

Visegrad Four as Viewed by the Public

Past Experience and Future Challenges

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This publication reflects the views only of the authors.

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Methodological note

Public opinion surveys in all V4 countries were conducted between March and April 2021.

Samples of 1 000 respondents in each country are representative for the adult population (age 18+) in each country.

Fieldwork was co-ordinated by:

- FOCUS - Centrum pre sociálnu a marketingovú analýzu, s.r.o. (Slovakia)

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- FOCUS - Centrum pro sociální a marketingovou analýzu, spol. s.r.o. (Czech Republic)
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MAIN FINDINGS

- The survey of public opinion in all Visegrad Four countries revealed that the highest level of awareness about the Visegrad group and Visegrad cooperation is currently among inhabitants of Hungary (69%), followed by residents of Slovakia (65%), Czech Republic (52%) and Poland (49%).
- Over the past several years, people's awareness of the Visegrad Four increased in all four V4 member states, most rapidly in Hungary where it increased more than 2.5 times, from 26% in 2015 to 69% in 2021. This increase may undoubtedly be attributed to the fact that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán accentuates the V4 agenda as an important part of his European and overall foreign policy, which is inevitably accompanied by the increased volume of official communication.
- According to the citizens of V4 member states, the most important area of regional cooperation should be economy and trade, which confirms their sustained orientation on socio-economic issues. Further down the list, the priorities tend to differ slightly: while Slovak and Polish respondents prefer development of tourism, the Czechs accentuate mutual cooperation in the field of security and defence, the Hungarians and the Slovaks development of regional cross-border infrastructure. Generally speaking, though, when it comes to preferred areas of cooperation, people's perception of priorities does not differ substantially from one country to another.
- The survey confirmed long-term differences in people's perception of their respective countries' EU membership: more than two in three Poles (68%) but only two in five Czechs (41%) are happy about their country's EU membership; the Hungarians and the Slovaks are in the middle, at 59% and 57%, respectively. The Czech Republic stands out of the overall Visegrad picture by the high share of explicitly negative views of EU membership, as two in seven Czech respondents (29%) see their country's EU membership as a bad thing. In the remaining three V4 countries, the respondents preferred ambivalent views to openly critical ones.

- There are considerable differences between V4 member states also when it comes to membership in the NATO: while almost three in four Polish respondents (73%) view their country's NATO membership favourably, in Slovakia it is barely two in five (38%). Public support for NATO membership in Hungary is almost as high as in Poland (69%) while in the Czech Republic it is substantially lower but still majority (52%). People in individual V4 member states showed a much greater level of consensus when perceiving their respective countries' membership in United Nations or in the Visegrad Four.
- The survey also examined the level of trust inhabitants of the bloc feel toward other V4 countries. The findings revealed high mutual solidarity and strong social capital within the V4 quartet. Mutual trust between citizens of the Czech and Slovak Republics is a long-term feature of the Visegrad mental map. Slovak-Hungarian relations traditionally remain the weakest link in the chain of mutual relations; however, mutual vigilance between the Slovaks and Hungarians is slowly fading away in recent years.
- Inhabitants of V4 are strongly divided when it comes to credibility of the United States and Russia. Although all V4 countries are NATO member states, their citizens' trust toward the United States as the key member of the transatlantic community differs significantly: it is the highest in Poland (51%) and the lowest in Slovakia (19%). On the other hand, Polish respondents expressed the highest level of distrust with respect to Russia while Slovak respondents were the most trusting of Russia.
- The present survey in the V4 countries was conducted in spring 2021, when the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was peaking. Therefore, it seemed only natural to ask the respondents how they viewed competence and performance of national governments and international institutions in tackling the pandemic. The Hungarian respondents seemed the happiest with their government's performance in tackling the pandemic (51% of them chose the Viktor Orbán administration), followed by the Czech (41% of them trusted the Andrej Babiš administration), Polish (37% of Poles trusted the Mateusz Morawiecki administration) and Slovak respondents (only 28% of Slovaks trusted the Igor Matovič administration).

- An important part of the survey was examining the intensity of mutual contacts – touristic and cultural – between inhabitants of individual V4 countries. Not surprisingly, the most intense are mutual contacts between Czechs and Slovaks as nine in ten Slovaks said they visited the Czech Republic and over eight in ten Czechs (82%) said they visited Slovakia as tourists. The second most intense cross-border interaction exists between Slovakia and Hungary as approximately three in four respondents (75%) from both sides said they visited the neighbouring country. In the case of ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia, the frequency was as high as 86%. On the other hand, the lowest intensity of mutual contacts exists between Hungary and Poland as 43% of Hungarian respondents said they visited Poland and 41% of Polish respondents said they visited Hungary. Generally speaking, Poland is a less frequent destination for other Visegrad inhabitants and the same goes for Polish citizens' travelling to other V4 countries.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2021, the Visegrad Four (V4) integration grouping commemorated the 30th anniversary of its founding. The V4 is a form of regional cooperation between states, nations and citizens, a project based on solidarity, mutual support, and common interests shared by four neighbouring Central European countries. Although the V4 clearly emerged as a political project, it has a broader relevance than regional arrangement of participating states' bilateral relations.

Originally, the Visegrad group was formed with the ambition to overcome the security vacuum that emerged after the collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern European countries and the subsequent disassembling of the Warsaw Pact. In the beginning, it served primarily as the tool of preventing potential conflicts between states with problematic past relations. It comprised transforming post-communist states that had liberated themselves from the hegemony of the previous geopolitical dominator and attempted to fill the existing security vacuum through a regional system that would guarantee a sufficient level of stability based on mutual trust between individual states. The Visegrad group emerged as an association of countries bound together by elements of shared history, cultural closeness and similar types of social reforms launched after the collapse of communist regimes.

The Visegrad group was formed under different historical circumstances and with a different mission than other regional groupings in Europe, for instance the Benelux Union that was formed by Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg or the Nordic Council that comprises Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Iceland plus three autonomous areas (Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Åland Islands). Benelux was not only part but, to certain extent, also the prototype of the integration process in Western Europe, as the three member states coordinated their policies more closely and in certain areas they managed to surpass the overall integration process considerably (for instance by introducing a joint visa-free zone). The Nordic Council, for its part, associates European Union (EU) member states with non-members. The institutionalization degree of both abovementioned regional European groupings is significantly greater than that of Visegrad Four. Compared to Benelux and the Nordic Council, Visegrad Four is a much looser association.

Less than two years after the founding of the Visegrad group, when Central European countries began to participate directly in European integration processes, Czechoslovakia was disassembled and the V3 was transformed into the V4. Soon afterwards the Slovak Republic, the new member of the Visegrad group, began to develop in a significantly different direction than its three neighbours. The country's institutions began to suffer under authoritarian tendencies and violations of basic principles of the rule of law. The country's democratic deficit continued to deepen even when Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic had already begun to take a direct part in the process of NATO and EU enlargement. And although the Visegrad group continued to exist formally during the period of 1994 – 1998, there were only three relevant integration candidates from the viewpoint of NATO and EU. Eventually only Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic became NATO members in 1999 while Slovakia was not part of the first wave of the Alliance's enlargement and shortly before was *de facto* disqualified from accession negotiations with the EU.

On the heels of positive internal political development started by 1998 national elections, Slovakia eventually not only re-joined the process of Euro-Atlantic integration but also resumed its active position within the Visegrad group. And it was Slovakia's three Visegrad neighbours that were the greatest advocates of its accelerated integration into both groupings. The high level of regional solidarity that had become typical for the V4 was viewed a good signal by the EU and NATO and positively catalysed Slovakia's integration into a joint economic and security area.

The optimum regional setting of the Visegrad group may be illustrated by the fact that its original format set by the founding members has remained unchanged until now. V4 has not been enlarged since its founding in 1991, although there have been attempts in this regard. Today, the V4 is internationally perceived as a well-structured entity, which may be demonstrated by the fact that some states including so-called big players within as well as outside the EU – e.g. Germany, France, United Kingdom, Japan, Ukraine and others – often organize "bilateral" or multilateral summits with V4 leaders on the highest level.

When examining the Visegrad project in the broader context of European integration, we can apply two aspects: one is general and determined by the position and the role of the V4 as a platform within the EU; the other is particular and has to do with ambitions and positions of individual V4 countries within the EU and other integration processes. Thanks to the influence the V4 exerts as a regional grouping within

the enlarged EU's internal configuration, its member states (i.e. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) have gained a lever to further their national interests. On the outside, the Visegrad platform has become a model of regional cooperation that serves as a guarantee of stability and an example of good neighbourly relations for the rest of Europe and the world.

Indeed, the V4 has stood the test of time as a particularly advantageous format of mutual cooperation. V4 members had chances to satisfy themselves of this fact time and time again, especially in situations when their mutual cooperation intensified after each period of stagnation caused by selfishness of their respective political elites or individual member states' internal problems. The revival of the V4 cooperation after 1998 contributed to strengthening stability in Central Europe, deepening cooperation in various areas such as education, culture, science, environmental protection, regional development or transportation. By demonstrating their shared sense for regional cooperation and supporting each other's efforts to join the EU, the Czechs, Slovaks, Poles and Hungarians have created a more favourable image in the eyes of the European Union.

Throughout its existence, this remarkable format of regional cooperation has faced various unfavourable predictions regarding its future. The mutual relations between V4 member states as well as their relations with the outside world have been affected by a multitude of internal and external factors. But despite all the turbulences, the Visegrad cooperation has been sustained and seems to be going strong.

The future *raison d'être* of the Visegrad group seems to be closely related to the continuous joint fate of four interconnected nations that have formed part of various state entities throughout history and today exist side by side under the conditions of national sovereignty, political freedom, democracy, peace and security guarantees provided by the Euro-Atlantic community.

But equally important to the future fate of the V4 is the interaction of the platform or its individual member states with the EU as a whole or its individual member states. In this area, the V4 and the EU have encountered significant problems over the past five years. While before joining the EU and during the first decade of their EU membership, the policies of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia vis-à-vis the Visegrad and the EU were characterized by mutual harmony and coordination, ever since 2015 their policies seem to have revealed mutual discrepancies, although they are manifested differently in each country's positions. Those discrepancies have

to do with internal political development in individual V4 member states as well as with their positions on select political agendas of the EU.

In 2015, for instance, the V4 became synonymous with a non-solidary approach to the Union's efforts to tackle the refugee crisis, which immediately caused serious challenges in terms of V4 member states' bilateral relations with the European Union. The Union viewed V4 member states as opposing the joint solution to the problem of external immigration, which has damaged their image in Brussels and several Western and Southern EU member states. Mutual relations between the EU and two V4 members – namely Hungary and Poland – have been negatively affected by the problems of their recent internal political development, particularly in the field of upholding the rule of law, protecting media independence and developing the civil society. But unlike the immigration issue when the V4 stood united against the EU, Brussels' more recent reservations vis-à-vis Hungary and Poland have failed to provoke a joint response from the V4, although one could ill ignore efforts by chastised states to persuade the Czech Republic and Slovakia in order to make them support a joint V4 position. In this respect, experts and politicians have speculated whether accentuating a joint Visegrad position in foreign policies of V4 member states may continue to play its previously positive role if that position clashes with the joint European position for whatever reason. Finding an answer to that question today rests with experts as well as politicians in all four member states, including Slovakia, and it is quite possible that its urgency will only increase in time.

The issue of Visegrad solidarity seems to have a broader social dimension, not only on the level of political elites but also that of the general public. It certainly makes sense to examine the issue of Visegrad identity in different contexts, particularly in the context of European identity. The European identity shared by people inhabiting the "old continent" is determined especially by cultural and value factors. The project of pan-European integration with all its economic, political and security dimensions would not be thinkable without this kind of systemic identity, without "Europeanism", without the joint European cultural foundation, without universal human values whose recognition emerged and developed on the European soil.

