**The Czech Republic and Slovakia look to fellow liberal democracies, while Hungary and Poland head in the opposite direction.**

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**The Visegrad Group of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic is known as the V4, but it’s turning into more of a V 2+2.**

That’s because of the growing divergence between Poland and Hungary — dropping fast in most measures of what makes a liberal democracy — and Slovakia and the Czech Republic, both of which have seen recent government changes sending them back into the EU mainstream.

The split was highlighted by Czech EU Affairs Minister Mikuláš Bek this week.

“Hungary and Poland are nowadays in a serious dispute with the rest of the EU, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia are not playing the same notes,” the new minister [told](https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67017800-nesmime-se-chovat-jako-hochstapleri-s-predsednictvim-eu-jdeme-do-rizika-ale-zvladneme-to-rika-ministr-bek) Czech daily Hospodářské noviny.

It’s not that the four are scrapping Visegrad, founded in 1991 as the countries emerged from communism and sought to join NATO and the EU, it’s just that they are on different trajectories.

They still have common ground on issues like battling Mobility Package [trucker reforms](https://www.politico.eu/?p=1408736) they see as undermining Central European logistics companies, pushing for the EU to expand the freedom of services and advocating for favourable treatment of nuclear power. Last month, the Czech and Polish delegations [torpedoed an effort](https://www.politico.eu/?p=1931375) to find common language on energy issues by EU leaders after a failed bid to reform the bloc’s Emissions Trading System.

But there’s now a lot that divides them as well — from policies toward Russia and China to tying the disbursement of EU funds to the rule of law. Prague and Warsaw are also split over the [Turów open-pit](https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-digs-in-over-mine-spat-with-eu/) coal mine located near the Czech border that’s seen Poland hit with a daily fine of €500,000 for disobeying a ruling from the Court of Justice of the EU to shutter the mine while the court adjudicates the dispute.

“There is an increasing political and cultural divergence among these countries,” said Eugeniusz Smolar, a board member at Warsaw’s Centre for International Relations. “There are common areas, but any romance is long gone.” The core reason is a change in tone from Bratislava and Prague. Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger took power last year, cementing a break with the populist governments of the recent past. That left Slovakia a bit of a loner in Visegrad until Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala took office late last year, [promising](https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-prime-minister-petr-fiala-prague-jan-lipavsky/) a shift to the West.

“Slovakia and now the Czechs are elsewhere compared to Hungary and Poland when it comes to the rule of law — both administrations have a very strong interest in strengthening, not undermining the EU,” said one Slovak official.

“Finally the Czechs are stating what they were quiet about during [the former Prime Minister Andrej] Babiš years,” the official said, adding however that “how this will play out in the Visegrad Four is still to be seen.”

Although Prague has shifted direction, the new Czech government consists of a diverse coalition of parties, from conservatives to Pirates, and their approach to Hungary and Poland is not uniform. Bek was nominated by the centrist Mayors and Independents group. Fiala is a member of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) which sits in the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament together with Poland’s ruling Law and Justice party.

**Tattered alliance**

For both Warsaw and Budapest, Visegrad cooperation has served as an important diplomatic tool at a time when the two capitals are increasingly isolated. Leaders from the four countries often attend high-level meetings together and use the Visegrad format to try to project more influence in EU policy debates than they would on their own.  Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has acknowledged differences within the alliance but downplayed the idea that there is a conflict.

“Out of the four Visegrad countries three are not members of the eurozone, one is,” the Hungarian leader said in a December [press conference](https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-valaszai-a-felmerult-ujsagiroi-kerdesekre-2/). “And that is why the Slovak situation, its relationship with Brussels, its relationship with the Germans, its relationship with the finance ministers’ council, is completely different from ours.”

“We are more sovereign,” he said, adding that Slovakia has different “room for maneuver.” This dynamic, according to Orbán, is “built into” the Visegrad system and constitutes “friction” rather than conflict.

Even though Budapest and Warsaw have a tight alliance against efforts by the EU to penalize them for backsliding on democracy, their policies toward Russia are very different. Poland’s nationalist government sees Russia as a threat, while Orbán has nurtured a close relationship with the Kremlin.

Asked about Warsaw’s assertion that Moscow is behind a migration crisis on the Polish border with Belarus, Orbán said he has yet to see any evidence on the matter, adding that there is a tendency in Europe to blame Russian President Vladimir Putin whenever something doesn’t work.

Hungary has a “very excellent relationship with Putin and Russia,” said Czech MEP Tomáš Zdechovský, noting that the Czech Republic and Poland “are facing the Russian propaganda, Russian actions in our countries” and “need to cooperate much more.”

Orbán has also alienated the new Czech government thanks to his efforts to prop up his regional ally by joining Babiš on the campaign trail ahead of the fall Czech election, something Zdechovský called a “huge mistake.” The Hungarian leader will be “much more isolated now” within the Visegrad Group, he said. The parliamentarian, who is a member of the center-right coalition party KDU-ČSL, said the new Czech government will prioritize relations with Slovakia and Poland, and will focus more on dialogue with Austria and Germany than the previous administration.

Now it’s Prague hoping for a change of government in Budapest and Warsaw. Orbán faces a fierce [electoral challenge](https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-elections-2022-poll-of-polls-france-portugal-hungary/) in the parliamentary election later this year, while Poland’s Law and Justice party is seeing its opinion poll ratings fray ahead of next year’s scheduled election.

“The meaningfulness of cooperation on a V4-wide basis is weakened. However, this may change after the elections in both countries, perhaps already this year in the case of Hungary,” Bek said.

“Already for a few years some countries have seen this as V2 plus V2,” said one Czech official, adding that now “we are basically standing on opposite extremes” and “with Babiš gone, it has totally changed the landscape.”

Louise Guillot contributed reporting.

**In groups or pairs discuss these questions**

1. What are the reasons for the growing divergence between Poland and Hungary and Slovakia and Czechia?
2. Are there still any common interests that might lead to future resumption of a strong bond between the two parties? If so, which ones?
3. Do you think that while Poland and Hungary are trying to maintain their independence and national integrity, Slovakia and Czechia may become a toy in the hands of EU powers? Support your ideas.
4. Do you believe that as divided in their opinions on crucial issues as they are now, can the Visegrad Group survive this decade? Why do you think so?
5. Don´t you suspect the world powers of escalating tension and negative sentiment towards Russia because previous attempts to destabilize situation in the world (flower and colourful revolutions in the Middle East and Ukraine) have failed, while Russia has strengthened their influence in those areas and gat closer to China and Turkey? Support your opinion.