Central Europe:

Success stories and challenges after 20 years of EU accesion

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Part I.

Society and Politics in Central Europe

Introduction: Creating Knowledge on Central Europe in the Digital Age

The Research Project, Editorial Methodology and AI-Assisted Scholarly Publishing

***by* Péter Rada**

Introduction

Academic books often represent the culmination of a completed research project, presenting carefully refined conclusions after years of investigation. This volume follows a somewhat different path. While it is grounded in years of rigorous scholarly research, it also documents an evolving process of intellectual exploration. The chapters collected here reflect not only the substantive debates surrounding the changing role of Central Europe but also a broader methodological experiment concerning how contemporary digital technologies may support research in the social sciences. In this respect, the volume serves two complementary purposes. It examines the political, economic and strategic development of Central Europe in an increasingly uncertain international environment, while simultaneously exploring how new research technologies can contribute to the production, communication and preservation of academic knowledge.

The project and its objectives

The publication forms part of Project No. 149910, supported by the Hungarian National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFIH) through the Mecenatúra Programme (MEC_SZ_24). The project was organized around the international scientific conference "Central Europe International Conference – Successes and Failures in Central Europe Twenty Years after Accession to the European Union", held at Budapest Metropolitan University on April 3-4, 2025. The conference represented considerably more than a commemorative reflection on two decades of European Union membership. It sought to provide an opportunity for researchers from across Central Europe and beyond to evaluate the profound political, economic, institutional and strategic transformations that have reshaped the region since enlargement while simultaneously considering the new challenges emerging from an increasingly fragmented international order.

The timing of the conference was particularly appropriate. A bit more than twenty years after the accession of several Central European states to the European Union, many of the assumptions that accompanied enlargement have been fundamentally reconsidered. European integration continues to constitute the principal institutional framework within which the region develops, yet its political environment has become markedly more complex. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, renewed geopolitical competition between major powers, growing concerns over economic resilience and technological dependence, debates surrounding strategic autonomy, and the broader transformation of the liberal international order have all altered the context within which Central European states formulate their domestic and foreign policies. These developments suggest that understanding Central Europe requires perspectives extending well beyond regional studies alone. The region increasingly occupies an important position within wider debates concerning European integration, international security, global political economy and the future evolution of the international system.

Against this background, the conference brought together a remarkably diverse academic community. More than 120 participants attended the event, including nearly eighty international researchers representing universities and research institutions from the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and numerous additional partner institutions across Europe and beyond. During two intensive days of plenary sessions and thematic panels, senior scholars, early-career researchers and doctoral candidates presented new research addressing questions of regional cooperation, democratic governance, economic transformation, innovation, security, cultural interaction and international relations. Equally important were the discussions that followed these presentations. Formal lectures frequently developed into broader exchanges concerning the future of Central Europe, generating new research questions, conceptual debates and interdisciplinary perspectives that extended well beyond the prepared chapters themselves.

This publication emerged directly from those conversations. Rather than functioning as conventional conference proceedings, the volume represents a second stage of scholarly development in which presentations, keynote lectures, panel discussions, recorded more philosophical lectures and working-group reflections were critically reconsidered, expanded and transformed into independent academic chapters. The researchers of the project, the authors and editors did not merely revise their conference chapters. They revisited their arguments, incorporated additional literature, refined conceptual frameworks, strengthened empirical foundations and reconsidered their conclusions in light of the discussions that took place during the conference itself. The resulting chapters therefore capture both the original research and the collective intellectual dialogue that accompanied its presentation.

From conference to research volume

The transition from conference presentations to scholarly publications also provided an opportunity to reconsider how academic knowledge is created, refined and communicated. Conferences have traditionally occupied a distinctive place within scholarly life. They enabled researchers to present preliminary findings, receive constructive criticism, test emerging ideas before expert audiences and establish new academic collaborations. Unlike journal chapters or monographs, conference presentations frequently represent research that is still evolving. The discussion that follows a presentation often becomes as valuable as the presentation itself, exposing conceptual ambiguities, suggesting alternative theoretical perspectives, identifying methodological weaknesses or highlighting new empirical directions that may substantially reshape subsequent research.

Despite their importance, much of the intellectual value generated during academic conferences has historically remained hidden. Questions raised by audiences, exchanges between participants, spontaneous reflections during workshops and interdisciplinary conversations often disappear once the event concludes. Even when formal conference proceedings are published, they typically capture only the prepared presentations rather than the broader scholarly dialogue that accompanies them. Consequently, many potentially valuable ideas remain confined to the conference room, limiting their contribution to wider academic debates.

Recent developments in digital technologies create new possibilities for preserving and further developing these forms of scholarly interaction. High-quality audiovisual recording, automatic speech recognition and AI-assisted language technologies now make it possible to document not only prepared presentations but also keynote discussions, panel debates, roundtable conversations, lectures and working-group exchanges with an accuracy that was difficult to achieve only a few years ago. These technological developments invite researchers to reconsider the relationship between oral academic communication and conventional scholarly publication. Rather than viewing conference presentations as temporary academic events that may eventually lead to separate publications, they increasingly allow conferences to become the starting point of an integrated research and publication process in which scholarly dialogue itself contributes directly to the development of new knowledge.

The present volume was designed within this very framework. Although every chapter represents an original scholarly contribution, many originated as conference chapters, keynote lectures or thematic presentations delivered during and around the international conference and the project. Rather than simply editing these chapters for publication, the project adopted a substantially more ambitious approach. Authors revisited their presentations in light of the questions raised during discussions, expanded their literature reviews, refined conceptual arguments, incorporated additional empirical material and reconsidered their conclusions. In many cases, the published chapters differ considerably from their original conference versions because the collective discussions themselves became part of the research process. The resulting volume should therefore not be understood as conventional conference proceedings but as a research publication whose intellectual foundations were strengthened through collaborative scholarly exchange.

This approach also reflects a broader understanding of research as a gradual rather than linear process. Knowledge rarely develops through isolated acts of writing. Instead, it evolves through repeated cycles of presentation, critique, revision, discussion and reinterpretation. Conferences occupy a particularly important position within this process because they expose research to diverse disciplinary perspectives before it reaches its final published form. The editorial methodology adopted for this volume sought to preserve this dynamic character by treating conference discussions not as supplementary activities but as integral components of scholarly development.

It is within this broader context that the methodological ambition of the present project should be understood. Alongside its substantive focus on Central Europe, the project deliberately explored how recent advances in artificial intelligence may support responsible academic research. The objective was never to demonstrate technological novelty for its own sake, nor to suggest that scholarly inquiry can be delegated to computational systems. Instead, the project sought to examine how emerging digital tools may assist researchers in preserving knowledge, improving scholarly communication and supporting editorial processes while maintaining the fundamental principles that define academic research: intellectual independence, methodological transparency, critical judgement and personal responsibility for every published claim.

More specifically, the project investigated how AI-assisted technologies could facilitate the transition from oral academic communication to publishable scholarly text. Conference recordings, presentation transcripts, recorded lectures (which were based on the research during the project) and workshop discussions provided valuable source that could be systematically organized, transcribed and transformed into preliminary manuscript drafts. These initial texts were never regarded as finished academic products. Rather, they functioned as working documents that enabled authors and editors to concentrate their efforts on conceptual refinement, theoretical development, empirical verification and critical interpretation instead of spending considerable time reconstructing spoken presentations from notes or recordings. The technology therefore supported the efficiency of the editorial process while leaving every substantive academic decision under the control of the contributing researchers and editors.

Viewed from this perspective, the methodological innovation presented in this volume concerns not only the use of artificial intelligence but also the broader transformation of academic publishing itself. Digital technologies increasingly allow researchers to preserve intellectual exchanges that previously disappeared once a conference had ended, thereby extending the scholarly value of academic meetings beyond their immediate audience. This project represents one example of how such technologies may be incorporated into responsible research practice, demonstrating that technological innovation can strengthen rather than replace the collaborative and reflective processes that remain at the heart of scientific inquiry.

AI as a research-support technology

The emergence of large language models and other forms of generative artificial intelligence has rapidly transformed discussions concerning research methodology across the social sciences. Within only a few years, these systems have become capable of producing coherent academic prose, summarizing extensive bodies of literature, translating complex texts, assisting with coding procedures and supporting numerous editorial tasks that previously demanded considerable time and effort. Such developments inevitably raise important questions regarding authorship, originality, academic integrity and epistemic responsibility. They also invite researchers to reconsider the relationship between technological assistance and scholarly expertise. Should these technologies be regarded merely as sophisticated writing tools, or do they represent a more profound transformation in the practice of research itself?

This volume does not claim to offer definitive answers to these questions. Instead, it presents one carefully documented example of how generative artificial intelligence may be incorporated into academic practice within clearly defined methodological and ethical boundaries. Every chapter contained in this volume remains the intellectual product of its respective author and the editors. Research questions, theoretical frameworks, methodological choices, empirical analyses and scholarly conclusions were conceived, evaluated and accepted exclusively by the human researchers responsible for each contribution. Artificial intelligence was employed only where it could support rather than replace scholarly judgement. Consequently, the project should be understood not as an experiment in automated knowledge production, but as an exploration of how researchers may responsibly integrate new technological capabilities into established academic practice.

This distinction is particularly significant for the social sciences. Unlike many technical disciplines, political science, international relations and related fields depend not only upon the accumulation of information but also upon interpretation, contextual understanding and theoretical reasoning. The meaning of political concepts, the significance of historical developments, the interpretation of institutional change and the evaluation of competing explanations cannot be determined through statistical regularities or linguistic fluency alone. They require disciplinary knowledge, methodological competence and continuous critical reflection. The present volume therefore proceeds from the assumption that technological innovation should strengthen rather than diminish the central role of human scholarship. New tools may improve efficiency, facilitate collaboration and enhance communication, but they cannot replace the intellectual responsibilities that remain inseparable from academic research.

For these reasons, the project deliberately combined two ambitions that might initially appear unrelated. On the one hand, it sought to deepen scholarly understanding of Central Europe’s changing place within Europe and the wider international system. On the other hand, it investigated how contemporary digital technologies may reshape the practical processes through which such knowledge is produced, refined and disseminated. Both objectives ultimately address the same fundamental question: how should academic research adapt to a rapidly changing world while preserving the principles upon which its credibility depends? The chapters that follow represent one collective attempt to answer that question.

Generative artificial intelligence should be understood, at least in its present stage of development, as a research-support technology rather than an autonomous researcher. Its principal contribution lies in extending human capacities for searching, comparing, organizing, translating, drafting and revising scholarly material while leaving the formulation of research questions, the assessment of evidence, the construction of theoretical arguments and the justification of conclusions firmly within human responsibility. This distinction is fundamental because contemporary large language models do not generate knowledge in the epistemological sense. Rather, they recognize and reproduce statistical and linguistic patterns derived from extensive training data without possessing an independent understanding of truth, intentionality, ethical responsibility or the practical consequences of the claims they produce. Their increasing sophistication therefore expands the methodological toolkit available to researchers while simultaneously raising important questions concerning transparency, explanation, trust, accountability and potential forms of epistemic harm (Alvarado, 2023). Within political science and international relations, such systems may substantially improve document discovery, corpus organization, comparative literature analysis and preliminary text classification, yet their outputs should never be confused with interpretation, explanation or theory development, all of which continue to depend upon human scholarly judgement (Linegar & Rafał Kocielnik, 2023).

