration policies, Hungary began to upload its anti-

immigration policy as a new topic of cooperation in the V4 platform. Arato and Koller (2018: 99) point out that the V4 in its statement of the 2015-2016 Czech Presidency included a paragraph at Hungary's request on the insufficiency of the EU's migration policies to deal with the migration problem and their preference for voluntary options regarding resettlement and relocation in June 2015 even before the influx of migrants did not approach their borders. The V4 has turned into a "significant collective actor" (Cabada and Waisova, 2018: 10) influencing the EU's policy direction.

Hungary obtained the support of the V4 countries at the EU meetings for its position on strengthening the border controls, bringing up the security component of the issue and putting the term "migration" in use instead of the term "refugee" preferred by the EU (Arato and Koller, 2018: 99). In addition to diplomatic and political backing, Hungary received security assistance from the V4 countries (Visegrad Group, 2015). As opposed to the EU's shared responsibility and solidarity emphasis, the V4 has long refused the mandatory quota system to redistribute migrants –with a brief shift in Poland's position– and acted as a "unit" at subsequent EU meetings to find a mutual standpoint in defending their interests (Bauerova, 2018: 100-104). Reflecting a sharp division between the V4's "nationalist Europe" and the EU's "open, multicultural and cosmopolitan Europe" visions, the V4's alternative of flexible solidarity that would enable each member state to decide on their contribution to the EU's migration policy showed their sovereigntist and Eurosceptic approach (Strnad, 2022: 73-75). Another common attitude on the area of migration by the V4 was adopted during the second half of the Hungarian V4 presidency which coincided with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. V4 Prime Ministers at their meeting in March 2022 decided to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine and to support Ukrainian refugees especially in the V4 countries through the International Visegrad Fund (Visegrad Group, 2022b).

Hungary's another foreign policy interest is in a strong Europe. For this sake, during its presidencies of the V4, Hungary repeated the importance of defence as a key area of cooperation. In line with this, during Hungary's 2013-2014 Presidency of the V4, Budapest Declaration (Visegrad Group, 2014a) was adopted to further V4 security and defence cooperation and to continue the preparations for the V4 Battleground to establish it as a permanent force as complementary to the European and transatlantic security policies. Hungary uploaded its vision regarding the future of the EU in line with its populist foreign policy emphasizing sovereignty and the interests of the people, and resulting in challenging the EU integration (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021: 691-693). During its 2017-2018 Presidency of the V4, Hungary projected its vision for Europe as a "strong Europe of strong nations" where the opinion of every member state as well as the "voice" of European "citizens" would be heard more (Visegrad Group, 2017). The V4 countries issued a joint statement titled "Stronger Together" in 2018 and they presented their common position on the future of Europe to tackle the issue of democratic legitimacy by strengthening the role of national parliaments and considering the citizens' wishes (Visegrad Group, 2018). "Recharging Europe" was the motto of Hungary during its 2021-2022 Presidency of the V4. In its programme, Hungary maintained its key areas for cooperation such as nuclear energy, defence, migration and the immediate

neighbourhood. Hungary repeated the V4's interest in the "strong" and efficient EU which is possible through increasing the role of the member states in its decision-making procedures (Visegrad Group, 2021).

HUNGARY'S STANCE TOWARDS RUSSIA AFTER 2010 AND ITS POSITION ON THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

As of 2010, "Eastern opening" appeared to play a significant role in Orbán's economic recovery plans to establish closer economic cooperation with the emerging powers of China, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia and Russia in an attempt to diversify Hungary's economic relations as a remedy for the negative effects of the economic crisis experienced by Hungary's Western partners (Sadecki, 2014: 36-37). As Russia became the prominent partner in the Eastern Opening, it was deemed as Hungary's "most important and strategic partner outside of the EU". Their economic partnership was enhanced with the opening of Hungarian trade houses in Russia, supporting the South Stream project and agreeing to build the Paks II in 2014 as a new nuclear power station in collaboration with Rosatom to be financed by Russian banks. This in return increased Hungary's energy and political dependence on Russia (Gyori et al., 2015: 56-57). The development of deeper energy cooperation has gone hand in hand with political, economic, and cultural ties so Prime Minister Orbán has stated his belief in expanding the cooperation of the EU and NATO with Russia (Sadecki, 2014: 38).