The histories of Central European nations have been mutually intertwined and effectively shared over certain historical periods; however, these periods are not perceived equally by inhabitants of individual countries. On the other hand, the three decades of the Visegrad group's existence that has produced multidimensional

cross-border ties, actual measures on the level of practical policies and various tangible results of mutual cooperation must inevitably have affected individual people's perception of this format of regional cooperation, their views regarding its meaningfulness and viability, and the role individual member states have played in developing this concept.

The V4 is based primarily on cooperation in the domain of politics. But how is it perceived by inhabitants of individual countries? Do they know at all what it entails? How would they describe the Visegrad Four's common interests? How do they perceive each other? What is the level of their mutual trust? What is the intensity of their mutual interactions? What problems within the Visegrad group itself and in its broader environs including the EU can be identified by inhabitants of individual V4 member states?

All these questions that represent an important dimension of internal cohesion on the level of V4 member states' populations have hopefully been answered by the research project entitled "Perception of Visegrad Cooperation by V4 Inhabitants" that has been initiated and conducted in 2021 with the financial support from the International Visegrad Fund.

The project was coordinated by the Institute for Public Affairs in Bratislava. The collecting of data from representative samples of adult population in each of the Visegrad Four countries was conducted in March 2021 by four research agencies: FOCUS – Centrum pro sociální a marketingovou analýzu, spol. s.r.o. (Czech Republic); IMAS International Magyarország Kft. (Hungary); IMAS International Sp. z o.o. (Poland); and FOCUS – Centrum pre sociálnu a marketingovú analýzu, s.r.o. (Slovakia). The most recent project is a direct continuation of similar quadrilateral public opinion surveys that were carried out in 2001, 2003, 2011, and 2015.¹ The long term data allow for valuable comparison of people's perception of the most principal issues in time.

¹ Their findings have been published via various academic and journalistic channels, for instance Gyárfášová et al, 2003; Gyárfášová, 2013, pp. 100-111; as well as in the monograph by Gyárfášová – Mesežnikov (2016).

1. AWARENESS OF THE V4 COOPERATION, ITS RELEVANCE AND PRIORITY AREAS

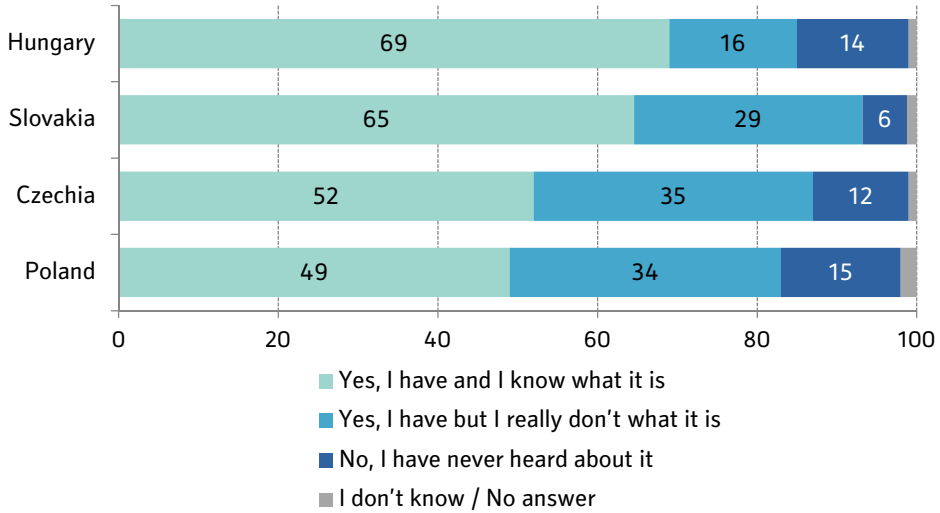
People's opinions on foreign policy issues reflect, more than any other issues, the views and statements by politicians as well how these issues are treated by the media and the public discourse. It is therefore little surprise that the terms "Visegrad Four" and "Visegrad cooperation" are repeatedly identified as rather common in Slovakia, where people's awareness of its political importance is the highest of all V4 countries in the long term. In 2021, almost two in three respondents (65%) answered they were familiar with these terms and knew what they stood for.

It was somewhat surprising, though, that the most recent survey revealed the highest comparative awareness of these terms among Hungarian respondents as more than two in three of them (69%) said they were familiar with these terms and knew what they stood for. Over the past several years, people's awareness about the V4 increased significantly also in the Czech Republic and Poland, with 52% of Czechs and 49% of Poles answering in the affirmative (see Graph 1). The percentage of those who have never heard of Visegrad cooperation declined to marginal 15 – 12% overall; in the case of Slovakia, it was only 6%.

The data for Slovakia reflect the country's political representation's long-lasting interest in cooperation within this grouping, which may be traced back to the time when Slovakia struggled to get back on the integration trajectory following the 1998 elections. Back then, forwarding intense relations within the V4 framework became part of Mikuláš Dzurinda's first administration's ambition to catch up and eliminate the country's democratic deficits caused by the previous Vladimír Mečiar's administration. At the same time, top political representatives of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland viewed preserving the Visegrad group's operability to be of strategic importance and actively pursued foreign policy measures designed to help Slovakia get back on the right track toward its European integration and transatlantic partnership.

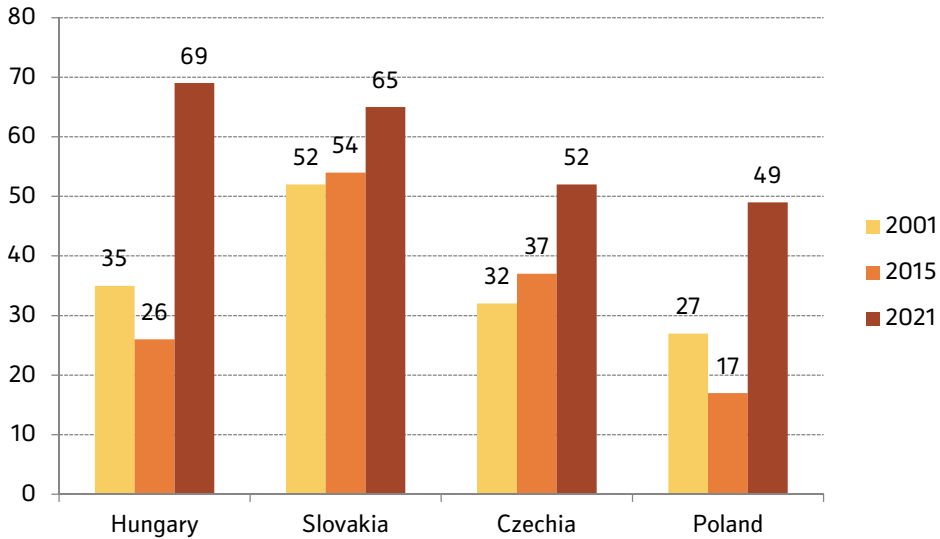
Besides political reasons, Slovak citizens' high awareness of the V4 has also geographical and geopolitical reasons as Slovakia is the only V4 member to border with every other member state and simultaneously is the smallest of all of them. Besides, Bratislava is home to the sole "stone institution" of the V4, namely the International Visegrad Fund. It is therefore only natural that the V4 is perceived as an important referential framework here.

Graph 1: " Have you heard about a group of countries called Visegrad Four"? (in %)



Source: IVF, 2021.

Graf 2: "Have you heard about a group of countries called Visegrad Four?" A development in time between 2001 and 2021 (% of answers "Yes, I have and I know what it is")



Source: IVF 2001, 2015, 2021.

It is particularly interesting to examine development trends in people's awareness of the V4 by comparing the data from 2021 to a similar survey conducted in 2015 or even further back, in 2001. It is plain to see that in all four countries, people's awareness of the V4 increased considerably, the most remarkable increase was recorded in Hungary (see Graph 2).

There are several explanations for this finding. Most importantly, it is safe to draw a conclusion that "Visegrad Four" has gradually become a familiar term in all four countries' public discourse. Furthermore, the most recent survey was carried out shortly after the 30th anniversary of founding the V4 grouping when issues related to Visegrad cooperation had been much more present in the media. But even outside anniversaries, multilateral meetings and summits of presidents, prime ministers or cabinet members in the V4 format have become a standard and solid part of all four countries' political agenda. This is undoubtedly helped by the practice of rotating presidency, with every presiding country trying to promote the "Visegrad agenda" and draw media attention to it. In other words, Visegrad cooperation has taken root in member states' inhabitants' awareness and has become part of their everyday political discussions, even in those countries where public awareness was very low six years ago.

An interesting case in point in this respect is Hungary where people's awareness of V4 issues increased more than 2.5 times, from 26% in 2015 to 69% in 2021. This increase may be partly attributed to the fact that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán accentuates the V4 agenda as an important part of his European and overall foreign policy, which is inevitably accompanied by the increased volume of official communication. In recent years, his administration began to present the V4 to Hungarian voters as a certain counterpoint to Brussels and the EU. For Premier Orbán, the regional grouping of four Central European countries serves as the platform to propose alternative solutions to European problems, which are based on accentuating greater independence of V4 member states and prioritizing their national, cultural and confessional specifics. As part of this approach, the Hungarian leader interprets the Union's criticism of V4 member states' negative position on external migration or of certain disturbing tendencies in domestic political development in Hungary or Poland as failure to recognise these specifics or even as punishment for efforts to take them into consideration. Under this interpretation, the Visegrad group may seem as a political entity that defends national values and may inspire additional interest and

even sympathy among people who sympathize with these values and Orbán's interpretations.²

It may also be assumed that the V4 has attracted additional attention – not only in the Central European context but also the EU one – thanks to promoting negative agendas. Back in 2015-2016, when the EU tried to alleviate the migration crisis by introducing compulsory migrant quotas for all EU member states, all V4 countries' political representations opposed and dismissed the plan in unison.³ Another relevant issue that has recently drawn increased attention to the Visegrad group was the discussion on the potential crisis of liberal democracy in Hungary and Poland and related criticism on the part of the EU. In other words, V4 has become a "brand", both in the positive and the negative sense of the word, while it is a time-tested truth that controversial issues attract greater attention of the media and the general public compared to positive ones.

The respondents' answers to additional questions also revealed a differentiated perception of the regional grouping's importance. The Visegrad cooperation is viewed as meaningful and important by 82% of Hungarian, 78% of Slovak, 71% of Czech and 59% of Polish respondents (see Graph 3).

Although people's perceived importance of the Visegrad cooperation and people's awareness of it are two different indicators, Hungary is currently leading the pack in both categories and seems to be the strongest advocate of Visegrad cooperation, a position that was unambiguously held by Slovakia in the past.