These considerations have rapidly become central to contemporary debates on academic integrity. The principal question is no longer whether any use of generative AI is inherently acceptable or unacceptable. Instead, the discussion increasingly concerns the conditions under which AI-assisted research remains compatible with the fundamental principles governing scholarly communication: intellectual honesty, methodological transparency, reproducibility, accountability and critical evaluation. Although institutional guidelines and publishing policies continue to evolve, a broad international consensus appears to be emerging around several core principles. Artificial intelligence cannot be recognized as an author because it cannot assume responsibility for scholarly claims; researchers retain full accountability for every stage of the research process; AI may support but not replace academic reasoning; and its use should be disclosed whenever it contributes substantively to the production of scholarly work (Crawford et al., 2023), similarly as we do now in this volume. Comparative reviews of university policies similarly indicate that higher education institutions continue to negotiate the appropriate boundaries between acceptable assistance and inappropriate delegation, reflecting both the rapid pace of technological development and the absence of universally accepted standards (Rana, 2024)[1]. This uncertainty is further reinforced by the ability of contemporary language models to generate highly convincing prose, plausible references and coherent explanations while simultaneously producing fabricated citations, factual inaccuracies, hidden biases and outputs that may vary considerably across prompts, model versions and successive interactions (Abdurahman et al., 2025). Linguistic fluency, therefore, should never be mistaken for scholarly reliability.

The methodological approach adopted throughout this project reflects these emerging principles. Artificial intelligence was deliberately incorporated into the editorial workflow not because it was considered capable of producing independent academic knowledge, but because it could enhance particular stages of an otherwise entirely human research process. Every contributor remained fully responsible for identifying research questions, selecting theoretical approaches, reviewing the relevant literature, evaluating evidence, interpreting empirical findings and defending the conclusions presented within each chapter. AI neither generated original research problems nor determined analytical frameworks. Instead, it functioned as an advanced editorial and organizational assistant operating under continuous human supervision. The responsibility for every published proposition, interpretation and citation therefore remained exclusively with the respective authors.

Research workflow and editorial methodology

Human oversight constituted not only a final verification procedure but the central organizing principle of the entire project. Responsible AI use requires considerably more than identifying occasional factual inaccuracies or correcting isolated linguistic errors. It demands continuous evaluation of how arguments have been constructed, which evidence has been

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[1] The Budapest Metropolitan University intended to regulate the use of AI early but remain flexible with the recommendations (see: https://gephaz.metropolitan.hu/storage/contentblocks/MI%20aj%C3%A1nl%C3%A1s_hallgat%C3%B3_20250905-1763725896.pdf), because as John von Neumann mentioned: “It would appear that we have reached the limits of what it is possible to achieve with computer technology, although one should be careful with such statements, as they tend to sound pretty silly in 5 years”.

selected, how alternative interpretations have been considered and whether the resulting conclusions remain theoretically and empirically justified. Researchers remain accountable for methodological decisions, source selection, conceptual coherence and the broader ethical implications of their work regardless of the technological tools employed during its preparation. Recent scholarship emphasizes that responsible reliance upon AI depends upon maintaining continuous critical engagement with system outputs rather than accepting them as authoritative representations of knowledge (Naeem & Hauser, 2024). Equally important, excessive dependence upon statistically probable formulations may gradually reduce scholarly reflexivity by encouraging familiar or conventional expressions in place of theoretically informed and contextually situated judgement (Lindebaum & Fleming, 2023). The intellectual leadership of the research process must therefore remain firmly in human hands, even where computational systems contribute to particular cognitive or editorial tasks.

Within these clearly defined boundaries, generative AI can provide meaningful assistance throughout the research lifecycle. It may facilitate preliminary literature exploration, suggest alternative manuscript structures, improve linguistic clarity, translate academic material, summarize extensive documents, compare competing conceptual approaches and support the organization of complex research projects. In qualitative research, recent studies indicate that carefully supervised applications of generative AI may assist researchers in developing and identifying potential thematic relationships and organizing extensive texts and videos, provided that analytical frameworks remain researcher-driven and outputs are repeatedly evaluated and revised through critical interpretation (Nguyen-Trung, 2025). These findings suggest that AI should be regarded primarily as an augmentative rather than substitutive technology whose principal value lies in reducing repetitive editorial work while allowing researchers to devote greater attention to conceptual development and theoretical reasoning.

The workflow developed within the present project was explicitly designed around this understanding. Many contributions included in this volume originated not as completed manuscripts but as keynote lectures, conference presentations, panel discussions, workshop exchanges and recorded videos of lectures and conversations held during the international conference and during the project. Traditionally, such intellectual interactions have remained largely inaccessible after the conclusion of academic events despite frequently containing valuable theoretical insights, methodological reflections and emerging research questions. Contemporary speech-recognition systems and generative language models now make it possible to transform these discussions into coherent draft texts with remarkable efficiency. The project therefore explored whether recorded academic dialogue could become the starting point for further scholarly development rather than remaining a temporary component of conference participation.

This transformation, however, represented only the beginning of the writing process rather than its conclusion. Machine-generated transcripts were treated exclusively as preliminary working documents. Every chapter subsequently underwent substantial revision by its author, including verification against original recordings and notes, incorporation of additional academic literature, refinement of conceptual frameworks, expansion of empirical analysis and careful reconsideration of theoretical arguments. In many cases, the published chapter differs significantly from the original presentation or the recorded video because the conference discussions themselves generated new perspectives, highlighted conceptual ambiguities or suggested additional directions for investigation. Artificial intelligence therefore facilitated the preservation and organization of scholarly conversations without determining either their intellectual content or their final academic interpretation.

The distinction between linguistic assistance and intellectual authorship proved particularly important throughout this process. AI contributed to improving grammar, restructuring paragraphs, enhancing stylistic coherence and organizing preliminary material into more accessible forms, but it did not determine the significance of empirical findings, evaluate competing theoretical explanations or decide which interpretations were academically defensible. Such decisions remained inseparable from the disciplinary expertise, methodological competence and critical judgement of the individual researcher. As recent scholarship has argued, editorial refinement and language assistance should not be conflated with intellectual contribution because the former concerns communication whereas the latter concerns the production and justification of knowledge itself (Formosa et al., 2024). Throughout this volume, authorship consequently remained entirely human despite benefiting from AI-supported editorial processes.

The project also illustrates how emerging technologies may contribute to preserving academic dialogue in ways that were previously difficult to achieve. Conferences often generate valuable insights during question-and-answer sessions, informal discussions, interdisciplinary workshops and collaborative exchanges that never become part of the published scholarly record. By combining digital recording technologies, automated transcription and carefully supervised editorial revision, researchers may increasingly capture these intellectual interactions and develop them into enduring scholarly outputs. Such an approach extends the life of academic collaboration beyond the conference and the project itself while ensuring that the resulting publications remain grounded in critical reflection, theoretical refinement and rigorous human scholarship. Rather than replacing conventional academic writing, AI becomes one component of a broader research methodology aimed at strengthening collaboration, improving scholarly communication and preserving knowledge generated through collective scientific exchange.

Opportunities and limitations of AI in social science research

The opportunities created by generative artificial intelligence should not obscure its important methodological limitations. These limitations are particularly significant in disciplines such as political science, international relations and other qualitative social sciences, where the central objective is not merely to organize information but to explain complex political phenomena, interpret historical developments and construct theoretically informed arguments. Large language models excel at recognizing recurring (textual) patterns, identifying semantic similarities and generating linguistically coherent responses. They are considerably less capable of evaluating causal relationships, assessing competing theoretical explanations or exercising the contextual judgement required for meaningful social scientific interpretation. While AI may suggest conceptual connections or generate potential hypotheses, such outputs do not in themselves establish theoretical novelty, explanatory validity or empirical robustness. As recent research increasingly argues, generative AI should therefore be understood as a highly capable pattern-recognition technology operating within clearly defined methodological boundaries rather than as an independent producer of scientific knowledge (Madden, 2025).

These limitations are even more pronounced in interpretive and qualitative research. Political processes are embedded within historical experience, institutional development, cultural context and social interaction, dimensions that frequently resist purely textual representation. Interviews, focus groups, workshop discussions and elite conversations (such as during this project and the conference) contain not only verbal content but also tone, emphasis, hesitation, institutional memory and contextual meaning that may fundamentally shape interpretation. Automated coding procedures may assist researchers in organizing extensive textual material, yet they cannot reliably distinguish between rhetorical strategy and genuine preference, between irony and literal meaning, or between historically contingent concepts and apparently similar contemporary expressions. The richness of qualitative inquiry derives precisely from these contextual dimensions. Consequently, AI-assisted coding should remain subordinate to researcher interpretation rather than replacing it. Recent methodological discussions similarly caution that excessive reliance upon automated analytical procedures may inadvertently privilege standardized categories over context-sensitive interpretation and thereby narrow rather than broaden scholarly understanding (Chatzichristos, 2025; Davison et al., 2024).

For international relations research, these considerations acquire additional significance because many research questions concern contested concepts, competing narratives and evolving political identities rather than objectively measurable variables alone. Explanations of regional cooperation, alliance behavior, strategic autonomy or geopolitical competition require researchers to navigate multiple theoretical traditions while remaining attentive to historical contingency and normative assumptions. AI systems may efficiently summarize existing scholarship or identify similarities across texts, yet they remain unable to determine which theoretical framework is most appropriate for a particular research question or how contradictory evidence should be interpreted. Such decisions remain fundamentally intellectual rather than computational. Model architecture, alignment strategies and training data may themselves influence generated outputs, meaning that the selection of an AI system becomes a methodological decision requiring scholarly awareness rather than a neutral technical choice (Lyman et al., 2025). Responsible use therefore presupposes not only familiarity with the substantive research topic but also an understanding of the technological limitations that shape AI-generated responses.

Equally important are the ethical and practical questions surrounding data governance. Contemporary qualitative research frequently relies upon confidential interviews, workshop discussions, unpublished policy materials and field observations that cannot automatically be transferred to external computational systems without careful consideration. Researchers must therefore evaluate whether participants have provided informed consent for such processing, whether confidential material may be uploaded to commercial platforms, how submitted information is stored or retained, and whether institutional or legal obligations restrict particular forms of digital processing. Questions of privacy, ownership, anonymity, researcher agency and interpretive sufficiency are inseparable from the apparent convenience offered by increasingly powerful AI systems (Davison et al., 2024). In projects involving sensitive political topics or identifiable participants, methodological prudence may require limiting or entirely avoiding the use of externally hosted generative AI platforms, which was not the case of our present project.

However, the present project adopted a cautious and transparent approach in addressing these challenges. AI-assisted workflows were employed exclusively where they remained compatible with ethical standards, institutional requirements and scholarly responsibility. Recorded conference presentations, videos during and associated to the project, the keynote lecture and workshop discussions were processed only within the boundaries established by the participants and the organizers of the conference. Machine-generated transcripts served exclusively as preliminary editorial material, while all substantive interpretation, theoretical refinement and empirical verification remained the responsibility of the contributing authors. No chapter relied upon AI-generated analysis without subsequent human verification, and no scholarly claim was accepted solely because it had been suggested by a computational system. Throughout the project, technological assistance remained subordinate to disciplinary expertise and critical academic judgement.