Just after these developments, the Ukrainian conflict became a prominent issue in on the agendas of Hungary, the V4 and the EU. Hungary supported Ukraine's European integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, 2014: 24), territorial integrity and sovereignty after the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 in its official statements within the V4 group (Visegrad Group, 2014b). The main issue for Hungary in the Ukrainian conflict was the safety and rights of Hungarian minorities living in Ukraine. Hungarian foreign policy under Orbán placed a much greater emphasis on the national minorities residing in Hungary's bordering countries than before with the state assuming the responsibility for these minorities' fate in a constitutional provision (Sadecki, 2014: 34-36). Therefore, Orbán raised the rights of the ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine² because of their disenfranchisement to adopt Hungarian as the second

2 During the nation-building processes of both Hungary and Ukraine, their borders have shifted in accordance with the ends of the two World Wars, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Western region of Ukraine, Transcarpathia bordering Hungary, belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and Ukraine respectively during these processes (Dunai, 2023). According to the latest Ukrainian census, the Hungarian minority is the largest minority in the region of Transcarpathia, representing the 12.1% of the population and Hungarian language representing the 12.7% of the language structure (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001). The number of Hungarian speakers in Ukraine amounts to around 150.000 (The New York Times, 2018 qtd. in European Parliament, 2019). The issue of Hungarian minority rights has become controversial between the two countries since Ukraine embarked on changes in language, education and minority laws to curb the minority rights of Russians in Ukraine as a response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the conflicts in the Eastern region. Yet, Hungarian minority rights have been adversely affected by virtue of these changes. In this regard, Ukraine abolished in 2014 the entitlement of minori-

official language due to the abolishment of the language law as main concerns (Feledy, 2015: 75).

While the official statements issued under the V4 and the EU supported Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Orbán emphasized Hungary's neutrality in the conflict which has shifted towards a pro-Russian stance by virtue of increasing economic cooperation especially in the energy sector between Hungary and Russia (Kusumawardani and Dharmaputra, 2014: 456). Hungary's decision to freeze the reverse flow of gas to Ukraine in September 2014 was judged as to be sided with Gazprom and Russian interests (Feledy, 2015: 76). Although Hungary joined the EU in its sanctions regime against Russia after the annexation of Crimea, Orbán condemned the sanctions by calling them "shooting oneself in the foot" to underline that they harmed the EU economy more than that of Russia (BBC News, 2014) and being "against Hungarian national interests" (Gyori et al., 2015: 57). Apart from this rapprochement between Hungary and Russia, Orbán praised Russia along with other countries such as China and India as for their success without following the Western path of liberal democracy in his speech in 2014. In this regard, Orbán declared his intentions to construct Hungary as "an illiberal state" to compete in "the great global race" (Orbán, 2014, qtd. in Kusumawardani and Dharmaputra, 2014: 458) to signal his further closeness to Putin's Russia. During the first year of the Ukrainian conflict, Orbán maintained his preference for a long-term European security structure where Russia would be a part of it as well as declaring 2015 as "the Hungarian-Russian year of culture" (Feledy, 2015: 73-74).

Yet, Orbán aimed to restore Hungarian sovereignty over its energy policy by reducing its energy dependency on Russia (Feledy, 2015: 72). Hungary is dependent on Russia for natural gas, oil and nuclear fuels. Already in its "National Energy Strategy 2030", Hungary clearly stated that Russia is Hungary's most important energy provider in natural gas and oil sectors but emphasized the importance of energy security of Hungary as a vulnerable country due to its dependence on this highly strategic geopolitical issue. In this regard, staying out of international conflicts was chosen as a path to follow. Besides, with the slogan of "independence from energy dependence", diversification of sources as well as alternative transportation routes were made the pillar of its national energy strategy (Ministry of National Development, 2012: 18-19). However, Hungary became more dependent on Russia especially in natural gas. In 2017, 95% of Hungary's natural gas imports came from Russia while its share was 82.7% in 2009 (Eurostat, 2009, 2017, qtd. in Visnovsky, 2020: 351). Reflecting the energy dependency on Russia, Orbán argued for a reversal of the EU sanctions on Russia and instead supported the idea of a European army that would restrain and balance Russia (Baczynska and Chalmers, 2020). Just before the Russia-Ukraine war of 2022, Russia kept its ranking as the top natural gas provider to