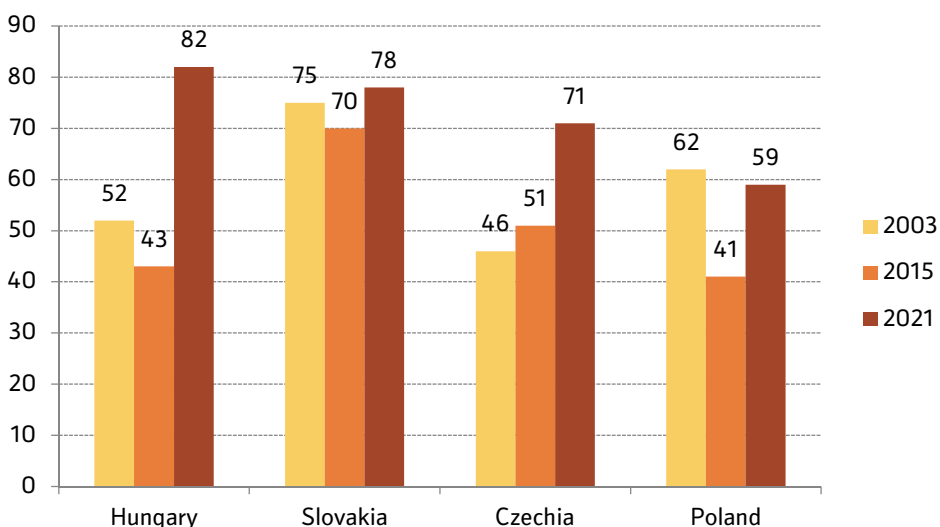
On the other hand, the dynamism of both indicators' development is quite similar: a strong growth in support posted by Hungary but also Czech Republic; a constantly high support on the part of Slovakia; and finally, somewhat lukewarm support in the case of Poland, which continues to lag slightly behind other V4 partners just like in the 2015 survey. But even Polish respondents seem to perceive the Visegrad cooperation significantly more positively than six years ago. The comparatively lower support for the V4 in Poland may have to do with the fact that Poland perceives itself as a regional power with specific foreign policy priorities, both within and outside the EU (e.g. its activities vis-à-vis Ukraine and Belarus), and is less interested in developing cooperation with smaller countries of the region. Since 2015, Poland as the founding

² For further details see an interview with Viktor Orbán in the *Postoj* daily (May 5, 2021).

³ In 2015, the survey was carried out in May through July, i.e. before the migration crisis broke out in full, provoking domestic and international controversies.

member has been very active (along with Croatia) in the Three Seas initiative, which in the country's socio-political discourse continues in the footsteps of the historical project *Intermarum* (Międzymorze) of the interwar period. Against the background of diverse activities within this initiative, especially in the past two years, the potential growth in public perception of the V4 as an important regional player may have been somewhat suppressed.

Graph 3: "Cooperation among the Visegrad group countries started at the beginning of the 1990s. Do you feel that the Visegrad group is still important and has a mission to fulfil?" (% of answers "certainly yes" + "rather yes")



Source: IVF 2003, 2015, 2021.

The respondents' generally favourable attitude to the currently existing Visegrad cooperation has also been reflected in their ideas about its future. The most vocal advocates of the future Visegrad cooperation are Hungarian respondents, followed by Slovak, Czech and Polish ones (see Table 1). In the case of Poland, we can also identify the highest standard deviation from the median, which in simple terms means the highest rate of answers' spread; at the same time, Polish respondents most frequently manifested ignorance or indifference toward the issue, which was represented by the answer "I don't know" (7%).

Table 1: "Some people say that the V4 cooperation should continue. Others say it has no future potential. Please indicate your view using the scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the V4 cooperation has no future and 10 means cooperation should continue. What number on this scale best describes your position?"

	Means (0 to 10)	Standard deviation	% of answers "I don't know" and "No answer"
Hungary	7,60	2,76	3,5
Slovakia	7,40	2,72	2,9
Czechia	7,05	2,50	4,6
Poland	6,24	3,16	7,1

Source: IVF, 2021.

Which areas of regional cooperation are the most important in the eyes of the general public? In all four countries, it is clearly the area of business and trade; like in 2015, this area was most accentuated by Czech and Slovak respondents (see Table 2). Further down the list, the priorities tend to differ slightly: the Slovaks and the Poles prefer development of tourism; the Czechs mutual cooperation in the field of security and defence; the Hungarians and the Slovaks development of regional cross-border infrastructure (i.e. construction of roads, highways, railroads and other transportation and communication infrastructure), apparently with respect to mutual bilateral relations and intense cross-border cooperation. Relatively high on the list of priorities is also cooperation in the field of foreign policy (particularly among Czech and Slovak respondents), followed by security and defence and – obviously due to the ongoing global pandemic – the area of healthcare.

To a smaller extent, the respondents also cited other areas of cooperation such as mutual investments, environmental protection, science and research; culture and education. At the bottom of the list of priorities is cooperation in researching shared history, which may be attributed to citizens having confidence in national history interpretations and relying on experts and politicians to clear possible discrepancies.

Generally speaking, the survey revealed that citizens of all V4 countries prefer mutual cooperation to focus primarily on areas of economic and social development. Also, a conclusion may be drawn that people's perception of priorities does not differ substantially from one country to another.

Table 2: "In your opinion, what are the most important priority areas of the V4 cooperation?" (Please select no more than 3; in %)

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Developing mutual trade relations	44	37	33	41
Developing tourism	24	24	27	37
Security and defence	38	20	21	32
Developing cross-border infrastructure (i.e. road, highway and railway construction, etc.)	25	31	25	31
Foreign policy	30	23	22	28
Healthcare	18	22	16	21
Mutual investments	12	19	22	21
Environmental protection	21	23	24	19
Science, research and innovations	21	12	13	17
Education	7	11	6	13
Culture	8	16	12	11
Processing common history	5	11	9	9
Financial institutions (banks, insurance companies)	6	8	6	5

Zdroj: IVF, 2021.

Perhaps the most important finding is that in terms of public support, the prospects of long-term sustainability of the Visegrad format of cooperation seem more favourable in 2021 than ever before. However, an important factor is the Visegrad dimension of party politics on the national level, i.e. the power ratio between advocates of strengthening Visegrad cooperation and its critics as well as arguments in favour of either possibility. It is this ratio and the way of communicating the benefits/detriments of mutual cooperation that may influence the public opinion and motivate voters of relevant political forces to prefer one or the other. Last but not least, their preference may also be affected by politicians' motivations, i.e. whether their arguments in favour of strengthening the Visegrad platform are rooted in their desire to drift closer toward fundamental EU values or, on the contrary, to deviate even further away from them.

2. VISEGRAD FOUR AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Attaining full-fledged membership in the European Union stood at the cradle of joining the Visegrad group for each of its members. One should bear in mind that this was back in 1991, i.e. very shortly after the collapse of totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern European countries, each of whom perceived the “return to Europe” as their fundamental strategic priority. Building of a society based on the principles of liberal democracy was widely perceived as part of the process of approximation to those countries and integration groupings in which this model had been developed and consolidated, i.e. democratic countries of the West.

At the same time, all Visegrad countries correctly assumed that since they shared common past and a similar starting point of their transition, their road back to Europe would be less bumpy if they joined forces.

For all V4 countries, this long-term goal became a reality on the same day – May 1, 2004. However, the dynamism of people’s attitudes to EU membership differed from one country to another. For instance, while a significant proportion of the Polish society was initially rather sceptical of their country’s EU membership – partly due to its extensive agricultural sector – the Polish gradually became among the most Euro-optimistic people in the region. On the other hand, people in Slovakia and Hungary had always been optimistic about their countries’ EU membership. In the case of Slovakia, an important role was played by the fact that it was the active support from the EU that had helped the country overcome the period of national-populist authoritarianism and the ensuing democratic deficits.

Naturally, there have been certain fluctuations in public support of each country’s EU membership over the first 17 years, particularly catalysed by the global financial crisis of 2008 – 2009 and the European migration crisis of 2015 – 2016. The Czech Republic always stood a bit apart from the rest as its citizens harboured somewhat reserved attitudes to EU membership. In the long term, the public and political discourse in the country has been affected by marked Euroscepticism of most relevant party leaders, both on the right end (i.e. conservatives and libertarians) and the left end (i.e. old communist hardliners and other anti-Western promoters of nostalgic memories of the totalitarian past) of the political spectrum.

These differences in people's perception of their respective countries' EU membership have been confirmed by the most recent survey: more than two in three Poles (68%) but only two in five Czechs (41%) are happy about their country's EU membership; the Hungarians and the Slovaks are in the middle, at 59% and 57%, respectively. Again, the Czech Republic stands out of the overall Visegrad picture by the high share of explicitly negative views of EU membership, as two in seven Czech respondents (29%) see their country's EU membership as a bad thing. In the remaining three V4 countries, the respondents preferred ambivalent views to openly critical ones (see Table 3).

Table 3: "Generally speaking, how do you feel about your country's membership in the European Union?"(in %)

	It is a good thing	It is a bad thing	It is neither good nor bad	I don't know
Czechia	41	29	25	5
Hungary	59	6	34	1
Poland	68	8	22	2
Slovakia	57	12	29	2

Source: IVF, 2021.

The respondents were also asked about the problems and challenges the EU is currently facing. Since the gathering of data coincided with the peak of the 2nd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, it came as little surprise that most respondents cited this challenge to be the most pressing (see Table 4). Only Czech respondents put immigration on top of the list of problems, while people in the remaining three countries view immigration as the second most pressing problem, which indicates that anti-immigration sentiment and anxiety linger on, this despite the fact that there is hardly any inflow of refugees into V4 countries. Next on the list of problems are terrorism and corruption. It is interesting that people in all four V4 countries perceive terrorism, which *de facto* does not threaten any Central European country, as more pressing than corruption, which on the other hand continues to be generally rampant and its negative political, social and economic effects are undeniable.

In Hungary and Poland, partly also in the Czech Republic, challenges related to the climate change are perceived more urgently than social problems stemming from unemployment, which may indicate their citizens' greater sensitivity to environmental issues. Further down on the list of relevancy is the growth in political extremism and radical nationalism, followed by inflation (which is objectively low in all V4 countries), hybrid wars and cyber threats (which most of the general public still largely ignores despite recently intensified activities of authoritarian states, especially Russia, in Europe in general and in Central Europe in particular). At the bottom of the list is Brexit, which currently presents problems only for those V4 citizens who live, work or study in the United Kingdom. It seems that broader or longer-term effects of Britain's secession from the EU – including potential economic turbulences and a significant reduction in the volume of European funds available to all V4 countries – remain under the “radar” of most ordinary citizens of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland.

Table 4: “European Union currently faces multiple challenges and problems. I will read you some of them. For each, please indicate how serious do you see it for the EU?” (% of answers “It is a serious challenge/problem for the EU”)

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
COVID-19 pandemic	64	79	70	76
Immigration to the EU from the Middle East and North Africa	68	61	54	58
Terrorism	63	58	55	58
Corruption	51	57	43	54
Unemployment	31	50	39	51
Climate change	37	63	51	48
Rise of political extremism and radical nationalism	46	40	46	45
Inflation	29	38	34	39
Hybrid wars and cyber threats	45	46	46	37
Brexit – secession of the United Kingdom from the EU	16	17	22	19

Source: IVF, 2021.

Next, we decided to reverse the previous question and asked the respondents whether V4 countries might be helpful in tackling the most pressing problems and greatest challenges the EU is currently facing (see Table 5). The highest on the list

were the ongoing pandemic and immigration. Hungarian respondents were particularly frequently convinced of their country's important role in tackling immigration. From the overall context, one may assume that the Hungarians see their country's contribution in halting the influx of immigrants rather than in accommodating more refugees as an act of solidarity with the EU. Premier Orbán has often presented Hungary as some sort of a "dam" that protects Europe against refugees and, in other words, Christianity against Islam. On the other end of this continuum were Polish respondents who were the most sceptical about their country's contribution to tackling the problem of external migration. In this context, one may assume that Polish citizens recognize that their government focuses primarily on tackling immigration from other geographical areas rather than Middle East and Northern Africa, as well as with different motives for migration than refugees fleeing from war zones (i.e. especially the influx of Ukrainians and Belarussians into Poland's labour market).

Compared to respondents from other V4 countries, the Hungarians seemed rather confident in their country's potential to contribute to tackling the climate change. But generally speaking, the respondents perceived their countries' capacity to make a difference as rather limited.