Within this volume, AI contributed primarily to editorial and organizational tasks. It assisted in converting recorded presentations into preliminary textual drafts, improving linguistic clarity, restructuring sections where appropriate, comparing alternative formulations, identifying stylistic inconsistencies and facilitating communication across multiple contributors. Whenever more substantive forms of assistance – including summarization, translation, structural editing or preliminary coding – were employed, these outputs were subjected to repeated human evaluation before becoming part of the final manuscript. The distinction between computational assistance and scholarly contribution therefore remained explicit throughout the publication process. Consistent with emerging international recommendations, linguistic refinement and editorial support were treated differently from intellectual authorship, theoretical reasoning and empirical interpretation (Aczél & Wagenmakers, 2023; Formosa et al., 2024).

Looking ahead: AI, Central Europe and the future of scholarly publishing

The methodological experiment documented in this volume also reflects broader changes taking place within academic publishing. The future is unlikely to be characterized by a simple opposition between books written entirely by humans and books produced by artificial intelligence. Instead, scholarly communication will probably evolve towards increasingly differentiated understandings of technological assistance. Editorial policies may distinguish between language editing, document organization, transcription, translation, literature exploration, coding assistance, analytical prompting and substantive text generation while continuing to assign full responsibility for every published claim to the human author (Lin, 2024). Such distinctions will become increasingly important not because they diminish the value of scholarly expertise but because they reinforce it. The more sophisticated research technologies become, the more essential it is to identify which aspects of knowledge production remain uniquely human.

This observation carries special significance for the social sciences. Political science and international relations have always depended upon the capacity of researchers to exercise critical judgement under conditions of uncertainty. They require scholars to evaluate competing explanations, challenge established assumptions, interpret incomplete evidence and situate empirical findings within broader theoretical debates. These intellectual activities cannot be reduced to statistical prediction or linguistic probability. They depend upon disciplinary knowledge, methodological reflexivity, ethical responsibility and scholarly imagination. Artificial intelligence may increasingly assist researchers in navigating expanding bodies of literature, managing complex research materials and communicating their findings more effectively, but it cannot assume responsibility for the arguments advanced or the knowledge ultimately produced.

Viewed from this perspective, the present volume should not be interpreted solely as a collection of studies on Central Europe, nor exclusively as an experiment in AI-assisted academic writing. Rather, it documents two parallel transformations. The first concerns the changing position of Central Europe within an evolving European and international order. The second concerns the changing practices through which contemporary scholarship is produced, discussed and disseminated. Both transformations require openness to innovation while preserving the principles that have long defined credible scientific inquiry.

Technological development does not diminish the importance of rigorous scholarship; instead, it increases the responsibility of researchers to apply new tools critically, transparently and ethically.

It is our hope that readers will therefore approach this volume from both perspectives. The chapters offer original selected analyses of Central Europe’s contemporary political, economic and strategic challenges, while the publication itself demonstrates one possible model for integrating generative artificial intelligence into academic research without compromising scholarly integrity. We do not present this methodology as definitive, nor do we suggest that it will remain unchanged as technologies continue to evolve. Instead, we offer it as a carefully documented contribution to an ongoing international conversation concerning the future of knowledge production in the social sciences.

Ultimately, the responsible researcher is neither the scholar who rejects every technological innovation nor the one who delegates intellectual inquiry to computational systems. Rather, responsibility lies in understanding precisely what these technologies can contribute, recognizing where their limitations begin, and remaining able to explain transparently how they were used throughout the research process. The credibility of academic scholarship has always rested upon reasoned argument, methodological transparency and intellectual accountability. Those principles remain unchanged. What is changing are the instruments through which researchers pursue them. This volume represents one attempt to explore that future while remaining firmly anchored in the enduring values of scholarly inquiry.

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The Visegrád Group in a Changing World Order

by Laura Nyilas

Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of Central and Eastern Europe has undergone significant transformations since the end of the Cold War, particularly in the context of security and defense policies. The Visegrád Group (V4), comprising Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, has emerged as a pivotal regional entity in navigating these changes, especially considering recent crises such as the war in Ukraine that began in 2022. This conflict has not only reshaped the security dynamics of the region but has also prompted the V4 countries to reassess their roles within the European security architecture, highlighting both their collaborative efforts and the limitations of their cooperation amid escalating tensions.

Despite the V4's historical significance and its initial successes in fostering regional cooperation, recent developments have exposed fractures within the group, particularly regarding divergent national interests and responses to external threats. The strategic environment in which this cooperation takes place has changed fundamentally. The post-Cold War period was associated with relative stability, expanding globalization, and confidence in the liberal international order. It has increasingly given way to a more contested environment marked by renewed great-power competition, strategic uncertainty, weakening international norms, and the re-emergence of military conflict in Europe. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 accelerated these developments and restored territorial defense, deterrence, and military readiness to the center of European security. At the same time, the conflict expanded the meaning of security to include energy resilience, cybersecurity, technological competitiveness, economic stability, supply-chain security, and the protection of critical infrastructure. Central Europe has consequently regained heightened strategic significance as NATO’s eastern frontier, increasing the importance of military mobility, defense infrastructure, logistics, allied presence, and national capability development.

This transformation raises the central research question of the chapter: how is the Visegrád Group adapting to renewed great-power competition and the return of large-scale interstate war to Europe, and what does this adaptation reveal about the possibilities and limits of regional cooperation within the contemporary European security order (P. Rada, 2023b, 2025a, 2026)? The question is particularly significant because the war in Ukraine has simultaneously strengthened the structural incentives for cooperation and exposed the political limits of V4 cohesion. Poland has adopted one of the strongest pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian positions in Europe, whereas Hungary has emphasized diplomatic engagement, energy security, and the avoidance of direct involvement; the Czech Republic and Slovakia have occupied intermediate and changing positions shaped partly by domestic political developments. These differences demonstrate that the V4 does not operate as a unified foreign-policy actor, particularly on military assistance, sanctions, and diplomatic policy toward Russia and Ukraine.

This document seeks to explore the evolving role of the Visegrád Group in a changing world order, focusing on its responses to contemporary security challenges and the implications for regional stability. The objective of this chapter is to assess the evolving strategic relevance of the V4 by examining the relationship between national interests, collective security, and the broader NATO–EU security architecture. Its central argument is that the group's future should not be evaluated primarily according to the degree of political unanimity it achieves. Rather, its significance increasingly depends on its ability to facilitate selective cooperation in areas where shared geographical exposure, institutional interdependence, and common vulnerabilities generate practical incentives for coordination. By analyzing the interplay between national interests and collective security initiatives, this work aims to contribute to the understanding of the V4's position within the broader European security framework and the potential pathways for future cooperation. Through this examination, the study will illuminate the complexities of regional cooperation in a time of uncertainty, offering insights into the V4's potential as a stabilizing force in Central Europe.

Analytically, the chapter approaches the V4 as an adaptive and flexible mechanism of subregional coordination. It distinguishes between political cohesion—understood as convergence in foreign-policy positions—and functional cooperation, which may persist despite disagreement when states confront shared risks. This distinction is particularly relevant to military capability development, military mobility, energy diversification, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, defense-industrial cooperation, and technological resilience. The analysis consequently focuses less on whether the V4 can formulate a common grand strategy than on where practical cooperation continues to generate tangible strategic value.

The V4 as a Central European Strategic Subregion

The Visegrád Group, which includes the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, was formed in 1991 as a response to the intense geopolitical transformation that followed the end of the Cold War. Created through the Visegrád Declaration, its original aim was to coordinate the political and economic transition of the four post-socialist states while promote their accession to NATO and the European Union. Regional cooperation therefore developed not as an alternative to European integration but as an instrument supporting the countries' return to the Euro-Atlantic community (Damjanovski, 2023). Following the successful accomplishment of accession in 1999 and 2004, the main motives of the cooperation changed rather than disappeared. Instead of preparing for integration, the V4 gradually evolved into a platform for coordinating regional interests from within the European Union and NATO (P. Rada & Stepper, 2026), while preserving the flexibility that had characterized the cooperation from its inception (Володимирівна et al., 2023).

Unlike highly institutionalized regional organizations, the V4 deliberately retained an informal structure based on regular political consultations, consensus-building, and selective cooperation (P. Rada, 2023a, 2024b, 2025a). This institutional flexibility has become one of its defining strategic characteristics. Rather than requiring permanent agreement across all policy areas, the V4 allows its members to cooperate where common interests exist while avoiding institutional paralysis when national positions are different (Bąk-Pitucha, 2024). The establishment of the International Visegrad Fund further broadened this cooperation beyond governments by supporting academic, cultural, educational, and civil-society exchanges, thereby creating networks that reinforce regional cohesion even during periods of political disagreement. Consequently, the resilience of the V4 has depended less on formal institutions than on its capacity to adapt its agenda to changing geopolitical circumstances while preserving a shared framework for dialogue (Cabada, 2018; Szabó, 2022; Visegrad, n.d.).

The strategic significance of the V4 extends beyond its institutional design. The four countries occupy a geographically contiguous space at the intersection of Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans, positioning the region along several of Europe's principal geopolitical fault lines. This location has historically exposed Central Europe to competing external influences while simultaneously increasing the strategic importance of regional coordination (Nyilas, 2024b). Shared historical experiences—including communist rule, democratic transition, and accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions—have contributed to the emergence of comparable security perceptions and policy priorities (Stepper, 2025; Vedernikov, 2024). These common experiences have not produced identical foreign policies, but they have fostered a regional strategic culture in which questions of sovereignty, territorial security, energy resilience, and external dependence occupy a particularly prominent place (Nyilas & Stepper, 2023a, 2023b). Energy connectivity, critical infrastructure, migration management, and military mobility therefore represent not only national concerns but increasingly regional ones (Górka & Cabada, 2025).

These characteristics suggest that the V4 should be understood as a strategic subregion rather than merely a political consultation forum(Nyilas, 2026a, 2026b). A strategic subregion is distinguished not simply by geographical proximity but by the interaction of common historical experiences, dense economic interdependence, shared security challenges, and overlapping institutional memberships. The V4 satisfies these conditions through its integration within both NATO and the European Union while simultaneously maintaining a distinct regional perspective shaped by Central Europe's geopolitical position (P. Rada, 2020b, 2020a). Trade integration, cross-border infrastructure, integrated supply chains, and growing defense cooperation reinforce this regional interconnectedness and increase the incentives for collective action (Strážay & Terem, 2025). Although political preferences differ across governments and national priorities frequently diverge, these structural conditions continue to encourage cooperation on issues where common vulnerabilities and interests remain evident.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has demonstrated both the strengths and the limitations of this model of regional cooperation. National responses regarding military assistance, sanctions, and diplomatic engagement have varied considerably, illustrating that the V4 does not operate as a unified foreign policy actor (Czyż, 2024). At the same time, the war has reinforced a shared recognition that the security of Central Europe cannot be addressed solely through national policies. Defence modernization, NATO's eastern flank, military mobility, critical infrastructure protection, and energy security have all gained greater strategic importance, creating renewed incentives for regional coordination despite political disagreements (Kulczycki & Musioł, 2025). This pattern illustrates that the cohesion of the V4 rests less on ideological convergence than on the continued existence of common strategic challenges.