ties to make their native tongue the second official language once it is spoken by more than 10% of the region's population (RT News, 2014). In 2017, Ukraine passed a law which again eliminated the existing rights for ethnic minorities by making Ukrainian the only language in secondary education (Euractiv, 2017). Although Hungary has supported Ukraine's membership to the EU in principle, Prime Minister Orbán stated the restoration of the language rights of ethnic Hungarians as a condition for any support in the international arena (Gyori and Than, 2023).

Hungary counting to 95% of Hungary's natural gas imports (Csernus, 2023: 2). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 took place during the 2022 Hungarian national election campaign. For this reason, the war played a significant role in Orbán's election campaign, and Hungary's position on the war was influenced by both economic considerations and a narrative derived from Orbán's "authoritarian populism" consolidated by the emergency regime as a response to the Covid-19 (Adam and Csaba, 2022). By virtue of Orbán's Eastern Opening policy and his Euro-scepticism, he has taken a pro-Russia position but tried to balance it by fulfilling his formal obligations to the EU and NATO (Madlovics and Magyar, 2023: 27). "Hungary must stay out of this military conflict" and objection to sending any weapons and troops to Ukraine (Hungary Today, 2022) became the constant refrain of Orbán during and after the elections to distance Hungary from the war. Hungary announced that it would not provide weapons to Ukraine not to be part of the conflict and would not allow the transit of lethal weapons to Ukraine through its territory over its concerns for the security of Hungary and the Hungarian minorities in Ukraine on the basis of avoiding the risk of making these weapons targets of "hostile military action" (Bayer, 2022).

Orbán justified his position on the war with a discourse of Hungarian national interests by arguing that both sides in the conflict are focused on their own interests, and that "Neither the United States, nor Brussels would think with Hungarians' minds and feel with Hungarians' hearts," so that Hungary would be forced to act similarly to Russia and Ukraine. In this context, Orbán presented the elections as a choice between his party seeking peace, and the opposition taking a pro-European stance to drag the country into a bloody war (Than, 2022). Although Orbán condemned the Russian attack on Ukraine and acknowledged that he would not veto any sanctions against Russia as part of the EU unity (Szakacs, 2022), he emphasized that "Hungarians should not pay the price in the end" (Reuters, 2022).

According to the latest available official data Hungary's energy dependence increased from 53.7% in 2021 to 64.2% in 2022 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office). In this regard, concerns over energy supplies became a prominent issue for Hungary. Just before the emergency regime of the pandemic ended, Orbán announced a new state of emergency justifying it on the grounds of the war posing a constant danger to Hungary not just in physical terms but also in economic terms by threatening Hungarians' access to energy supplies and material security (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2022). After Orbán's fourth consecutive victory in the April 2022 elections, the EU frozen most of the EU funds under cohesion and Covid recovery funds for Hungary and appealed for the first time against Hungary a rule of law conditionality mechanism that linked unblocking these funds to Hungary's reversing the rule of law erosion (Simon, 2023). Given the high inflation in the country, the lost value of its national currency, and the rising costs of refinancing the public debt as well as the suspension of the EU's development financing, the EU has been chosen as the scapegoat for all the economic difficulties Hungary has been facing with (Adam, 2023: 175).

Since the EU and its sanction regime against Russia were blamed as the reasons for economic turmoil and sharp price hikes in energy, Hungary challenged the

EU solidarity against Russia even more. Orbán not only refused to take part in the sixth sanctions package concerning the progressive ban on Russian oil exports to the EU and got exempted due to its concerns over energy security but also delayed its adoption in May 2022 (Herszenhorn et al., 2022). Orbán criticized the EU for trying to replace energy dependence on Russia with dependence on the USA. Hence, he objected to the EU's ruling out Russia as an option based on political reasons. Orbán approached energy security by emphasizing that Hungary "as a customer" should be independent in deciding from whom to buy its gas and oil whether on the basis of political or economic judgements based on its national interests (Orbán, 2022a).