Table 5: "In which of the above challenges/problems do you think V4 could be useful for the whole EU, with which problems could V4 help the EU the most? (please select no more than 3)" (in %)

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
COVID-19 pandemic	33	42	33	46
Unemployment	25	27	25	38
Immigration to the EU from the Middle East and North Africa	41	51	24	34
Climate change	14	30	23	27
Terrorism	26	19	19	23
Corruption	14	21	17	22
Rise of political extremism and radical nationalism	15	9	13	14
Inflation	8	12	11	13
Hybrid wars and cyber threats	11	7	11	12
Brexit – secession of the United Kingdom from the EU	4	1	5	5
In none of them	12	8	15	7

Source: IVF, 2021.

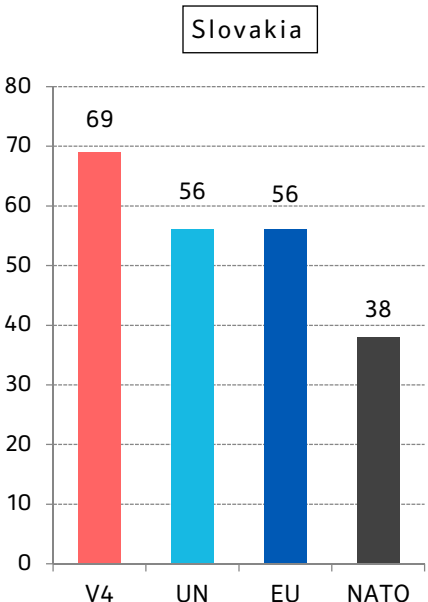
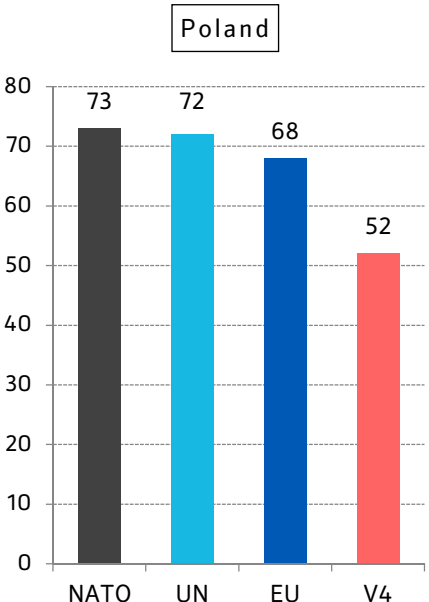
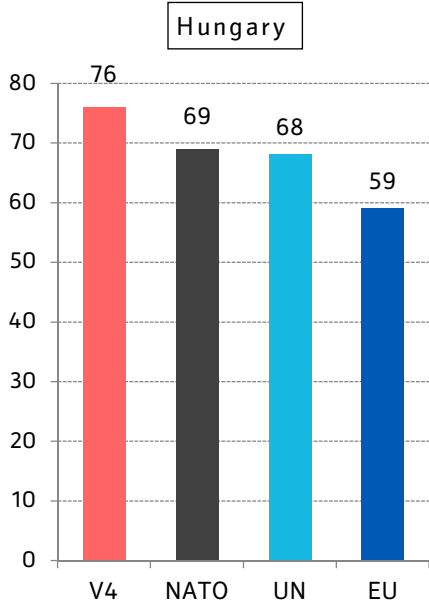
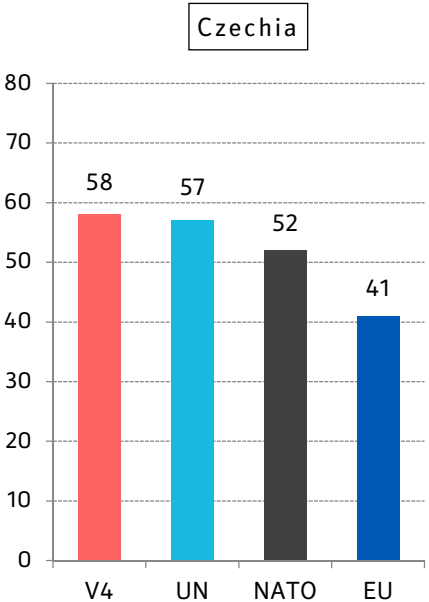
3. MEMBERSHIP IN OTHER INTERNATIONAL GROUPINGS

Besides being EU member states, all V4 countries are simultaneously NATO members (Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland since 1999; Slovakia since 2004). The public opinion differs considerably when it comes to NATO membership; in the long term, the Alliance has the most positive image in Poland and the most controversial one in Slovakia. This was also confirmed by the most recent survey: while almost three in four Polish respondents (73%) view their country's NATO membership favourably, in Slovakia it is barely two in five (38%) (see Graph 4). This may partially be attributed to the fact that a relevant part of the Slovak public believes that their country may act as some sort of a bridge between the West and the East; this geopolitical concept is traditionally advocated by certain political parties and social organisations. Also, Slovak citizens' perception of this issue is influenced by activities of the local pro-Russian lobby, which furthers anti-Western narratives mostly adopted from abroad in the public discourse and fuels resistance against the United States and Slovakia's NATO membership.⁴ As far as two remaining V4 members go, public support for NATO membership in Hungary is almost as high as in Poland (69%) while in the Czech Republic it is substantially lower but still majority (52%).

On the other hand, there is much greater consensus among V4 citizens regarding their countries' membership in United Nations (UN) and in the Visegrad Four grouping; the latter has been discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1. Somewhat surprising may be the relatively low and practically identical share of Czech and Slovak respondents who positively view their country's UN membership. This may have to do with Czech and Slovak media's coverage of UN activities that concern mostly other regions of the world than Central Europe. As a result, Czech and Slovak citizens very rarely hear about their countries' direct interactions with this global organisation, which may inspire their notion of lesser relevance or even unimportance of UN.

⁴ For further details see Mesežnikov – Bartoš, 2021.

Graph 4: "Generally speaking, how do you feel about your country's membership in the following groupings?" (% of answers "It is a good thing")



Source: IVF, 2021.

4. CREDIBILITY OF OTHER COUNTRIES AND NATIONS

A relatively simple indicator of mutual relations between V4 member states (as well as relations with third countries) is credibility of foreign countries in the eyes of the general public (see Graphs 5a-d). A typical long-term feature of the Visegrad map is mutual trust between citizens of the Czech and Slovak Republics: almost six in seven Slovaks (84%) said they trusted the Czechs and almost four in five Czechs (78%) said they trusted the Slovaks, which was more or less on the same level as in 2015. Very important is also the symmetry of this high level of credibility. For many years, the mutual closeness of both countries' populations has been repeatedly confirmed by all kinds of different surveys.⁵

But the entire Visegrad group shows above-standard levels of mutual trust all across the board. The Czech respondents expressed a high level of trust with respect to the Poles (53%) and the Hungarians (52%); the Hungarian respondents said they trusted mostly the Poles (75%) and the Czechs (63%); the most popular among the Slovak respondents after the Czechs were the Poles (65%) while the Polish respondents do not have any particular preference when it comes to their Visegrad neighbours (about two in three of them trust each of the remaining three member states' citizens). Therefore, a conclusion may be drawn that there is high mutual trust and strong social capital within the Visegrad quartet on the level of public opinion.

Slovak-Hungarian relations traditionally remain the weakest link in the chain of mutual relations among V4 member states as only about half of Slovak and Hungarian respondents (50% and 51%, respectively) said they trusted each other; however, the share of trustful Slovaks increased by 20% and the share of trustful Hungarians grew by 11% compared to 2015. And although both countries' inhabitants still remain somewhat more reserved to each other than vis-à-vis other V4 countries' citizens, several other surveys⁶ also indicate that this vigilance is slowly fading away. This may

⁵ See Bútorová – Tabery, 2014.

⁶ According to a survey entitled *Emotions in Politics* [Emócie v politike], (2019), for instance, social distance of the Slovak majority from the Hungarian minority dropped to the historically lowest level in 2019. Similar findings were produced by a survey carried out within the International Social Survey Programme in 2014 (SÚ SAV, 2015).

be attributed mostly to well-balanced Slovak-Hungarian bilateral relations over the past several years when both countries avoided controversial actions or statements that would provoke conflicting interpretations on both sides. Top constitutional officials of Hungary and Slovakia more frequently than before declared their shared ambition to maintain good neighbourly relations and conveyed reconciliatory messages from their bilateral meetings, thus undoubtedly affecting the views of the general public in the same way. All in all, a conclusion may be drawn that both countries' mutual perception continues to develop in the desirable direction as there are perceptible positive trends on both sides. It is extremely important that these trends continue regardless of everyday political turbulences on both sides of the border.

Let's take a look beyond external border of the Visegrad Four. In the long term, a special status in the eyes of V4 member states' inhabitants is enjoyed by Austria, a country that borders with three V4 members and is an important investor in the region. Two in three Hungarian and Czech respondents (67% each) and five in eight Slovak respondents (62%) said they trusted Austria while Polish respondents expressed lower trust (51%). It may be assumed that geographic closeness, job opportunities and more frequent visits across the border are the principal reasons behind Austria's more favourable perception among Hungarian, Czech and Slovak respondents compared to their Polish counterparts.

Another important country for all V4 member states is Germany, a country that is most trusted by Hungarians (62%), followed by Czechs (50%), Slovaks (45%) and Poles (43%). It is rather obvious that credibility of Germany among many Polish, Slovak and Czech citizens continues to be predetermined by their awareness of the historic events, especially in the 20th century.

On the other hand, the views of V4 inhabitants become strongly divided when it comes to credibility of the United States and Russia. The former is trusted by more than a half of Polish (51%), three in eight Hungarian (38%), almost one in three Czech (31%), but less than one in five Slovak (19%) respondents. The latter is trusted by exactly half of Slovak (50%), three in eight Hungarian (37%), one in five Czech (20%) and only one in seven Polish (14%) respondents.

As we see, the Visegrad group shows conflicting perceptions of the United States and Russia, especially between Poland (and partly Czech Republic) on the one hand and Slovakia on the other. Poland's negative perception of Russia is a direct result of the long-term political line promoted by the majority of its political elite that is shared by ordinary citizens. The historical experience of the Polish people with Russia, which

includes repeated participation of imperial Russia and later the Soviet Union in disassembling the Polish state, numerous military conflicts between both nations, persecution of Polish people in Russia and later the Soviet Union, animosity in contemporary Russian-Polish bilateral relations, or the so-called “memory wars” Kremlin began to wage again Poland in recent years – all that has contributed to developing the perception of Russia as a threat as well as the lingering feelings of mistrust and vigilance vis-à-vis Russia on the part of Polish citizens. On the contrary, the United States is where massive numbers of Polish immigrants began to settle in the 19th century and from where they supported their families as well as the Polish state and campaigned for its liberation from the sphere of Soviet influence after World War II. While Russia in Poland’s public discourse symbolises, inter alia, lack of freedom, war and oppression, the United States are considered an embodiment of efforts to restore its freedom, both on the personal and the national level.

Unlike Poland, Slovakia has been under the influence of the narrative of Slavic solidarity and mutual closeness of Slavic nations that became popular in mid-19th century, largely thanks to national awakeners and some other members of Slovakia’s cultural and political elite. The pivotal role in these theories was played by Russia, which was portrayed as the protector of small Slavic nations against their historical enemies. The gist of the concept of Slavic solidarity was the notion that the ethnic factor (particularly language and cultural closeness) is more important than the specific type of social order and the preferred system of relations with other states. According to this concept, all states formed by Slavic nations should feel closer to Russia regardless of their preferred political regime. In other words, democratic states of Central and Eastern Europe with Slavic populations should naturally be attracted to the authoritarian, undemocratic and imperial Russia as opposed to democratic states in the West that were formed by Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Roman, Finno-Ugric, Baltic and other nations and their integration groupings such as the EU and NATO.