Consequently, the V4's strategic room for maneuver is shaped less by formal institutionalization than by its capacity for selective alignment on external threats and practical policy objectives (Csiki Varga, 2024). The flexibility of the framework enables the four capitals to cooperate where interests converge while preserving national autonomy where preferences differ. This adaptive character has become one of the principal sources of the V4's durability throughout successive geopolitical crises. Looking ahead, the continued relevance of the cooperation will depend on its ability to connect subregional priorities with wider European debates on resilience, defense integration, and strategic autonomy without losing the flexibility and pragmatic cooperation that have historically constituted its greatest strengths (Michaels & Sus, 2024).

The Changing Strategic Environment of the V4

The strategic environment of the Visegrád Group has changed more profoundly than at any time since the countries joined NATO and the European Union. This transformation cannot be explained solely by Russia's invasion of Ukraine or by the resurgence of great-power rivalry. Rather, it reflects the interaction of structural changes occurring simultaneously at the global, European, and regional levels. The post-Cold War strategic environment, characterized by relative stability, expanding globalization, and confidence in the liberal international order, has gradually given way to a more competitive and uncertain international system. The return of geopolitical rivalry, the weakening of established international norms, growing strategic interdependence, and the re-emergence of military conflict in Europe have fundamentally altered the external environment within which the V4 operates (Bąk-Pitucha, 2024; Górka & Cabada, 2025). Consequently, the central strategic challenge facing the V4 is no longer accession to Western institutions—as it was during the 1990s—but adaptation to an increasingly contested international order while preserving regional security, economic resilience, and political room for maneuver. This broader transformation is best understood through three mutually reinforcing structural drivers: the transformation of the international order, the reconfiguration of European security after 2022, and the emergence of new strategic priorities for Central Europe. These developments are closely aligned with the broader evolution of the international system identified in the project's earlier theoretical work, where the liberal order is interpreted as adapting rather than disappearing under conditions of increasing geopolitical competition.

Transformation of the International Order

The first structural driver is the transformation of the international order itself. The relatively uncontested predominance of the liberal order that followed the Cold War has gradually been replaced by an environment characterized by renewed great-power competition, increasing multipolarity, and growing strategic uncertainty. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China has expanded beyond military competition to encompass trade, technology, investment, critical infrastructure, and supply chains, while Russia has challenged the European security architecture through the use of military force. Rather than replacing the existing order, these developments have produced a more contested international environment in which liberal institutions continue to exist but operate alongside intensifying geopolitical competition. The result is neither the collapse of the liberal order nor the emergence of a fully alternative one, but a more fragmented and competitive system in which different centers of power increasingly pursue overlapping and sometimes conflicting strategic objectives (P. Rada et al., 2024; P. Rada & Nyilas, 2024, 2026).

For the V4, this transformation has important implications. As relatively small and medium-sized states embedded in both NATO and the European Union, the four countries remain firmly integrated into the Euro-Atlantic institutional framework. Nevertheless, they are increasingly affected by global competition extending into economic governance, industrial policy, technology, and critical infrastructure. Strategic competition therefore no longer concerns only military balances but also the control of digital networks, semiconductor supply chains, artificial intelligence, energy technologies, and investment in strategic sectors. The growing Chinese economic presence in Central Europe (P. Rada & Medgyesi, 2025) illustrates this duality by creating opportunities for trade and investment while simultaneously raising concerns regarding technological dependence and strategic vulnerabilities. Consequently, the V4 increasingly faces the challenge of balancing economic openness with security considerations, generally aligning with EU and transatlantic efforts to reduce strategic dependencies in sensitive sectors without abandoning international economic engagement (Michaels & Sus, 2024). This evolution reflects the broader transition toward a more pluralistic and uncertain international system in which geopolitical and geo-economic considerations have become increasingly intertwined.

A defining characteristic of this evolving environment is uncertainty. Predictability, which constituted one of the principal advantages of the post-Cold War order, has diminished as power becomes more widely distributed and international institutions face increasing pressure. The future trajectory of United States (P. Rada, 2022) engagement in European security, the pace of European defense integration, the durability of globalization, and the evolution of Sino-American relations all introduce strategic uncertainty into the external environment of the V4. For small and medium-sized states, uncertainty itself becomes a strategic variable, increasing the importance of adaptability, diversification, and regional cooperation as mechanisms for managing risk rather than predicting outcomes.

European Security after 2022

The second structural driver has been the fundamental transformation of European security following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While tensions between Russia and the West had already intensified after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the invasion demonstrated that large-scale interstate war had once again become a defining feature of European security. Many assumptions underpinning the post-Cold War security architecture—including the expectation that economic interdependence would prevent major military conflict—were fundamentally challenged (Володимирівна et al., 2023).

For the V4, the war represented more than an external security crisis. It altered the strategic significance of Central Europe itself. The region once again became NATO's eastern frontier, increasing the importance of deterrence, military mobility, defence infrastructure, logistics, and resilience. Consequently, defence policy has shifted from long-term modernization toward immediate capability development, higher defence expenditures, strengthened allied presence, and improved interoperability within NATO (Kulczycki & Musioł, 2025). Deterrence has therefore regained a central position within the security strategies of all four V4 members, although national approaches toward Russia, sanctions, and military assistance to Ukraine have differed considerably (Czyż, 2024).

These divergences illustrate both the strengths and the limitations of V4 cooperation. The four governments do not constitute a unified foreign-policy actor, and differences in national threat perceptions continue to constrain political cohesion. Nevertheless, these differences have not eliminated the structural incentives for regional cooperation. Defence modernization, military mobility, border security, energy infrastructure, and critical infrastructure protection remain areas where practical cooperation continues to generate mutual benefits despite political disagreements. The war has therefore reinforced the importance of the V4 less as a vehicle for common diplomacy than as a flexible framework for selective coordination on concrete security issues (Csiki Varga, 2024).

Implications for Central Europe

The interaction between global geopolitical competition and the transformation of European security has created a third structural driver: the emergence of new strategic priorities for Central Europe. Security can no longer be understood solely in military terms. Economic resilience, technological competitiveness, energy diversification, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, and supply-chain security have become integral components of national and regional security strategies (Górka & Cabada, 2025).

Within this broader agenda, resilience has emerged as an organizing concept linking military preparedness with economic and societal adaptation. Rather than focusing exclusively on responding to military threats, resilience emphasizes the capacity of states and societies to absorb shocks, maintain essential functions, and recover from external disruptions. For the V4, this includes strengthening energy security, protecting critical infrastructure, reducing strategic dependencies, improving technological capabilities, and reinforcing regional cooperation across multiple policy sectors (Csiki Varga, 2024).

The growing emphasis on European strategic autonomy adds another dimension to this changing environment. Although the V4 countries differ regarding the scope and political interpretation of strategic autonomy, they increasingly recognize the need for Europe to strengthen its capacity to act in areas such as defence, industrial policy, technology, and critical supply chains. Their approach has generally remained pragmatic rather than ideological: support for greater European capabilities is typically accompanied by continued emphasis on NATO and the transatlantic relationship as the indispensable foundation of European hard security (Michaels & Sus, 2024). The resulting strategic challenge is therefore not to choose between the European Union and the United States but to reconcile deeper European resilience with continued transatlantic cohesion.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the strategic environment of the V4 is no longer defined primarily by post-Cold War integration but by continuous strategic adaptation. The convergence of great-power competition, renewed military confrontation in

Europe, and the expansion of security into economic and technological domains has increased both the opportunities and constraints facing Central Europe. Within this evolving environment, the most plausible role for the V4 is not the pursuit of a common grand strategy but the provision of a flexible regional framework capable of coordinating positions where interests converge, strengthening regional resilience, and enhancing the collective influence of Central Europe within both NATO and the European Union. This adaptive capacity, rather than permanent political unity, is likely to determine the continued strategic relevance of the Visegrád Cooperation in an increasingly contested international order.

NATO, the European Union and the Strategic Position of the V4

The strategic position of the Visegrád Group cannot be understood solely through its own regional cooperation. Since the accession of all four members to NATO and the European Union, the security of Central Europe has become embedded within a broader Euro-Atlantic institutional architecture in which the two organizations perform distinct but increasingly complementary functions. NATO remains the primary provider of collective defence and military deterrence, while the European Union has progressively expanded its role in strengthening economic resilience, technological competitiveness, defence industrial cooperation, and the protection of critical infrastructure. Rather than constituting competing frameworks, these organizations shape the strategic environment of the V4 through a division of labour that combines military security with broader political, economic, and societal resilience. As the international order becomes more competitive and uncertain, the interaction between NATO and the European Union increasingly defines both the opportunities and the constraints within which the V4 can pursue its strategic interests (Górka & Cabada, 2025; Michaels & Sus, 2024).

NATO: The Military Pillar of Regional Security

For the V4 countries, NATO remains the indispensable foundation of regional security. Membership in the Alliance transformed the strategic position of Central Europe by replacing the security uncertainty of the post-Cold War transition with collective defence guarantees under Chapter 5 of the Washington Treaty. While NATO has always provided deterrence, defence planning, and military interoperability, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has restored collective territorial defence to the centre of the Alliance's strategic agenda (Володимирівна et al., 2023). Consequently, the security of the V4 has become increasingly linked to NATO's enhanced forward presence, reinforced deterrence along the eastern flank, defence planning, military mobility, and the modernization of national armed forces.

The changing security environment has accelerated defense investments across Central Europe while reinforcing the importance of interoperability and multinational cooperation. Joint exercises, integrated command structures, intelligence sharing, and capability development have become increasingly important as NATO adapts to the return of high-intensity interstate conflict in Europe (Kulczycki & Musioł, 2025). The V4 countries differ in the scale of their military capabilities and defense priorities, yet all remain deeply embedded within NATO's planning processes and increasingly view deterrence as the essential precondition for regional stability. In this respect, the Alliance provides far more than military protection; it creates the strategic predictability necessary for the region's political and economic development.

The war in Ukraine has also demonstrated that the security of Central Europe cannot be separated from NATO's broader strategic adaptation. The reinforcement of the eastern flank, the accession of Finland and Sweden, increased defense expenditure across Europe, and renewed emphasis on conventional military capabilities have collectively strengthened the strategic position of the V4 within the Alliance. Although national political approaches toward Russia and support for Ukraine have differed, these differences have not fundamentally altered the shared recognition that NATO constitutes the primary guarantor of military security for all four member states (Czyż, 2024).

The European Union: Economic, Technological and Institutional Security

While NATO provides the military foundation of security, the European Union increasingly shapes the broader strategic environment within which security is generated. Contemporary security challenges extend beyond conventional defense to include economic coercion, energy dependence, technological competition, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, supply-chain resilience, and industrial capacity. These dimensions fall largely within the competences of the European Union, making it an increasingly important security actor despite its limited role in collective territorial defense (Bąk-Pitucha, 2024).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine significantly accelerated this evolution. The Union responded not only through successive sanctions packages but also by coordinating energy diversification, strengthening critical infrastructure protection, increasing defense industrial cooperation, and expanding financial and military assistance to Ukraine (Górka & Cabada, 2025). These measures illustrate the gradual broadening of the EU's security agenda from primarily economic integration toward a more comprehensive understanding of resilience that integrates economic, technological, industrial, and geopolitical dimensions.