Orbán continued his critical stance on the EU's sanction regime against Russia as a cause of the EU's economic recession. He judged these sanctions to be "ineffective" and portrayed the EU's solutions to help Ukraine as leading to "our own defeat" (Orbán, 2022b). In November 2022, Orbán stated that he refuses to be a part of any EU financial solution that would turn the EU into "a debt community" regarding the €18 billion aid package to Ukraine and prefers to provide aid to Ukraine on a bilateral basis (Orbán, 2022c). Therefore, Hungary blocked the €18 billion EU package of assistance to Ukraine in December 2022 on the grounds of leading to new common EU debt (Liboreiro, 2022). However, after the EU decided to lower the amount of frozen EU funds to Hungary under the new conditionality mechanism, Orbán decided to lift the veto in return (Tidey and Agence France Press, 2022).

Hungary's position on the Russia-Ukraine war remains unchanged. Hungarian government became the first EU member state to consult their citizens about the EU sanctions on Russia. According to the results, 97% of Hungarians who participated in the national consultation opposed sanctions that would have a significant negative impact. In this regard, an overwhelming majority of Hungarians opposes sanctions on oil, natural gas and nuclear energy as well as any other measure that would raise food costs or impact European tourism (MTI-Hungary Today, 2023). Orbán argued that the results signal Hungarians' desire to be heard in Brussels where "anti-war voices being suppressed" (Brader, 2023). Hungary is determined to continue economic relations with Russia through a new series of energy deals signed in 2023 based on "the security of Hungary's energy supply" regardless of "political preferences" (Gavin, 2023).

Orbán repeats his "Hungarians first" discourse by confirming that he will continue to veto sanctions against Russia in case they do harm Hungary's interests such as sanctions on Russian oil, natural gas and nuclear energy (Brader, 2023). Lately, Hungary linked the 11th package of sanctions against Russia with a separate issue concerning Hungarian companies and delayed its adoption (Moens et al., 2023). Orbán argues that Europe is in an indirect war with Russia because of arms deliveries to Ukraine by the EU members. At NATO's Vilnius Summit in July 2023, Orbán reiterated his calls for peace and ceasefire while objecting to the delivery of weapons to Ukraine due to his concerns over the security of Hungarians living in Transcarpathia, Ukraine. Besides, Orbán referred to the legitimate reason for NATO's existence as to protect its member states rather than performing military actions on the territories of other countries (Orbán, 2023).

RUSSIA AS THE GREATEST COMMON DIVISOR? IMPLICATIONS OF HUNGARY'S POSITION ON THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR FOR THE V4 COOPERATION

Orbán's foreign policy position on the Russia-Ukraine war has caused disagreements in the V4. Although the V4 does not speak with one voice all the time, the Russia-Ukraine war became the most prominent issue creating diverging voices and diverging policies among the V4 countries. In opposition to Hungary's "neutral" position, the other three V4 countries have embraced a pro-EU, pro-Ukraine and anti-Russia stance on the war. Among the V4 partners, particularly Poland has become one of the biggest proponents of the strictest sanctions against Russia. Poland became the first NATO country to provide Ukraine with fighter jets (AP News, 2023). Apart from supporting Ukraine's EU and NATO memberships, it played a special role in serving as a base for the US deployment of armed forces (Kolozi, 2022). Similarly, the Czech Republic adopted a harsh stance on the Russia-Ukraine war. Apart from supporting the EU sanctions against Russia and being the first NATO country to provide Ukraine with tanks (PBS News 2022), the Czech Senate decided to declare the Russian army's activities in Ukraine to be genocide and large-scale crimes against humanity (Saidel, 2022). Slovakia also strongly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, actively supported the imposition of strong sanctions against Russia, and Ukraine's ambition to join the EU and NATO (Meseznikov and Butorova, 2022: 6-7). Slovakia has emerged as one of the countries taking the lead in supplying military and humanitarian supplies to Ukraine since Russia invaded Ukraine. 35 Russian diplomats were removed from Bratislava, several pro-Russian websites were shut down, and the secret services' pursuit of Russian intelligence cooperation was stepped up (Debiec, 2022). Slovakia became the second NATO member after Poland to send fighter jets to Ukraine (Janicek, 2023).