A similar narrative – although on a rather marginal scale – is also present in the Czech public discourse, furthered mostly by nationalistic, anti-Atlantic and anti-American forces. The distrust vis-à-vis Russia is more perceptible in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia; it is related especially to the Czech population’s more critical perception of the circumstances and consequences of the Soviet invasion of August 1968 and the subsequent 20 years of Soviet occupation.

The deep division lines in perception of Russia by people inhabiting the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe were also established in a separate survey by

Globsec.⁷ Based on examining respondents' attitudes to Russia, the survey divided nine countries in the region into three categories: "bear huggers" (Slovakia, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria), "bear feeders" (Czech Republic, Hungary and North Macedonia) and "bear sceptics" (Poland and Romania).⁸ As we see, even a more detailed survey confirms the considerable variability of people's attitudes to Russia within the Visegrad group, which more or less corresponds to our findings based on examining people's trust.

The favourable perception of Russia by a significant proportion of the Slovak population serves as the breeding ground for building mistrust vis-à-vis the United States, which is promoted by local champions of Russia's interests such as politicians, activists, bloggers, etc. They are actively supported from the Kremlin whose propagandistic narrative presents the United States as the cause of many global problems.

Unlike in the 2015 survey, this year we decided to examine V4 inhabitants' perception of select Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. Our findings indicate that citizens of V4 countries are generally the most vigilant vis-à-vis China, which is trusted by only 14% of Slovaks, 19% of Poles and 13% of Czechs compared to 33% of Hungarians. China's greater credibility among the Hungarians compared to other V4 nations may be related to a rather intense development of bilateral Hungarian-Chinese relations in recent years and subsequently the more positive public image of China that is promoted by government-loyal media. Recently, the above-standard mutual relations may be illustrated by the purchase and administration of Sinopharm, the Chinese vaccine against COVID-19, or the Orbán administration's plans to establish an elite Chinese university in Budapest that is supposed to be financed from public funds.⁹

Japan enjoys a high level of credibility in all V4 countries except Slovakia; while it is trusted by 50 to 58% inhabitants of other V4 countries, in Slovakia it is only 28%. Similar numbers were recorded for all other examined Far East countries. This may be related to Slovak citizens' generally poor awareness of their culture, their almost complete absence from the media coverage, and the small number of Slovaks who have had the opportunity to visit these rather remote countries. Still, the low levels of trust vis-à-vis Japan, South Korea and Vietnam in Slovakia are quite surprising,

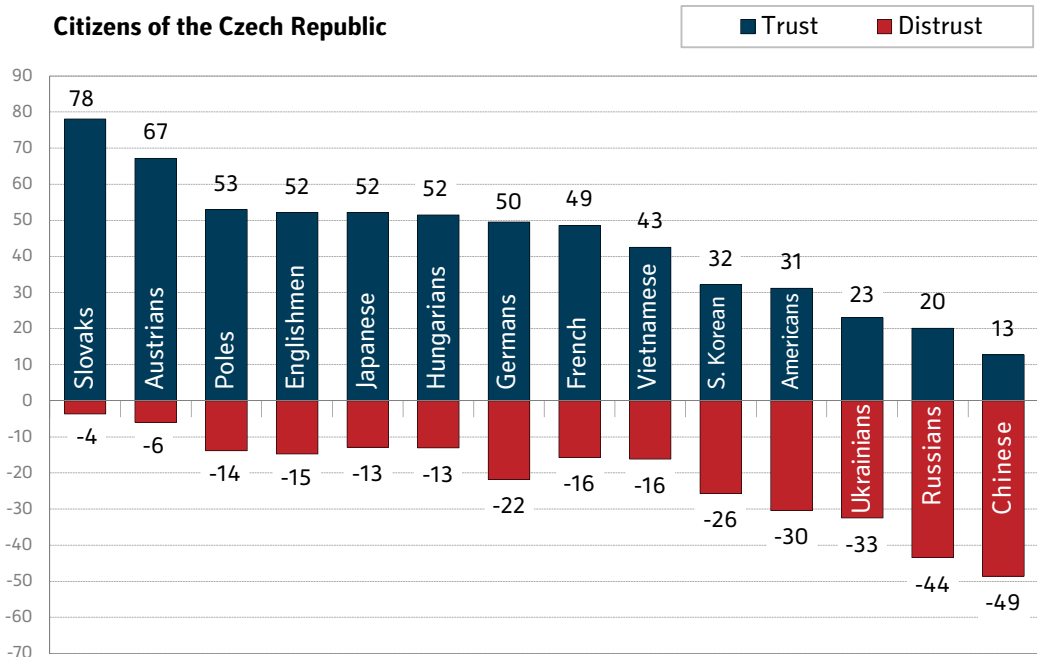
⁷ See Milo, 2021.

⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

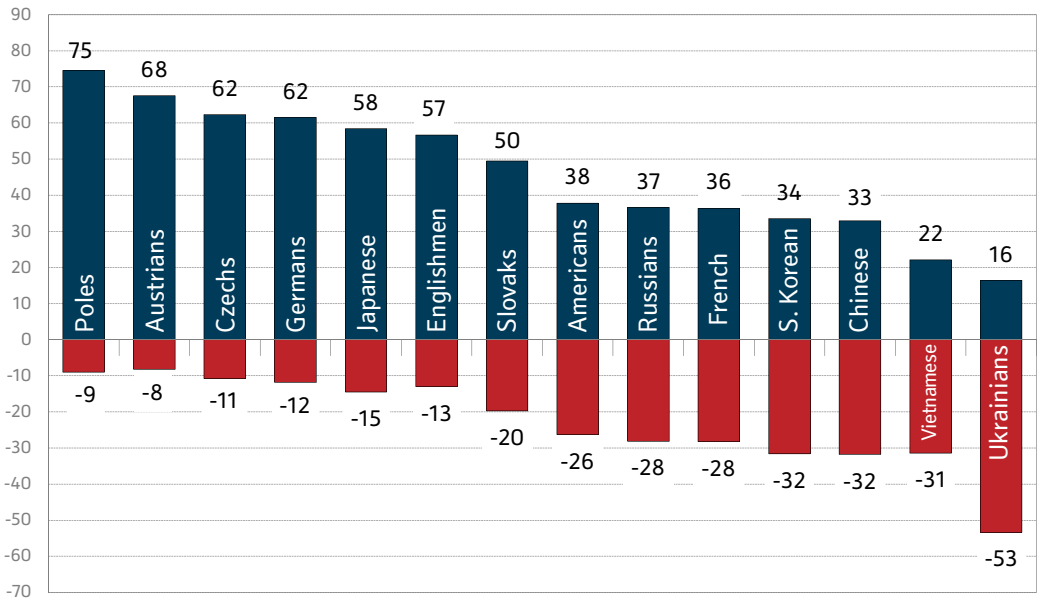
⁹ Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony has sided with the opposition in criticizing the cabinet's plan to establish a Chinese university, in early June 2021 many residents of Budapest expressed public protest against.

mostly because of the following factors: Slovakia maintains good and conflict-free relations with them, especially with Japan and South Korea; most Slovaks have no problems using Japanese or Korean electronics as well as communication and information technologies; South Korea ranks among the largest foreign investors in Slovakia, especially on the back of KIA passenger car producer. The Slovaks' favourable perception of Vietnam could be catalysed by their generally positive and problem-free experience with the local Vietnamese community whose members traditionally pursue business in gastronomy. To our great surprise, however, none of the mentioned factors has yet led to a more favourable public image of said Southeast Asian states among the Slovak population.

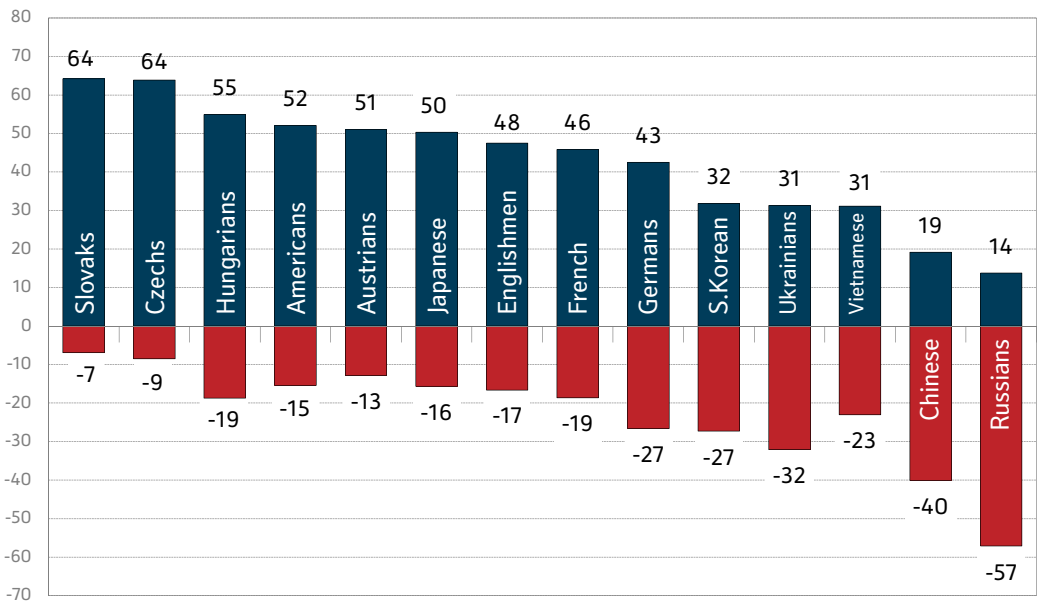
Graphs 5a-d: "I will read to you the names of several nations. For each of them, please indicate to what extent in your opinion can we trust this nation?" (% of answers "definitely trust" + "rather trust" and "definitely don't trust" + "rather don't trust" have been merged, without neutral answers "neither trust, nor distrust" and answers "I don't know")