For the V4 countries, the European Union therefore represents an institutional framework through which many of the non-military determinants of security are managed. Access to the single market, cohesion funding, industrial policy, research and innovation programs, transport infrastructure, digital regulation, and energy integration all contribute to strengthening the region's long-term strategic resilience. At the same time, EU initiatives concerning defense industrial cooperation, military mobility, cybersecurity, and critical technologies increasingly complement NATO's military role by strengthening the economic foundations upon which credible defence ultimately depends (Michaels & Sus, 2024).

The debate surrounding European strategic autonomy should also be understood within this broader context. Although the concept continues to generate political disagreement among the V4 countries, its practical implementation increasingly focuses on reducing critical dependencies, strengthening European industrial capabilities, improving technological competitiveness, and increasing the Union's capacity to act in situations where external support may be limited. For the V4, this does not imply replacing NATO as the cornerstone of defense but rather reinforcing the economic and technological capabilities that enable Europe to remain a credible security actor within the transatlantic alliance (Csiki Varga, 2024).

The Interaction of NATO and the European Union: Shaping the Strategic Position of the V4

The strategic position of the V4 is ultimately defined not by NATO or the European Union individually but by the interaction between the two institutional frameworks. Their memberships simultaneously constrain and enhance the strategic room for maneuver of the four Central European states. Membership imposes common obligations, legal commitments, and policy coordination that limit unilateral action. At the same time, these institutions provide security guarantees, financial resources, technological cooperation, and political influence that substantially expand the capabilities available to relatively small and medium-sized states.

This interaction has become increasingly important as security has evolved into a multidimensional concept. Military deterrence alone cannot address vulnerabilities arising from technological dependence, energy insecurity, economic coercion, cyber threats, or disruptions to critical supply chains. Likewise, economic resilience cannot substitute for credible military defense. Instead, contemporary security increasingly depends upon the interaction between military capabilities, economic competitiveness, technological innovation, institutional resilience, and political cohesion. NATO and the European Union therefore perform complementary rather than competing functions within the evolving European security architecture.

For the V4, this complementarity creates opportunities for selective regional coordination even when national political preferences diverge. While differences regarding Russia, sanctions, defense integration, and aspects of EU policy have become more pronounced after 2022 (Czyż, 2024; Vedernikov, 2024), the structural incentives for cooperation remain strong. Military mobility, defense procurement, critical infrastructure protection, cybersecurity, energy diversification, resilience planning, and defense industrial development all represent areas where regional cooperation can generate practical added value without requiring complete political consensus. This pragmatic approach has historically characterized Visegrád cooperation and appears likely to remain its most sustainable model under conditions of increasing geopolitical uncertainty.

The interaction between NATO and the European Union therefore defines the strategic room for maneuver available to the V4. Rather than choosing between transatlantic and European frameworks, the four countries increasingly operate within a system in which security depends upon the complementary strengths of both organizations. NATO continues to provide the indispensable military pillar through collective defense, deterrence, and operational capabilities. The European Union increasingly supplies the economic, technological, industrial, regulatory, and resilience dimensions necessary to sustain long-term security. The strategic position of the V4 consequently derives from its ability to operate effectively within both frameworks simultaneously, using regional cooperation not as an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration but as a mechanism for enhancing the collective influence and adaptability of Central Europe within an increasingly contested international environment. This integrated institutional architecture ultimately constitutes the principal source of the V4's strategic room for maneuver in the twenty-first century.

Common Security Challenges and Selective Regional Cooperation

The changing strategic environment (P. Rada, 2006) has not eliminated the rationale for Visegrád cooperation; instead, it has altered both its priorities and its realistic scope. During the accession period, regional cooperation primarily served to facilitate integration into NATO and the European Union. Today, cooperation is increasingly driven by the management of common vulnerabilities arising from geopolitical competition, military conflict, technological transformation, and economic interdependence. At the same time, the political divergence that has emerged among the four governments—particularly regarding Russia, Ukraine, and aspects of European integration—limits the prospects for comprehensive strategic coordination. Consequently, the future of the V4 is likely to depend less on developing common foreign policy positions than on selective cooperation in policy areas where structural interests continue to converge despite political disagreements (Czyż, 2024; Michaels & Sus, 2024).

This distinction between political consensus and functional cooperation is essential for understanding the contemporary V4. The four countries frequently differ in their diplomatic positions and domestic political priorities, yet they continue to face many of the same strategic risks. Geography, institutional membership, economic interdependence, and shared infrastructure create incentives for cooperation that persist independently of political alignment. The strategic relevance of the V4 therefore increasingly rests on its ability to identify those areas where practical cooperation generates tangible regional benefits while accepting that complete policy convergence is neither realistic nor necessary. This selective approach (C. Rada & Rada, 2007) reflects the adaptive character that has distinguished Visegrád cooperation throughout its history.

Military Security

Military security remains the area in which the V4 shares the clearest common threat perception, even if national political responses differ. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally altered the strategic environment of Central Europe by restoring territorial defence, deterrence, and military readiness to the centre of national security policies. All four countries recognize the necessity of strengthening NATO's eastern flank, modernizing their armed forces, improving interoperability, and increasing defence investments, although the pace and political framing of these efforts vary considerably (Володимирівна et al., 2023).

The principal common interest lies in maintaining credible deterrence and ensuring that Central Europe remains fully integrated into NATO's defence planning. Military mobility, logistics, intelligence sharing, joint exercises, defence planning, and capability development all provide opportunities where regional cooperation can complement Alliance structures without duplicating them (Kulczycki & Musioł, 2025). Existing V4 defence initiatives—including regular meetings of defence ministers and chiefs of staff, coordinated military exercises, and cooperation through the EU Battlegroup framework—demonstrate that practical collaboration remains feasible despite broader political disagreements. The V4 EU Battlegroup, although limited in operational significance, illustrates the capacity of the four countries to coordinate force generation and military planning under both NATO and EU frameworks.

The limits of cooperation nevertheless remain evident. Divergent national assessments of Russia, different levels of military support for Ukraine, and varying domestic political narratives constrain the development of a unified regional security strategy (Czyż, 2024). Rather than pursuing common strategic doctrines, future cooperation is therefore likely to concentrate on capability development, defence procurement, military mobility, logistics, and interoperability—areas where practical interests converge regardless of political differences (Csiki Varga, 2024).

Hybrid Threats and Cyber Security

The expansion of hybrid threats has considerably broadened the concept of security in Central Europe. Disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, foreign influence operations, attacks against critical infrastructure, and information manipulation increasingly accompany conventional geopolitical competition, blurring the distinction between peace and conflict. These challenges affect all V4 countries because of their shared digital infrastructure, open economies, and membership in NATO and the European Union (Bąk-Pitucha, 2024).

The common interest of the V4 lies in strengthening societal resilience and protecting democratic institutions against external interference. Information sharing, coordinated strategic communication, cyber incident response, cybersecurity exercises, and cooperation between national cyber authorities constitute areas where regional collaboration offers clear added value. NATO's cyber defence initiatives and the EU's expanding cybersecurity framework provide institutional support that individual states can reinforce through regional coordination (Csiki Varga, 2024).

Despite these shared interests, important limitations persist. National cybersecurity capacities remain uneven, while domestic political debates frequently shape approaches to disinformation and media regulation. Poland has invested significantly in cyber capabilities and digital resilience, whereas other V4 members have progressed at different speeds (Rotar, 2025). Consequently, comprehensive regional integration remains unlikely. A more realistic trajectory involves expanding technical cooperation, exchanging expertise, coordinating cyber exercises, and strengthening information-sharing mechanisms rather than establishing centralized regional institutions.

Energy Security and Critical Infrastructure

Energy security has become one of the defining strategic issues (P. Rada, 2024a, 2025c; P. Rada & Farkas, 2022) for Central Europe since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The disruption of traditional energy flows demonstrated that energy dependence constitutes not merely an economic vulnerability but a broader strategic challenge affecting national resilience, defense preparedness, and political autonomy (Tiara Lovysamina Zahir et al., 2024).

All four V4 countries therefore share an interest in strengthening energy security through diversification, improved interconnectivity, infrastructure development, and the protection of critical energy networks. Investments in gas interconnectors, electricity grids, LNG infrastructure, nuclear energy, and renewable energy sources all contribute to reducing external vulnerabilities while increasing regional resilience (Koscielniak & Czuprynski, 2025). Similarly, the protection of transport corridors, telecommunications networks, and digital infrastructure has become increasingly important as geopolitical competition expands into non-military domains.

Yet energy policy also illustrates the limits of Visegrád cooperation. National energy mixes differ substantially, as do levels of dependence on Russian energy supplies and preferred diversification strategies. Poland has pursued rapid diversification away from Russian fossil fuels while simultaneously investing in LNG infrastructure and nuclear energy. Hungary has maintained a greater degree of energy cooperation with Russia, reflecting different assessments of economic and strategic priorities (Żuk et al., 2025). These differences constrain the development of a unified regional energy strategy. Nevertheless, cooperation on cross-border infrastructure, emergency preparedness, critical infrastructure protection, and regional energy connectivity remains both feasible and strategically beneficial, suggesting that functional cooperation is likely to continue despite divergent national energy policies.

Economic and Technological Security

The intensification of geopolitical competition has increasingly blurred the boundary between economic policy and national security. Supply chains, critical technologies, foreign investment, industrial production, artificial intelligence, semiconductor manufacturing, and digital infrastructure have become strategic assets whose control influences national resilience and international competitiveness. The V4 countries therefore face a common challenge of maintaining economic openness while reducing strategic vulnerabilities created by excessive external dependence (Khan et al., 2023).

Economic security has become a shared regional interest because the V4 economies are highly integrated into European production networks while simultaneously remaining dependent upon global markets. The COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and the intensification of US–China strategic competition all demonstrated the importance of diversified supply chains, resilient industrial capacities, and secure technological ecosystems (Mišík, 2022). The European Union's increasing emphasis on economic security, industrial policy, and technological sovereignty further reinforces these priorities within Central Europe.

National approaches nevertheless differ considerably. Poland has increasingly prioritized strategic industrial development and technological capabilities, while Hungary has continued to emphasize attracting foreign direct investment from a diverse range of international partners. The Czech Republic and Slovakia similarly pursue distinct industrial and innovation strategies reflecting the structure of their respective economies. These differences reduce the likelihood of fully integrated regional industrial policies. At the same time, cooperation in research and innovation, digital infrastructure, critical technologies, higher education, and defense-industrial supply chains offers realistic opportunities where regional coordination can complement broader EU initiatives. The International Visegrad Fund and expanding academic and research networks also contribute to strengthening the region's long-term innovation capacity beyond purely governmental cooperation.