With having opposite attitudes on the Russia-Ukraine war, the harshest criticism in the V4 came from Poland. Poland's President Andrzej Duda condemned Hungary's position by stating that he finds it difficult to understand its position given the civilian casualties in Ukraine (Huseyinzade, 2022). Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki remarked that "the paths of Poland and Hungary have diverged" (Tilles, 2022) and criticized Orbán for delaying the ratification of Sweden and Finland's application to join NATO (Lopatka, 2022). When Orbán refrained from denouncing Russia directly for the incidents in Bucha, insisting that an inquiry be conducted first, the leader of Poland's ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) Jaroslaw Kaczynski lashed out by saying "When Orbán says that he cannot see what happened in Bucha, he must be advised to see an eye doctor" (Jack, 2022). Poland and the Czech Republic declined to attend a meeting of V4 defence ministers that was scheduled in Hungary during its V4 Presidency because of Hungary's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Euronews, 2022a). Along with these publicly criticisms, there were other indications of estrangement such as Poland's cancellation of the Polish-Hungarian Friendship Day in 2022 (Boyse, 2023).

The Czech Republic took a similar stance with Poland concerning Hungary's position as well as its effects on the V4 cooperation. Its defence minister Jana

Cernochova, in addition to declining to attend the meeting aforementioned, criticized Orbán's pro-Russian stance due to his preference for "cheap Russian oil" over "Ukrainian blood" (Euronews, 2022b). The Czech Republic's Prime Minister Petr Fiala referred to the V4 framework to be not its best times because of Hungary's divergent attitudes prevented the cooperation "to proceed as well as in the past" (Lopatka, 2022). He also expressed that Hungary's decision to pay for the Russian gas supplies in Russian currency is unacceptable for the Czech Republic who is also heavily dependent on Russian gas (Zachova, 2022). The Czech Republic's Foreign Minister Hungary's refusal to support any sanctions against Russian energy exports by referring to Orbán's disregard for European unity (Gencturk, 2022).

The tension caused by Orbán's position on the Russia-Ukraine war stems from the dissimilarities in the perception of security, and foreign policy interests among the V4 countries. Contrary to Hungary, the other three countries see Russian aggression against Ukraine as a threat to their own security. Poland PiS leader Kaczynski back in 2020 suggested for NATO troops to be "combat ready" in Eastern Europe for deterrence against Russian aggression (Rettman, 2020). Poland has a history of having a strong dedication to the transatlantic relationship to provide for its security by also supporting the strengthening NATO's Eastern European defence capabilities (Racz, 2014: 68). Although Poland has been a significant ally for Hungary in their coalition against the EU's Article 7 procedure for violation of its values particularly the rule of law (Holesch and Kyriazi, 2022) and adopted Eurosceptic and nationalist attitudes to reinstate Poland's sovereignty, it embraced a new role for European solidarity and defence of Ukraine with its strategic position on the Eastern border of the EU because of its security concerns over Russia that are feared to expand the conflict beyond Ukraine to reshape Poland (Higgins, 2022).

Russia has long been seen by the Czech Republic as both a partner and a rival as a result of historical Slavic ties and enormous economic potential, as well as a potential threat due to dependence on Russian oil and gas, and Russia's hostile attitude toward the West (Kratochvil and Rihackova, 2015: 19). Although Russia was not mentioned in the security strategy of 2015, Russia was named as a "direct threat" and "fundamental threat" to the Czech Republic's security in the new security strategy following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Reuters 2023). Similar to the Czech Republic's traditional stance on Russia, Slovakia's security strategy of 2021 considers Russia to be both a partner and a key challenge for security. Because of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Eastern Europe was associated with potential threats including an armed attack against Slovakia (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, 2021a: 11-24). However, Slovakia's national defence strategy of 2021 mentioned the deteriorating security environment in Europe due to Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity but the threat of an armed aggression against Slovakia was seen as low risk due to Slovakia's NATO and EU memberships (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic 2021b: 9-10). Yet, after the Russia-Ukraine War, Slovakia has expressed its security concerns in the case of the eventual defeat of Ukraine, which would embolden Russia to escalate its hostility toward Europe, with Slovakia as one of its first likely targets (Meseznikov and Butorova, 2022: 7).