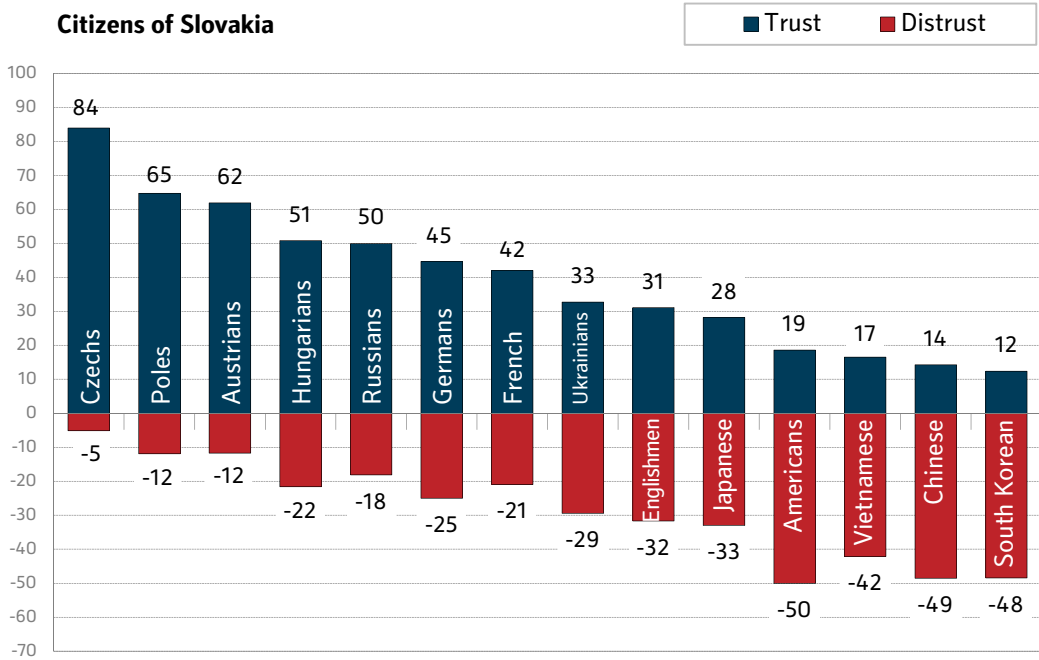
Citizens of Hungary



Citizens of Poland



Citizens of Slovakia

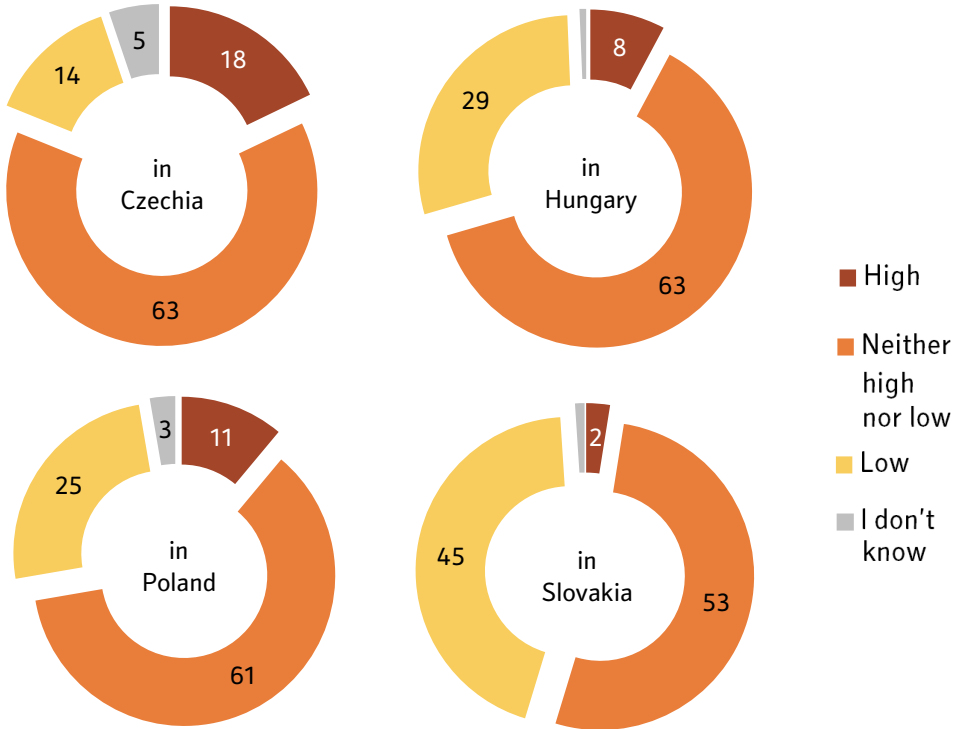


Source: IVF, 2021.

5. PERCEPTION OF "US" AND "THE OTHERS"

We examined V4 inhabitants' perception of their own country and "the others" by asking them what they think about "the living standard of ordinary people (like you)". The quadrilateral findings in this area allow for a multitude of interpretations (see Graphs 6a-d).

Graphs 6a-d: "Now, I would like to ask you to evaluate the living standard of people like you in your own country." (Respondents' perception of their home country, in %)



Source: IVF, 2021.

Let's first take a look at Visegrad citizens' perception of their own home countries. In the Czech Republic, five in eight respondents (63%) believe that ordinary people's standard of living is neither too high nor too low while one in six (18%) views it as

high and one in seven (14%) as low. The highest share of critical evaluations, i.e. "living standard of people like me is low" was recorded in Slovakia (45%, a considerable increase from 28% in 2015), followed by Hungary (29%) and Poland (25%). In other words, Slovakia confirmed its self-pity, martyr-like self-perception. Such a self-image is largely emerging as a result of the "definition of the social situation", in other words how people perceive the state of affairs. On the other hand, we must admit that the Covid pandemic did complicate the socio-economic situation of many people.

Last but not least, we should not forget that a strongly negative perception of the living standard is a long-term trend in Slovakia and is a specific manifestation of the population's prevailing social pessimism (along with a negative evaluation of the overall direction in which the country and/or society is headed), which is present even in situations when statistical data clearly indicate positive trends in economy that are bound to improve people's standard of living.

Evaluation of the situation in other countries

When evaluating the living standard of ordinary people in other V4 countries, most respondents preferred to use the ambivalent answer of "neither high nor low". Overall, the share of these answers fluctuated between 50% and 70%. At the same time, one may notice a lower rate of differentiation as the respondents' evaluation of the others fluctuates in a relatively narrow interval (see Graphs 7a-d).

The relatively greatest consensus was recorded in respondents' perception of the Czech Republic: the view that ordinary Czechs have a higher living standard is shared by 27% Hungarian, 19% Polish and 16% of Slovak respondents. In other words, the long-term image of the Czech Republic as the socio-economically most advanced country in the region has remained preserved.

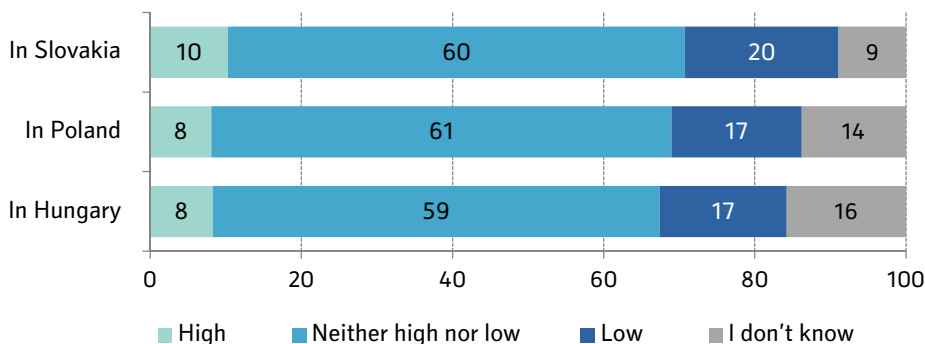
On the opposite pole are respondents' views of Poland; especially Czech and Slovak respondents perceive Poland as a country where ordinary people's standard of living is low. This view is not subscribed to by Hungarian respondents who believe that the living standard of ordinary people in Poland is the highest of all three evaluated countries; also, it is interesting that in their opinion, the Slovaks ranked second behind the Poles and before the Czechs.

Even within the Visegrad group, most people's perception of "the others" is formed based on secondary information. With the exception of Czech and Slovak republics,

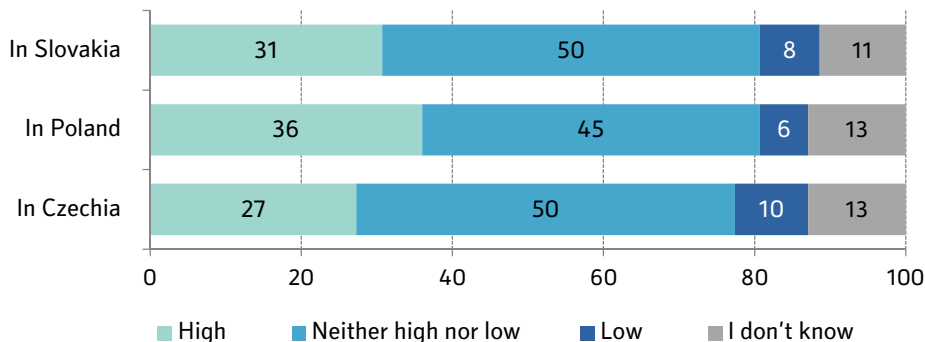
obtaining first-hand information is rather limited. And even though it is true that mutual social contacts between individual countries are intense, the evaluation may be affected by existing prejudices and stereotypes. A reliable exchange of first-hand information exists especially between the Czechs and the Slovaks; here, the views of a significant proportion of respondents are based on a relatively solid knowledge that ensues from the following facts: the two countries neighbour with each other; they are close in terms of language and culture; there are numerous family and personal ties that were formed during short-term visits and long-term stays (e.g. study or work); the Czech media outlets are generally available and closely followed in Slovakia; there is a general communication advantage stemming from language closeness.

Graphs 7a-d: "Now, I would like to ask you to evaluate the living standard of people like you in the following countries." (Respondents' perception of other V4 countries, in %)

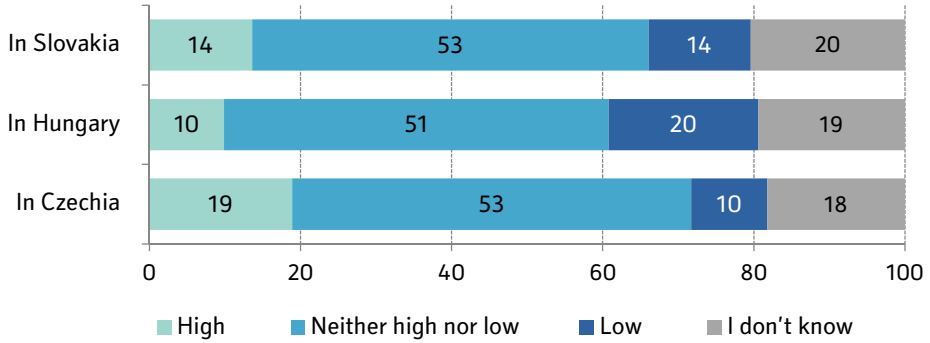
Czech respondents



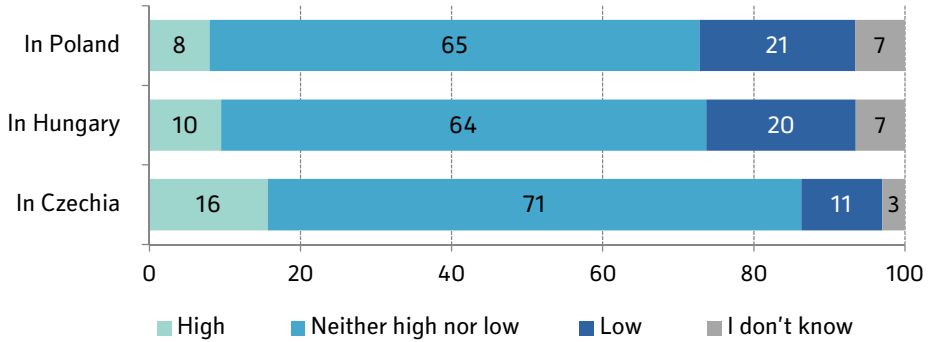
Hungarian respondents



Polish respondents



Slovak respondents



Source: IVF, 2021.

6. CONTACTS WITHIN THE V4

Another important part of the survey was examining the intensity of mutual contacts between inhabitants of individual V4 countries. The findings of a representative survey that analysed the frequency of cross-border contacts within the Visegrad group indicate that there is a relatively intense interaction between countries of the quartet. Not surprisingly, the most intense are mutual contacts between Czechs and Slovaks as 9 in 10 Slovaks said they visited the Czech Republic and over eight in ten Czechs said they visited Slovakia as tourists (see Table 6).

The second most intense cross-border interaction exists between Slovakia and Hungary as approximately three in four respondents from Slovakia said they visited Hungary. In the case of ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia, the frequency was as high as 86%. In the opposite direction, the intensity of contacts is slightly lower but still relatively high as two in three Hungarians (67%) said they visited Slovakia. Relatively intense though not exactly symmetrical are mutual contacts between Slovak and Polish citizens; five in seven Slovaks (72%) said they visited Poland but only 53% of Poles ever visited Slovakia.