Migration and Border Management

Migration has represented one of the most politically visible areas of V4 cooperation during the past decade. The migration crisis of 2015 demonstrated that the four countries shared similar concerns regarding the protection of the European Union's external borders and the preservation of national control over migration policies. Their coordinated opposition to mandatory relocation quotas significantly strengthened the international visibility of the V4 and illustrated its capacity to influence broader European debates.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, highlighted the multidimensional nature of migration policy. Poland became the principal destination for millions of Ukrainian refugees, while the other V4 countries also provided significant humanitarian assistance. This demonstrated that the V4 distinguishes between irregular migration and refugee protection arising from armed conflict, although national approaches and capacities differed considerably (Mohay, 2021; Vedernikov, 2024).

The common interest continues to lie in strengthening the protection of external borders, improving border management, combating organized crime and human trafficking, and coordinating responses to migration pressures affecting Central Europe (Vaagland & Zaun, 2025). Existing mechanisms for police cooperation, information exchange, and border management therefore remain relevant. At the same time, differing domestic political priorities and the absence of a common European migration policy limit prospects for deeper institutional integration. Future cooperation is therefore most likely to remain concentrated on operational border management, information exchange, Frontex cooperation, and humanitarian coordination rather than harmonizing national migration policies.

Taken together, these policy areas demonstrate that the future of Visegrád cooperation is unlikely to depend upon comprehensive political unity. Instead, its comparative advantage lies in providing a flexible framework for addressing common security challenges where geography, shared vulnerabilities, and institutional interdependence create lasting incentives for collaboration. Military interoperability, hybrid resilience, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, energy connectivity, technological competitiveness, and border management all represent domains in which selective regional cooperation can generate practical strategic benefits despite continuing political disagreements. The V4's long-term relevance will therefore depend less on speaking with a single political voice than on maintaining sufficient flexibility to coordinate effectively where common interests outweigh national differences. This functional and pragmatic model of cooperation is consistent with the historical evolution of the Visegrád Group and appears better suited to the increasingly differentiated security environment of contemporary Central Europe than more ambitious forms of regional integration.

The Future of the V4: Adaptation through Selective Regional Cooperation

The future of the Visegrád Group should not be assessed through a simple dichotomy between success and failure. Since its establishment in 1991, the V4 has repeatedly demonstrated an ability to redefine its purpose in response to changing geopolitical circumstances. Having successfully supported the accession of its members to NATO and the European Union, the group subsequently evolved into a flexible framework for coordinating regional interests within the Euro-Atlantic institutional architecture. The strategic environment created by renewed great-power competition, Russia's war against Ukraine, growing economic securitization, and technological rivalry now requires another phase of adaptation. Whether the V4 remains strategically relevant will depend less on preserving political unity than on its capacity to identify areas where regional cooperation continues to generate tangible strategic value (Cabada & Waisová, 2018)

Unlike highly institutionalized regional organizations, the V4 has historically derived its resilience from flexibility rather than legal integration. This institutional informality has enabled cooperation to continue despite recurring political disagreements and changes of government. Consequently, the question is not whether the V4 will survive as an organization, but rather what type of regional cooperation it will represent under increasingly differentiated geopolitical conditions. The answer depends on the interaction between internal political developments and external strategic pressures that together define the future strategic environment of Central Europe.

Drivers of Change

The first driver shaping the future of the V4 is increasing internal political divergence. Although the four countries continue to share geographical proximity, comparable historical experiences, and common membership in NATO and the European Union, their foreign-policy priorities have become progressively less aligned. Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed these differences most clearly. Poland adopted one of the strongest pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian positions within Europe, while Hungary pursued a more cautious approach emphasizing diplomatic engagement, energy security, and the avoidance of direct involvement. The Czech Republic and Slovakia have occupied positions between these two poles, with domestic political developments further influencing their respective policies (Dangerfield, 2012). These divergences reduce the prospects for common diplomatic positions but do not necessarily eliminate opportunities for functional cooperation.

The second driver arises from the changing external strategic environment. The return of great-power competition has fundamentally altered the geopolitical context within which the V4 operates. Strategic rivalry between the United States and China, Russia's revisionist foreign policy, technological competition, economic securitization, and growing uncertainty surrounding the international order all place new demands on Central European states (P. Rada, 2026; Ušiak et al., 2021). Rather than operating in a relatively stable post-Cold War environment, the V4 must increasingly adapt to a geopolitical landscape characterized by overlapping military, economic, technological, and political competition. These external pressures create incentives for regional coordination because many of the resulting vulnerabilities—particularly in energy, supply chains, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure—transcend national borders.

NATO will remain the principal external driver shaping the military dimension of the V4's future. The Alliance continues to provide the indispensable framework for collective defense, deterrence, military interoperability, and defense planning. The reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank following 2022 has increased the strategic importance of Central Europe while simultaneously encouraging greater regional cooperation in military mobility, capability development, logistics, and defense modernization (Nyilas, 2024a; P. Rada, 2025b). As long as the security environment remains unstable, NATO will continue to constitute the essential military pillar around which regional security cooperation develops.

The European Union represents a different but equally significant source of strategic influence. Its growing emphasis on resilience, defense industrial policy, technological sovereignty, economic security, and strategic autonomy expands the scope of cooperation beyond traditional defense. For the V4, European integration increasingly shapes the economic and institutional foundations of security, influencing areas ranging from energy diversification and industrial competitiveness to digital regulation and critical infrastructure protection (Damjanovski, 2023; Juncos & Vanhoonacker, 2024). These developments provide additional incentives for regional coordination while simultaneously exposing differences in national preferences regarding the future direction of European integration.

The future role of the United States will also remain a major variable affecting the strategic choices of the V4. Although Washington continues to be the principal guarantor of European military security through NATO, changing American strategic priorities and the increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific introduce uncertainty regarding the long-term distribution of US strategic resources. This uncertainty does not imply American disengagement from Europe, but it strengthens the incentive for European allies, including the V4 countries, to assume greater responsibility for their own defense capabilities and resilience (Nyilas, n.d.). For Central Europe, the challenge is therefore not replacing the transatlantic relationship but complementing it through stronger European and regional capacities.

Possible Trajectories

Against this background, three broad scenarios appear plausible for the future development of the Visegrád Group. These scenarios should not be understood as mutually exclusive predictions but as analytical models illustrating different pathways of regional adaptation.

Scenario 1: Selective Strategic Cooperation

The most plausible scenario is one of selective strategic cooperation**.** Under this trajectory, the V4 would neither return to the high level of political cohesion that characterized parts of the accession period nor experience institutional collapse. Instead, cooperation would increasingly concentrate on policy areas where common structural interests outweigh political differences. Defense capability development, military mobility, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, energy resilience, technological cooperation, border management, and defense-industrial cooperation would become the principal pillars of regional collaboration (Csiki Varga, 2024; Nyilas, 2026a; P. Rada, 2025d)

This scenario is consistent with the historical evolution of the V4 itself. Throughout its existence, the organization has repeatedly demonstrated that its effectiveness depends less on complete political consensus than on its capacity to identify concrete areas of practical cooperation. The flexibility of its institutional structure therefore becomes an advantage rather than a weakness under conditions of increasing geopolitical uncertainty. Rather than functioning as a unified geopolitical actor, the V4 would continue to serve as a pragmatic coordination platform embedded within NATO and the European Union.

Scenario 2: Functional Fragmentation

A second, moderately plausible scenario involves functional fragmentation**.** In this case, political disagreements regarding Russia, Ukraine, relations with the European Union, or broader foreign-policy priorities would increasingly spill over into areas that have traditionally supported regional cooperation. Defense initiatives would continue primarily through NATO, economic cooperation through the European Union, and the distinct added value of the V4 would gradually diminish.

Under this scenario, the V4 would remain formally intact but would lose much of its strategic significance as governments increasingly prioritize bilateral relationships, EU-level initiatives, or other regional formats such as the Three Seas Initiative or the Bucharest Nine. Cooperation would become increasingly selective and largely reactive, reducing the V4 to a consultation forum rather than a strategically influential regional actor (Czyż, 2024). While this trajectory reflects several contemporary political trends, it would not necessarily imply the complete disappearance of Visegrád cooperation.

Scenario 3: Strategic Revitalization

The least likely scenario is one of strategic revitalization, in which the V4 would emerge as a more cohesive and strategically integrated regional actor. Such an outcome would require a substantial convergence of national foreign-policy priorities, greater political consensus regarding relations with Russia and the European Union, and stronger institutional coordination across security, economic, and technological policy areas (Nyilas, 2026b; P. Rada, 2025d; Stepper, 2025).

Although external pressures can strengthen regional cooperation, the current diversity of national political preferences makes such comprehensive revitalization improbable in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the increasing importance of NATO and the European Union as the primary frameworks for defense and economic security reduces the incentives for developing the V4 into a more institutionalized regional organization. Its comparative advantage has historically rested on flexibility rather than formal integration, suggesting that greater institutionalization would not necessarily enhance its effectiveness.

Assessing the Most Plausible Trajectory

Among these alternatives, selective strategic cooperation appears to represent the most plausible trajectory. This assessment reflects both the historical experience of the V4 and the structural characteristics of the contemporary strategic environment. Internal political divergence is likely to persist, limiting the prospects for comprehensive foreign-policy coordination. At the same time, the growing importance of military resilience, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure, energy security, technological competitiveness, and economic resilience creates enduring incentives for practical regional cooperation. The interaction of these two trends suggests that the future of the V4 lies not in becoming either a fully integrated regional bloc or an obsolete political forum, but in functioning as an adaptive and flexible mechanism for coordinating responses to common strategic challenges.

The future relevance of the V4 will therefore depend less on maintaining political unanimity than on preserving sufficient institutional flexibility to cooperate where interests converge while accommodating differences where they persist. This pragmatic model is fully consistent with the historical evolution of Visegrád cooperation and with the broader transformation of European security. In an increasingly contested international order, the V4 is most likely to remain a strategic subregional framework that complements rather than competes with NATO and the European Union. NATO will continue to provide the indispensable military guarantees of regional security, while the European Union will increasingly shape its economic, technological, industrial, and resilience dimensions. Within this dual institutional architecture, the V4's comparative advantage will continue to lie in facilitating selective regional cooperation that enhances the strategic room for maneuver of Central Europe without requiring comprehensive political integration.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that the strategic environment of the Visegrád Group has undergone a fundamental transformation. During the post-Cold War period, the primary objective of regional cooperation was to facilitate the integration of the four Central European states into NATO and the European Union. Today, this strategic context has been replaced by a considerably more complex environment characterized by renewed great-power competition, the return of large-scale interstate war to Europe, growing economic and technological rivalry, and increasing uncertainty surrounding the future evolution of the international order. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has accelerated these trends by restoring deterrence and territorial defense to the center of European security while simultaneously expanding the concept of security to include resilience, critical infrastructure, technological competitiveness, energy security, and economic stability (Cabada & Waisová, 2018; Górka & Cabada, 2025; Володимирівна et al., 2023). These developments have altered not only the external environment of the V4 but also the nature of regional cooperation itself.

At the same time, several structural characteristics of the V4 have remained remarkably resilient. Geography continues to place the four countries at the strategic intersection of Western and Eastern Europe, exposing them to many of the same geopolitical pressures. Their shared historical experience of democratic transition, common membership in NATO and the European Union, and high levels of economic interdependence continue to generate overlapping strategic interests despite increasing political divergence. Equally important, the institutional character of the V4 has remained largely unchanged. Its informality, flexibility, and reliance on consensus have repeatedly enabled the group to survive periods of political disagreement by adapting its agenda rather than fundamentally altering its institutional structure. The historical experience of the V4 therefore suggests that its durability has depended less on permanent political cohesion than on its capacity to redefine the scope of cooperation in response to changing strategic circumstances (Bauerová, 2018; Strážay & Terem, 2025; Ušiak, 2020).