Given the different security approaches among the V4 partners, Hungary became isolated within the bloc for the first year of the Russia-Ukraine war. Although Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have not changed their attitudes towards Hungary's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, it appears that particularly Poland shifted its focus to represent their common interests in the EU and the V4 by referring to Hungary as a family member of their Central European "house" (Zgut-Przybylska, 2023). The V4 countries have recently displayed more cohesion with defence ministers attending a meeting in Slovakia in mid-June 2023 in place of the one that they had cancelled in Hungary. This in return was interpreted by Hungary as a sign of the bloc's capability and willingness to cooperate for the security of the region rather than focusing on their differences. The V4 prime ministers gathered once more to talk about several aspects such as regional security, EU defence capabilities and migration as areas that make their collaboration the strongest (Boyse, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Hungary under the rule of Prime Minister Orbán since 2010 has pursued a nationalist agenda with a view to further its interests on every platform. When the declarations, official statements, and Hungarian presidency programs of the V4 are analysed, it is seen that the V4 has played a significant role as a subregional cooperation for Hungary to upload its foreign policy priorities such as energy security, good relations with neighbours, and a national immigration policy. Recent Hungarian presidencies of the V4 have also exemplified Orbán's Eurosceptic and populist attitudes with his focus on strengthening the role of nation-states in the EU as well as the desire of the Hungarian citizens to be heard more loudly in the EU to shape the EU's future to a more sovereigntist direction. Besides, the V4 cooperation has seemed to be an alternative to refrain from the isolation stemming from Hungary's divergence from the EU norms and values termed as the rule of law crisis.

It is seen in the analysis that since the beginning of the war, Orbán has followed a foreign policy centred on Hungary's actorness as a sovereign nation-state to take its own decisions based on its national interests. Therefore, its support for the EU's sanction regime against Russia as a general discourse shows the lowest common denominator for its support for the Euro-Atlantic integration. Hungary endorses the unified EU stance as long as it does not contradict its vital interests among which its energy security prevails. In this way, arguing against the EU's sanctions against Russia on the energy sector and the transfer of any military assistance to Ukraine under the pretence of "neutrality" render Hungary's position on the war pro-Russian by virtue of being pro-Hungarian as well as anti-Ukrainian by virtue of considering the rights and security of the Hungarian minorities in Ukraine.

As the analysis has shown, the V4 has served as an opportunity to promote Hungarian national interests in the areas where the political agendas of all countries are converged. Energy security and diversification of energy sources with an emphasis on nuclear energy prevails as one of the utmost areas of collaboration. Yet, as the V4 does not always speak with one voice, the Russia-

Ukraine war approved itself to be a divider issue. Contrary to Hungary's position, its V4 partners have followed the EU's united stance on the Russia-Ukraine war despite their own energy dependencies on Russia. Although foreign policy has not constituted a common ground for the V4 cooperation, the divergent voices and divergent policies resulted in the cooperation within the V4 group to be adversely affected at the beginning of the war. The conflict sparked by Orbán's diverging stance from that of the EU based on its populist, sovereigntist and Eurosceptic foreign policy revealed the V4 states' divergent views on security and foreign policy objectives regarding both Russia and the European integration. The other three countries, in contrast to Hungary, associate the Russian aggression towards Ukraine as a danger to their own security while Hungary focuses on the economic considerations and political gains to consolidate his hold on power. Yet, although Hungary's position on the Russia-Ukraine war had negative implications for the V4 cooperation as Hungary was the subject of naming and shaming at the first year of the war, as there is no foreseeable end to the Russia-Ukraine war in the near future, Hungary's V4 partners seem to further their shared interests such as regional security, EU defence capabilities and migration instead of focusing on what divides them.

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