On the other hand, the lowest intensity of mutual contacts exists between Hungary and Poland, at 43% and 41%, respectively; here, an obvious factor is the absence of the common border. Generally speaking, Poland is a less frequent destination for other Visegrad inhabitants and the same is true vice versa.

Table 6: "Which of the following countries have you ever visited in the past for tourism or recreation?" (% of answers "I have")

	Czech respondents	Hungarian respondents	Polish respondents	Slovak respondents
Czech Republic	X	50	61	90
Hungary	53	X	41	75
Poland	55	43	X	72
Slovakia	82	67	53	X

Source: IVF, 2021.

As part of examining people's mutual interactions within the Visegrad group, we were also interested in how well our respondents were familiar with culture and art from other V4 countries. In this context, we inquired about film, theatre and literature (see Table 7). Reiterating the findings of the previous survey from 2015, only Czech culture in Slovakia seems to enjoy a truly broad level of recognition as five in six Slovak respondents (83%) have seen a Czech film or a theatre play or read a Czech book in recent years. Again, this may clearly be attributed primarily to the factor of Czech-Slovak mutuality that is fuelled by the language closeness, shared history and long-term cultural interactions between the two nations; however, this relation traditionally lacks symmetry as only half of Czech respondents said they encountered Slovak culture or art. Other combinations of bilateral contacts are less frequent as the language barrier appears to be the chief limitation. Part of the Hungarian culture's exposure in Slovakia is saturated by ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia as almost six in seven of them (84%) claimed they had contact with Hungarian culture or art recently.

Culture and art is definitely one of those areas that should allow V4 inhabitants to truly get to know each other – as opposed to merely filling the gaps in mutual contacts – as well as to eliminate potential misunderstandings in mutual relations. This interaction might be encouraged through supporting projects and activities aimed at mutual sharing of culture and art (e.g. translating literary works, organizing concerts, exhibitions, festivals and other cultural events, all that with a solid exchange of all relevant information if possible).

Table 7: "Have you recently (i.e. over the past 1 – 2 years) seen a movie, a theatre performance or have you read a book by author/s coming from the following countries?"

	Czech respondents	Hungarian respondents	Polish respondents	Slovak respondents
from Czech Republic	X	22	19	83
from Hungary	9	X	10	36
from Poland	26	26	X	39
from Slovakia	50	14	9	X

Source: IVF, 2021.

7. COPING WITH THE PANDEMIC

The present survey in the V4 countries was conducted in spring 2021, i.e. at the time when the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was peaking. Over 18 months of struggling to get the pandemic under control has divided the Visegrad group and pulled its individual member states apart, not only physically (e.g. by closing down mutual borders and issuing restrictions on transport, travelling and tourism) but also in terms of differing approaches to adopting anti-epidemic measures.

Despite original declarations of their top constitutional officials about the importance of adopting a joint and coordinated approach, V4 countries soon began to adopt measures off their own bat, often without any previous consultations with their neighbours. Some V4 members tried to toot their own horn (during the first wave of the pandemic it was especially Slovakia), either compared to third countries or other V4 members. But the second wave of the pandemic turned Visegrad star pupils into truants as Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia sat atop the list of countries most devastated by the pandemic during early months of 2021. Hungary actively began to vaccinate its citizens with Russian and Chinese vaccines; Slovakia's Prime Minister Igor Matovič also advocated the Russian vaccine Sputnik. The overall public image of the V4 in the EU was not exactly improved by the joint position of Poland and Hungary on approving the so-called EU recovery package as both governments conditioned their consent by the EU abandoning the scrutiny of their democratic deficits.

Within the framework of our survey, it seemed only natural to ask the respondents how they viewed the competence of national governments and international institutions in tackling the unprecedented crisis caused by the coronavirus. The respondents were presented with a list of five institutions and organisations and asked to single out one they trusted the most when it came to alleviating the effects of the pandemic in their country.

Obviously, principal responsibility for tackling the pandemic rests with national governments and it is natural that the respondents picked their respective governments; however, the survey revealed a differentiated perception of individual governments' competence and performance (see Table 8). The respondents seemed the happiest with their government in Hungary (a tiny majority of Hungarians trusted the Viktor Orbán administration), followed by the Czech Republic (41% of Czechs trusted the Andrej

Babiš administration), Poland (37% of Poles trusted the Mateusz Morawiecki administration) and Slovakia (only 28% of Slovaks trusted the Igor Matovič administration).

The Slovak leg of the survey was conducted between April 1 – 9, 2021, i.e. immediately after the government crisis that resulted in the resignation of Health Minister Marek Krajčí and eventually also Premier Matovič. The new administration in which Finance Minister Eduard Heger and Premier Matovič exchanged their posts was appointed on April 1, 2021. The government crisis was primarily the result of great dissatisfaction among experts and laymen with the cabinet's performance in coping with the pandemic; people's criticism of the cabinet's competence in this area was also documented by other surveys and public opinion polls.¹⁰ This negative perception caused that compared to respondents from other V4 countries Slovak respondents more frequently chose the European Union (27%) or the World Health Organisation (WHO – 23%) as the most trustworthy organisation.

As far as other interesting findings go, Hungarian respondents preferred the WHO to the EU while Polish respondents preferred the EU to the WHO; also, the Visegrad Four pushed UN to the bottom of the list.

Table 8: "The current pandemic situation is a challenge for the whole world and the V4 region. Which institution or organisation can in your opinion do the best to alleviate the impact of the pandemic in your home country? (please select only one option)" (in %)

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
National government	41	51	37	28
European Union	18	14	24	27
World Health Organisation	18	24	15	23
Visegrad Four	5	3	3	8
United Nations	3	3	4	4
Other organisations	2	1	2	1
I don't know / No answer	13	4	15	9

Source: IVF, 2021.

¹⁰ For instance a survey *How Are You, Slovakia?* [Ako sa máte, Slovensko?] carried out by the Sociological Institute and the Institute for Research in Social Communication of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in cooperation with Seesame agency and the Market Research Agency www.sociologia.sav.sk/podujatia.php?id=3129&r=1 as well as surveys conducted by Median (www.median.sk/sk/spolocnost-a-politika/) and FOCUS (www.focus-research.sk/) agencies.

CONCLUSION

The Visegrad Four just celebrated three decades of its existence. It was a period filled with individual achievements, mutual benefits and joint contributions to the forming of a strong feeling of regional togetherness based on unifying periods of shared history and common interests, a period of intense mutual cooperation in various areas, a period of overcoming problems in mutual relations between member states as well as in relations with their partners and allies within the EU.

Over the three decades, the Visegrad group has become an inspiring example of regional cooperation that guarantees stability and good neighbourly relations. Although the political elite's subscription to V4 cooperation kept vacillating ever since it was founded in 1991, the inhabitants of all V4 member states – as the most recent survey also confirmed – continue to perceive it as relevant, useful and meaningful. Today, the Visegrad group is not only a symbol and a respected brand that is recognized in Europe and around the world but is filled with obvious benefits for V4 member states' citizens that may be documented through specific and tangible results in the field of culture, art, education, regional development, cross-border cooperation, tourism and, most importantly, through encouraging human relations and contacts. The past three decades have undoubtedly confirmed the Visegrad group's *raison d'être*.

Today, the Visegrad group is facing new formidable challenges. Without a doubt, the most important of them is preserving its current position of an active and accommodating co-creator of pan-European space of freedom, democracy, solidarity, stability, economic prosperity and social welfare. Only achieving that may guarantee the long-term sustainability and viability of mutual regional cooperation of four partners, four full-fledged EU and NATO members – namely Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. The present survey clearly indicates that public support for this vision exists in all Visegrad Four member states.

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ANNEX: FREQUENCIES TABLES

In %, if not indicated differently.

Question #1

Have you heard about a group of countries, called Visegrad Four?

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Yes. I have and I know what it is	52.1	69.1	49.3	64.9
Yes. I have but I don't really know what it is	34.8	15.6	33.6	28.5
No. I have never heard about it	11.7	14.6	15.2	5.6
Don't know/NA	1.4	0.7	1.9	1.0

Explanation for all respondents: Visegrad group or Visegrad Four, in short V4, is group of four Central European countries - Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, which develops different forms of cooperation.

Question #2

Cooperation among the Visegrad group countries started at the beginning of the 1990s. Do you feel that the Visegrad Group—comprising of the four countries: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovak Republic—is still important and has a mission to fulfill?

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Definitely yes	29.1	52.9	23.3	38.2
Rather yes	42.1	29.0	35.7	40.0
Rather no	14.1	7.1	21.8	12.8
Definitely no	2.1	5.7	5.5	3.0
Don't know/NA	12.6	5.3	13.7	6.0

Question #3

Some people say that the V4 cooperation should be pushed further should continue. Others say it has no further potential; it has no future. Please indicate your view using the scale from 0 to 10; where 0 means the V4 cooperation has no future and 10 means cooperation should continue. What number on this scale best describes your position?

	Means (0 to 10)	Std. Deviation	% of Don't know responses + No answer
Czechia	7.05	2.500	4.6
Hungary	7.60	2.756	3.5
Poland	6.24	3.155	7.1
Slovakia	7.40	2.716	2.9

Question #4.

I will read you names of several nations. For each of them please indicate what do you think to what extent could we trust this nation?

1= we definitely can trust this nation

2= we rather can trust

3= neither trust. nor mistrust

4= we rather cannot trust

5= we definitely cannot trust this nation

9= DK

Czech respondents

	1	2	3	4	5	9
A. Slovaks	33.6	44.5	13.4	2.5	1.2	4.8
B. Hungarians	9.1	42.4	29.7	10.5	2.6	5.7
C. Poles	11.0	42.0	27.8	10.7	3.2	5.3
D. Germans	12.2	37.3	24.2	12.3	9.5	4.5
E. Englishmen	10.6	41.6	27.7	10.2	4.5	5.4
F. Russians	5.2	14.9	30.7	22.0	21.5	5.7
G. Americans	6.0	25.2	32.4	17.0	13.4	6.0
H. Ukrainians	2.7	20.3	37.4	24.5	8.0	7.1
I. Austrians	17.3	49.9	21.7	4.7	1.3	5.1
J. Chinese	2.0	10.7	32.0	25.2	23.4	6.7
K. South Koreans	6.2	26.0	32.9	16.4	9.3	9.2
L. Japanese	12.2	40.0	28.2	9.3	3.6	6.7
M. Vietnamese	7.0	35.5	34.0	11.4	4.8	7.3
N. French	9.2	39.4	30.2	11.8	3.9	5.5

Hungarian respondents

	1	2	3	4	5	9
A. Slovaks	15.6	33.9	28.3	13.3	6.4	2.5
B. Czechs	23.1	39.2	23.2	6.8	4.0	3.7
C. Poles	44.1	30.5	13.8	5.5	3.5	2.6
D. Germans	26.1	35.4	24.2	8.0	3.8	2.5
E. Englishmen	18.2	38.5	27.1	9.2	3.8	3.2
F. Russians	12.1	24.5	32.2	14.8	13.3	3.1
G. Americans	14.0	23.8	33.1	16.6	9.7	2.8
H. Ukrainians	5.0	11.4	26.5	27.0	26.4	3.7
I. Austrians	29.8	37.8	22.0	5.3	2.9	2.2
J. Chinese	11.3	21.6	32.2	15.9	15.9	3.1
K. South Koreans	10.2	23.3	27.2	16.6	15.0	7.7
L. Japanese	25.7	32.7	21.0	8.3	6.2	6.1
M. Vietnamese	6.5	15.6	35.3	19.1	12.3	11.2
N. French	10.7	25.7	31.4	18.4	9.8	4.0