The chapter also indicates that contemporary security challenges differ fundamentally from those that originally shaped Visegrád cooperation. Military security remains indispensable, yet it is increasingly interconnected with economic resilience, technological innovation, cybersecurity, energy diversification, supply-chain security, and the protection of critical infrastructure. These multidimensional challenges cannot be addressed through military capabilities alone, nor can they be managed effectively by individual states acting in isolation. Consequently, the comparative advantage of regional cooperation increasingly lies in coordinating practical responses to shared vulnerabilities rather than formulating comprehensive common foreign policies. This evolution reflects a broader transformation of

European security in which military, economic, technological, and societal dimensions have become progressively integrated (Csiki Varga, 2024; Nyilas, 2025; Stepper, 2025).

Against this background, the chapter suggests that the future role of the V4 should be understood neither through expectations of renewed political unity nor through predictions of institutional decline. The evidence instead points toward a more differentiated model of regional cooperation. Political divergence regarding Russia, Ukraine, aspects of European integration, and broader foreign-policy priorities is likely to persist, limiting the prospects for comprehensive strategic alignment (Vedernikov, 2024). At the same time, the structural incentives for cooperation remain substantial because the four countries continue to confront many of the same security challenges arising from their shared geographical position and institutional embeddedness. Military mobility, defense capability development, cybersecurity, hybrid threats, critical infrastructure protection, energy resilience, border management, and technological security all represent policy areas where practical cooperation can generate tangible regional benefits even when political consensus is incomplete.

The most plausible future trajectory is therefore one of selective strategic cooperation. Under this model, the V4 is unlikely to function as a unified foreign-policy actor or to recover the political cohesion that characterized parts of the accession period. Equally, it is unlikely to disappear as a strategically relevant framework for regional coordination. Instead, its continued significance will increasingly derive from its capacity to facilitate issue-specific cooperation in areas where national interests continue to converge despite broader political disagreements. Such a pragmatic approach is fully consistent with the historical evolution of the Visegrád Group, whose greatest strength has always been its flexibility rather than its institutional depth.

Ultimately, the chapter argues that the strategic relevance of the V4 should no longer be assessed by the degree of political unanimity among its members but by its capacity to enhance the strategic room for maneuver of Central Europe within an increasingly contested international order. Embedded simultaneously within NATO and the European Union, the V4 is best understood as a subregional coordination mechanism operating between national and European levels of governance. NATO is likely to remain the indispensable provider of collective defense, deterrence, and military security, while the European Union will continue to strengthen the economic, technological, industrial, and resilience dimensions of regional security. Within this dual institutional architecture, the V4's comparative advantage lies in translating shared regional vulnerabilities into practical forms of cooperation that complement rather than compete with the broader Euro-Atlantic security framework. Its future relevance will therefore depend not on restoring comprehensive political alignment but on preserving the adaptive and flexible character that has enabled the Visegrád Group to remain a durable strategic actor throughout successive transformations of the European security environment.

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Stabilizing Governance during the State Socialist Period in the Visegrád Countries

by Richárd Izmindi

Introduction

Few countries or groups of countries in the world possess traditions as old and histories of statehood spanning as many centuries as the countries of the Visegrád Group. Although these states repeatedly lost their sovereignty for shorter or longer periods, their resilience is demonstrated by the fact that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, they continue to exist as independent political entities in the heart of Europe. The decades of socialism were likewise among those periods when these countries were deprived of full sovereignty and existed in a quasi-colonial position. Moreover, although under Moscow's direction they belonged to the same military, political, and economic institutional structures, deeper cooperation consistent with their earlier historical traditions could not develop among them. The significance of examining this period therefore lies primarily in the fact that these decades immediately preceded the emergence of modern Visegrád cooperation.

Following the regime changes, the Visegrád Four became some of the most predictable and politically stable states of the post-Soviet region. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the question of how stable their political systems had been during the socialist era itself. To what extent did the countries of the Visegrád region—former Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary—follow similar or divergent paths in terms of political and governmental stability? Although they were among the leading countries of the former socialist bloc, the social and political transformations taking place within them often had exemplary significance for the communist world as a whole. One need only consider the Polish and Hungarian events of 1956, the developments in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and other similar processes.

A particularly interesting phenomenon is what in Hungary has sometimes been referred to as the "Warsaw Express": a historical pattern linking the trajectories of Hungary and Poland over several centuries, in which Hungarian social and political developments have often followed Polish developments with a certain delay but with striking similarities, as in 1848, 1956, and 1989.

This study focuses on one particular aspect of the period: the circumstances under which the longest-serving prime ministers of the three Visegrád countries were able to acquire political power, preserve and stabilize their positions, and, ultimately, the factors that led to their downfall. Although the constitutional institutions of the socialist era functioned as subordinate instruments of the communist state party, their operation within a distinctive domestic political framework nevertheless reveals important features of the internal condition and stability of the political system.

The analysis deliberately does not focus on the genuinely all-powerful leaders of these countries—the well-known general secretaries of the ruling communist parties—because a substantial part of their legitimacy was derived externally, from the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The internationally less prominent prime ministers, by contrast, continued to operate within the remnants of the institutional framework of conventional civilian government. Their careers can therefore reveal more about the classical internal dynamics of governmental systems.

The study is divided into three parts. The first section provides a brief historical overview of Visegrád cooperation. The second examines the careers of the longest-serving prime ministers of the three countries. The final section summarizes the common features of these political trajectories and considers whether distinctive patterns can be identified in the state-socialist systems of the region.

The Historical Background of Visegrád Cooperation

The historical point of reference for Visegrád cooperation is a medieval agreement. In 1335, King Charles Robert of Hungary invited King Casimir III of Poland and King John of Bohemia to a meeting at the royal palace in Visegrád. The objective of the three monarchs was to resolve their political differences and establish economic and political cooperation in response to Austrian and German ambitions for dominance in Central Europe. They also designated new trade routes in order to bypass the customs duties imposed in Vienna.

The success of this cooperation strengthened the region for decades. While the plague devastated Western Europe, the three Visegrád kingdoms experienced a period of prosperity. The success of Central Europe demonstrated that external aggression and ambitions of conquest could be countered effectively only through coordinated action. In all three countries, the historical memory that cooperation and mutual support could bring shared success remained strong, while the absence of such cooperation could weaken states left to face external pressures alone.

After the Second World War, even the concept of "Central Europe" largely disappeared from political vocabulary. The countries behind the Iron Curtain found themselves categorized as part of Eastern Europe and incorporated into the Soviet sphere of influence. Within the region, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary nevertheless remained among its most developed countries and were never fully absorbed into the Soviet social model. One of the most important demands expressed during the Polish and Hungarian events of 1956, the Czechoslovak reforms of 1968, and later Polish protest movements was the persistent aspiration to belong to Europe.

The political processes that began in the late 1980s, most importantly the reforms associated with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, eventually created the opportunity to dismantle dictatorship and construct new democratic systems. For several years, the processes of political transition proceeded almost simultaneously in the three Central European states. Poland and Hungary were the first to embark on democratic transition, establish political pluralism, and hold free parliamentary elections, but developments in Czechoslovakia soon followed.

Even at this stage, as during the decades of socialism, the three countries paid close attention to one another's achievements and political decisions, reinforcing both their historical similarities and their shared interests. Not only former communist political leaders but also opposition movements developed increasingly close relations with one another, learned from each other's experiences, and regarded the common belonging of the peoples of the region as increasingly natural.

The Longest-Serving Prime Ministers

György Lázár, Prime Minister of the Hungarian People's Republic

György Lázár was not only one of the least conspicuous politicians of the socialist era, but perhaps one of the least colorful figures in modern Hungarian political history as a whole. Despite his lengthy political and governmental career, relatively little information about his personal life has survived. Outside his family and closest colleagues, very few people ever came to know him well. Little was revealed publicly about his actual political values, ideological convictions, or views on economic policy.

His professional and political career seemed almost designed to preserve his image as a bureaucratic politician. The public persona he projected was that of an administrator rather than a politician: a senior official interested primarily in carrying out the tasks assigned to him, a servant of the system rather than one of its leaders. Yet Lázár, who for a long period was Hungary's second-longest-serving prime minister, was well aware that he had assumed office exactly one hundred years after Kálmán Tisza took the oath of office. He therefore considered 1975, the year of his appointment, an auspicious year, once remarking that he expected the next record-breaking prime minister to emerge only another hundred years later.[2]

Lázár was born in Isaszeg on 15 September 1924. He originally trained as a planning technician and worked for a time as a technical draughtsman. In January 1945, he was taken to the Soviet Union as a prisoner of war. He subsequently joined the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (MSZDP). Following the merger of the socialist and communist parties in 1948, he became a member of the Hungarian Working People's Party (MDP).

In the same year, he began working as an official at the National Planning Office. Four years later he became a department head, and from 1958 he served for twelve years as deputy president of the institution. He was subsequently appointed Minister of Labour and, before becoming prime minister, also served as deputy prime minister. Lázár coordinated the overall system of centrally planned economic management. In 1970, he became a member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP), and five years later joined the Political Committee, the highest decision-making body of the state party. Later that same year, he was appointed head of government.

An important impetus for the process of political transformation in Hungary came on 25 June 1987, when Lázár was removed from office and succeeded as prime minister by Károly Grósz. He did not immediately disappear from the highest levels of decision-making. Alongside his

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[2] https://masolat.cafeblog.hu/2018/01/17/lazar-gyorgy-miniszterelnok-aki-nem-volt-politikus/

departure from government, he was appointed deputy general secretary of the MSZMP, effectively becoming the deputy of János Kádár. During the major leadership reshuffle of May 1988, however, he lost all of his party positions. He subsequently withdrew permanently from public life. Until his death, he gave no further interviews and made no public appearances. He died in 2014 after having spent many years entirely outside political life. His final wishes reflected the discretion that had characterized his entire career: his family announced his death only after his funeral.

Lázár became prime minister at the zenith of the consolidation of the Kádár regime, while his departure opened the way for efforts to reform the foundations of state socialism and, ultimately, contributed to the broader process of regime change. Although the more than eleven years of his premiership may appear to have been a peaceful and consolidated period, his tenure nevertheless coincided with several significant international and domestic political developments.

One of the most important events was the return of the Holy Crown of Hungary in 1978. As prime minister, Lázár was a member of the official state committee that received the coronation regalia. In 1977, acting on behalf of the Hungarian government, he also signed the interstate treaty on the construction of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros hydroelectric project together with Czechoslovak Prime Minister Lubomír Štrougal, who himself remained in office for even longer, for almost two decades.

Lázár reached the peak of his career after the marginalization of the prominent economic reformer Jenő Fock. The introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1968 had not proceeded without difficulties. After several years, and in the context of an increasingly tense international environment, the entire region experienced an ideologically orthodox leftward shift originating in Moscow. This substantially curtailed several elements of the new economic model.