Polish respondents

	1	2	3	4	5	9
A. Slovaks	13.6	50.6	22.9	4.8	2.1	6.0
B. Hungarians	16.5	38.4	20.8	11.4	7.3	5.6
C. Czechs	14.4	49.5	22.1	6.1	2.4	5.5
D. Germans	9.4	33.1	26.1	16.5	10.1	4.8
E. Englishmen	8.8	38.7	30.0	10.2	6.4	5.9
F. Russians	3.5	10.3	23.6	29.1	28.0	5.5
G. Americans	11.7	40.4	27.5	10.6	4.8	5.0
H. Ukrainians	4.6	26.7	30.7	20.6	11.5	5.9
I. Austrians	10.6	40.4	29.4	9.0	3.8	6.6
J. Chinese	3.7	15.5	33.4	25.6	14.5	7.3
K. South Koreans	7.3	24.5	32.0	17.1	10.2	8.9
L. Japanese	12.3	38.0	26.3	10.9	4.7	7.8
M. Vietnamese	4.3	26.8	34.8	15.6	7.4	11.1
N. French	7.4	38.4	29.2	12.5	6.1	6.4

Slovak respondents

	1	2	3	4	5	9
A. Czechs	41.9	42.1	10.2	3.4	1.7	0.7
B. Hungarians	17.1	33.7	26.2	12.5	9.1	1.4
C. Poles	18.2	46.6	22.0	8.5	3.4	1.3
D. Germans	10.4	34.3	28.5	14.7	10.3	1.8
E. Englishmen	5.5	25.6	35.4	21.6	10.1	1.8
F. Russians	14.9	35.1	29.9	13.2	4.9	2.0
G. Americans	4.8	13.8	29.8	25.2	24.8	1.6
H. Ukrainians	5.2	27.5	35.9	18.4	11.0	2.0
I. Austrians	17.5	44.4	24.5	8.0	3.7	1.9
J. Chinese	2.0	12.3	32.9	29.5	19.0	4.3
K. South Koreans	2.2	10.2	31.1	30.3	18.1	8.1
L. Japanese	5.6	22.6	34.2	21.1	11.9	4.6
M. Vietnamese	2.3	14.2	35.8	26.7	15.4	5.6
N. French	8.9	33.2	34.9	15.8	5.1	2.1

Question #5.

Generally speaking, do you think that [COUNTRY]'s membership in the following integration entities/organizations is a good thing or a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?

A. European Union

	A good thing	A bad thing	Neither good nor bad	DK
Czechia	40.8	29.4	25.2	4.6
Hungary	58.7	6.1	34.3	0.9
Poland	67.6	8.1	22.4	1.9
Slovakia	56.5	12.4	29.2	1.9

B. NATO

	A good thing	A bad thing	Neither good nor bad	DK
Czechia	52.1	16.6	22.6	8.7
Hungary	69.0	5.9	22.0	3.1
Poland	73.2	5.2	17.9	3.7
Slovakia	38.1	25.3	32.2	4.4

C. Organization of the United Nations (UN)

	A good thing	A bad thing	Neither good nor bad	DK
Czechia	56.7	8.3	25.0	10.0
Hungary	68.4	4.8	22.4	4.4
Poland	72.5	4.6	18.2	4.7
Slovakia	55.5	10.4	28.9	5.2

D. Visegrad Group/V4

	A good thing	A bad thing	Neither good nor bad	DK
Czechia	58.0	4.2	27.4	10.4
Hungary	75.5	2.9	18.8	2.8
Poland	52.4	6.3	34.3	7.0
Slovakia	68.7	5.1	21.3	4.9

Question #6

European Union currently faces multiple challenges. I will read you some of them. For each please indicate, how serious do you see it for the EU?

1= very serious problem for the EU

2= rather serious problem for the EU

3= not very serious problem for the EU

4= not serious problem for the EU at all

9= DK

% of responses – this is “very serious problem for the EU”

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
unemployment	30.9	49.9	38.6	50.6
immigration to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa	68.2	60.9	53.5	58.1
rise of political extremism and extreme nationalism	46.2	39.7	46.0	44.8
climate change	36.6	62.9	50.8	48.3
COVID-19 pandemic	64.2	79.0	70.4	75.7
hybrid wars and cyber threats	45.1	45.7	46.2	37.3
corruption	50.7	57.4	43.1	53.7
Brexit	15.5	17.0	22.1	19.3
terrorism	62.8	58.0	54.5	57.6
inflation	29.5	38.0	34.4	39.1

Question #7

In which of the above topics and problems do you think V4 could be useful for the whole EU, with which problems could V4 help the EU the most? (select max 3)

% of cumulative responses

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
unemployment	24.5	27.0	25.3	37.9
immigration to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa	40.8	51.3	24.2	34.2
rise of political extremism, and extreme nationalism	14.7	8.6	13.1	14.2
climate change	14.1	30.3	23.5	27.3
COVID-19 pandemic	32.8	41.6	33.3	46.2
hybrid wars and cyber threats	11.1	7.0	10.6	11.5
corruption	13.9	20.6	16.8	22.0
Brexit	4.4	1.3	5.1	4.6
terrorism	26.0	19.0	19.1	22.9
inflation	8.5	11.8	11.1	13.4
In none of them	11.6	7.8	14.7	7.3
DK/NA	14.5	7.0	13.3	4.2

Question #8

The current pandemic situation challenges the whole world and the V4 region in it. Who could - in your opinion - do more to soften the impact of the pandemic in the [COUNTRY]? (SELECT JUST ONE OPTION)

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
The [COUNTRY`S] national government	40.7	50.5	36.7	28.0
V4 Visegrad Four grouping	4.8	3.1	3.0	8.1
EU (European Union)	18.2	14.3	25.4	26.7
UN (United Nations)	2.6	3.1	3.7	4.3
WHO (World Health Organization)	18.4	23.9	14.8	23.3
Any other organization	2.0	1.4	1.7	0.6
DK/NA	13.3	3.7	14.7	9.0

Question #9

Now, I would like to ask you to evaluate living standard of people like you:

Czech respondents

	High	Neither high nor low	Low	DK
In Czechia	17.9	63.2	13.7	5.2
In Hungary	8.3	59.1	16.8	15.8
In Poland	8.1	60.9	17.2	13.8
In Slovakia	10.3	60.4	20.4	8.9

Hungarian respondents

	High	Neither high nor low	Low	DK
In Czechia	27.3	50.1	9.7	12.9
In Hungary	7.8	62.7	28.8	0.7
In Poland	36.0	44.7	6.4	12.9
In Slovakia	30.7	50.0	7.9	11.4

Polish respondents

	High	Neither high nor low	Low	DK
In Czechia	18.9	52.8	10.1	18.2
In Hungary	9.9	50.9	19.8	19.4
In Poland	11.1	61.2	25.0	2.7
In Slovakia	13.6	52.5	13.5	20.4

Slovak respondents

	High	Neither high nor low	Low	DK
In Czechia	15.7	70.6	10.7	3.0
In Hungary	9.5	64.2	19.8	6.5
In Poland	8.0	64.8	20.6	6.6
In Slovakia	2.0	52.8	44.6	0.6

Question #10

Which of the following countries have you ever visited in the past for tourism or recreation (i.e. as a tourist)?

1. yes, I have visited in the past for tourism / recreation

2. no, I have never visited for tourism / recreation

Have you ever visited Czech Republic for touristic or recreational reasons (so, as a tourist)?

	Hungarian resp.	Polish resp	Slovak resp.
yes	49.5	60.9	90.3

Have you ever visited Hungary for touristic or recreational reasons (so, as a tourist)?

	Czech resp.	Polish resp.	Slovak resp.
yes	52.7	41.0	75.2

Have you ever visited Poland for touristic or recreational reasons (so, as a tourist)?

	Czech resp.	Hungarian resp.	Slovak resp.
yes	54.6	42.5	72.1

Have you ever visited Slovakia for touristic or recreational reasons (so, as a tourist)?

	Czech resp.	Hungarian resp.	Polish resp.
yes	81.9	66.7	53.4

Question #11

Have you recently (last 1 – 2 years) seen a movie, a theatre performance or have you read a book by author/s coming from:

Czech Republic

	Hungarian resp.	Polish resp.	Slovak resp.
yes	22.1	19.0	82.5

Hungary

	Czech resp.	Polish resp.	Slovak resp.
yes	9.3	10.0	35.6

Poland

	Czech resp.	Hungarian resp.	Slovak resp.
yes	26.0	25.9	39.2

Slovakia

	Czech resp.	Hungarian resp.	Polish resp.
yes	50.1	14.1	9.3

Question #12.

In your opinion, what are the most important priority areas, fields of the V4 cooperation?

(Please select max 3)

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Cooperation in the field of culture	8.2	15.6	11.8	11.3
Cooperation in the field of education	6.9	10.7	6.3	12.9
Processing of common history	4.5	10.8	9.4	8.5
Developing mutual trade relations	44.2	36.9	32.8	40.5
Mutual investments	12.4	19.4	21.6	21.1
Cooperation of the financial institutions (i.e. banks, insurance companies)	5.6	7.7	5.5	4.5
Developing cross-regional infrastructure development (like construction of roads, highways, railways and other connections)	25.1	31.1	25.2	31.1
Cooperation in the field of science, research and innovation	20.5	12.1	12.5	16.7
Cooperation in environment´s protection	20.7	23.2	23.7	18.7
Development of tourism	24.1	23.8	27.2	36.6
Cooperation in the field of healthcare	18.1	22.4	15.5	20.6
Cooperation in the field of foreign policy	29.9	23.1	21.9	27.8
Cooperation in the field of security and defence	38.1	20.1	20.5	31.5
DK/NA	10.4	5.3	14.4	2.3

SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

	Male	Female
Czechia	48.2	51.8
Hungary	47.1	52.9
Poland	47.3	52.7
Slovakia	48.0	52.0

Age

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Czechia	9.0	16.7	19.8	16.1	15.8	22.6
Hungary	9.1	15.4	18.5	17.5	15.4	24.1
Poland	8.6	16.4	18.8	17.3	19.2	19.7
Slovakia	9.3	17.4	20.3	16.7	16.3	20.0

Education

	Elementary	Secondary/vocational	Secondary/matura	University
Czechia	11.5	35.0	34.7	18.8
Hungary	23.1	22.0	33.1	21.8
Poland	6.7	38.2	26.2	28.9
Slovakia	12.6	26.9	37.3	22.8

Size of the community / How many people are living in the village/ city where you live?

	Up to 5 000	5 -19 999	20 - 49 999	50 - 100 000	100 000+	Capital
Czechia	37.5	18.5	21.7		10.0	12.3
Hungary	31.2	20.8	11.7	7.5	10.5	18.3
Poland	39.3	24.5		31.2		5.0
Slovakia	44.9	16.6	16.6	9.4	12.5	

Region – Czech Republic

Praha	12.3
Central Czechia	12.2
South-West	11.9
North-West	10.4
North-East	13.9
South-East	15.8
Central Morava	12.0
Moravskoslezsko	11.5

Region – Hungary

Budapest	18.3
Central Hungary	12.8
Central Transdanubia	10.9
West Transdanubia	10.2
South Transdanubia	9.1
North Hungary	11.3
Northern Great Plain	14.6
Southern Great Plain	12.8

Region – Poland

Central	9.8
Southern	20.1
Eastern	14.2
Northern - west	16.2
Southern - west	10.3
Northern	15.2
Masovia	14.2

Region – Slovakia

Bratislava region	12.1
Trnava region	10.5
Trenčín region	11.1
Nitra region	12.7
Žilina region	12.6
Banská Bystrica region	12.1
Prešov region	14.5
Košice region	14.4

Visegrad Four as Viewed by the Public
Past Experience and Future Challenges

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