During this period, Kádár himself was able to retain and strengthen his political position only by carefully balancing competing interest groups in accordance with changing power relations in Moscow. Lázár similarly belonged to the category of politicians skilled in political maneuvering.

As a bureaucrat who patiently advanced through the administrative hierarchy, Lázár served in a wide variety of positions at the National Planning Office, an institution that at the time was in some respects more powerful than the government itself. Yet it was not always clear what professional position he personally held regarding economic reform. He was evidently not considered a major reformer, since otherwise he would hardly have been chosen to replace Jenő Fock. Instead, he occupied some form of intermediate position, continuously and flexibly adapting himself to Hungary's domestic and international political environment.

Overall, much like Kádár, Lázár primarily represented a form of ideological and political pragmatism. Although the period witnessed some retreat from earlier economic and ideological reforms, maintaining the system required increasingly extensive borrowing.

Hungary’s gross external public debt rose dramatically during the period of Kádár-era consolidation, increasing from USD 2.1 billion in 1973 to almost ten times that amount by 1989.

It was during Lázár’s premiership that Hungary joined the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in an effort to avoid complete economic collapse and the prospect of sovereign default in the spring of 1982. His government also liberalized private economic activity earlier than any other country in the Soviet bloc. During the period of Kádárist consolidation, Hungary increasingly opened towards Western Europe—particularly the Federal Republic of Germany—and towards Western investors more generally. Nevertheless, substantial economic or ideological reforms were not implemented even when a growing number of actors were calling for them.

These limited changes gradually contributed, as part of a slow and continuous process, to the disintegration of the highly centralized structures of state socialism. They did not constitute a deliberate program of reform; rather, they were increasingly desperate attempts to preserve the power of an ageing political elite. Yet the postponement of genuine reform, combined with gradual foreign-policy and economic opening, slowly prepared the ground for a new relationship of dependence on Western European political and economic institutions.

This process contributed to the pressures that eventually made comprehensive constitutional, political, and economic transformation unavoidable. The Lázár government, however, would no longer have been capable of fundamentally restructuring the system. Its delaying tactics could at most prolong the political survival of the government and individual groups within the existing power structure.

György Lázár never developed a particularly distinctive political profile. He was, however, disciplined, adaptable, and consistently loyal within the leadership hierarchy. Conflict-averse and restrained, he embodied the classical image of the senior civil servant. In many respects, little else was required of him, because the councils of ministers under state socialism did not function as governments in the conventional sense. They operated instead primarily as executive institutions, almost as economic committees of the ruling party.

Although Lázár formally held the office of prime minister, his genuine political influence was derived less from his constitutional position than from his senior functions within the party, particularly his membership in the Political Committee. Like previous party-state governments, his cabinet operated as a fragmented institution with relatively weak powers. The authority of the prime minister was further limited by government committees responsible for particular policy areas and by the deputy prime ministers who coordinated the work of sectoral ministries.

The real transformation within government and the legislature occurred shortly after the replacement of the Lázár cabinet. From that point until the first free elections, constitutional institutions—and the government in particular—gradually began to recover genuine political authority.

Nevertheless, even during the late Kádár era, considerable political skill was required for a prime minister to remain in office for such an extended period. Lázár's distant personality remains somewhat enigmatic to this day. He was a genuinely colorless technocrat whom even his closest colleagues knew only superficially. Remarkably, even at the height of his career as one of the country's most senior officials and politicians, he rarely gave interviews. He remained more an administrator than a politician throughout his career, functioning as a narrowly defined executive official rather than as an autonomous political leader.

Lázár was often regarded as a *grey eminence*: his restrained political style and deliberately inconspicuous personality made his real ideological position difficult to determine even within the state party itself. He remained at the head of government even as Hungary entered an increasingly steep economic and social decline in the early 1980s and the international political environment underwent major changes—during his tenure he witnessed no fewer than four general secretaries of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

His political survival was made possible precisely by his lack of a clearly defined political profile and by his capacity to blend into his political environment. Yet the same characteristics prevented him from initiating meaningful change and ultimately contributed to his downfall when domestic and international economic and political circumstances increasingly demanded transformation.

By the summer of 1987, Gorbachev had already served as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for two years. As the architect of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, he had clearly opened greater space for change than much of the Hungarian party leadership was prepared to contemplate. The atmosphere of transformation was already evident, but Lázár failed to recognize it; by that point, his political time had passed. His career thus illustrates the proposition that bureaucrats may be capable of governing in periods of stability, but major transformations require political leaders capable of initiating change.

Józef Cyrankiewicz, Prime Minister of the Polish People's Republic

The well-known Polish communist politician remains the longest-serving prime minister in Polish history. He headed the Polish government on two occasions, first from 1947 to 1952 and then from 1954 to 1970, serving for more than twenty-one years in total. A thoroughly pragmatic politician, Cyrankiewicz was already an influential figure during the establishment of communist Poland and managed to preserve his political position despite the numerous upheavals experienced by the country.

This required continuous compromise, which was one reason why he was often regarded as an archetypal conformist. As the title of one biography suggests, Cyrankiewicz became Poland's "eternal prime minister."

Cyrankiewicz was born in Tarnów on 23 April 1911, at the time part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, into a middle-class family. His father was an engineer, while his mother was the daughter of the owner of a successful sawmill. He later studied at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and became involved in the socialist movement at a very young age.

Following the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Cyrankiewicz joined the resistance and became involved in the underground movement associated with the Home Army. He was arrested by the Germans in 1941 and deported first to Auschwitz and later to Mauthausen. He became one of the leaders of an internal resistance group within the concentration camp. After the collapse of communism, allegations were made that he had collaborated with the Gestapo, although these accusations were never substantiated. After the war, however, he participated in the early show trial of his former fellow prisoner and resistance fighter Witold Pilecki and gave false testimony against him.

In 1946, while still relatively young, Cyrankiewicz became a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Polish Socialist Party. At the end of that year, he entered the provisional government as a minister without portfolio. On 6 February 1947, at the age of only thirty-four, he was appointed Prime Minister of Poland.

As head of government, he replaced Edward Osóbka-Morawski, leader of the anti-communist wing of the socialist movement, a development that contributed to a split within the Polish Socialist Party. Cyrankiewicz supported unification with the communists, which eventually took place at the end of 1948, in a process similar to developments in Hungary, leading to the establishment of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR).

The Polish People's Republic was formally proclaimed in 1952. Under the new constitutional order, the office of President of the Republic was abolished. On 20 November, Cyrankiewicz handed over the leadership of the government to the former president and hard-line communist Bolesław Bierut. Cyrankiewicz himself became deputy prime minister, remaining in that position until 18 March 1954, when he returned to the premiership.

Following Stalin's death, both the Soviet Union and several of its satellite states sought to move away from the principle of totally centralized leadership. In Poland, this resulted in the development of a distinctive internal division of power intended to manage conflicts within the PZPR, and it was within this arrangement that Cyrankiewicz was able to return as prime minister.

Beyond his political activities during the Stalinist period, one of the darkest episodes associated with Cyrankiewicz was the Poznań uprising of 1956. He adopted a hard-line approach to the protests: several hundred workers were arrested or tortured, and many were killed. The spirit of the government response was encapsulated in Cyrankiewicz's infamous declaration that anyone who raised a hand against the people's government would have that hand cut off.

At the time, he was only a moderate supporter of political and economic reform, but he maneuvered skillfully in his relationship with the leading reformist politician Władysław Gomułka. After Khrushchev ultimately supported Gomułka despite his willingness to push political confrontation to its limits, Gomułka in turn ensured that Cyrankiewicz remained in power. Cyrankiewicz represented a compromise between the removed Stalinist old guard and those demanding reform.

For an extended period, Gomułka and Cyrankiewicz formed a relatively successful political tandem. As party general secretary, Gomułka possessed genuine power and became the country's leading political figure, while Cyrankiewicz remained behind him as head of the comparatively weak communist government. At the same time, Cyrankiewicz continued to represent the old socialist wing within the highest circles of the regime.

The two leaders also complemented one another in terms of style and lifestyle. Whereas Gomułka was relatively austere and abrasive, Cyrankiewicz retained something of the atmosphere and elegance of the pre-war world. As a colorful political figure, he appeared more acceptable and personally appealing to society, seemed somewhat closer to the attitudes and aspirations of younger generations, and cultivated a much more open image towards the outside world.

Under Gomułka, however, the system ultimately moved not towards the fulfillment of reform but gradually in the opposite direction. It was reportedly characteristic of Cyrankiewicz that, rather than official documents, he sometimes brought crime novels hidden inside government folders to cabinet meetings. By the second half of the 1960s, even Gomułka accused him of showing little real interest in economic affairs.

Almost fifteen years after the Poznań events, strikes and demonstrations triggered by price increases in 1970 were once again suppressed with firearms. Members of the security forces responsible for the deaths of several dozen people subsequently received state decorations. Cyrankiewicz, too, failed to appreciate the wider changes taking place in the world, and such political responses increasingly appeared anachronistic.

As a consequence of the violence, he was removed as prime minister on 23 December 1970, although he was simultaneously transferred upwards within the formal state hierarchy. He became Chairman of the Council of State, effectively serving as head of state, but remained in that position only from December 1970 until March 1972. Thereafter, he gradually withdrew from frontline politics, and by December 1975 he had also been removed from the leadership of the PZPR.

Cyrankiewicz died in Warsaw on 20 January 1989. Some regarded him as a shrewd career politician, an accomplished tactician skilled at political maneuvering. Others simply considered him an opportunist who never committed himself permanently to any particular faction within the party and continuously adjusted his views to external political circumstances. It was precisely this adaptability that allowed Cyrankiewicz to become an enduring political survivor for several decades.

Lubomír Štrougal, Prime Minister of the Czechoslovak People's Republic

Štrougal's left-wing political background can be traced back to his childhood. His father, a cement-factory worker, was actively involved in the left-wing labour movement and participated in the establishment of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He later died in prison during the final days of the German occupation.

Across the history of Czechoslovakia and its successor states, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Štrougal remains by far the longest-serving head of government. He led the Czechoslovak federal government for almost nineteen years, from 28 January 1970 until 11 October 1988. As a professional career politician, he managed to preserve his position at the highest level for an unusually long period despite being associated with the reformist wing of the communist leadership.

Lubomír Štrougal was born in Veselí nad Lužnicí on 19 October 1924. Shortly after the war, he obtained a law degree from Charles University. He became politically active within the Communist Party in 1948. His first government position came as Minister of Agriculture between 1959 and 1961, after which he served as Minister of the Interior until 1965. As interior minister, he was also involved in the arrest of his predecessor.

In March 1968, he became deputy prime minister. At that stage, he still appeared to oppose intervention by Moscow and the other countries of the socialist bloc. When Prime Minister Oldřich Černík began negotiations with the Soviets, Štrougal initially objected. His position soon changed, however, for several reasons.

First, in 1968 he succeeded in entering the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Second, after Gustáv Husák assumed control of the state party, Štrougal's political orientation changed further. He accepted Soviet participation and intervention in Czechoslovak political life and consequently became one of the key figures in the policy of so-called "normalization"—that is, political restoration and retrenchment—over the following two decades.

After the removal of Alexander Dubček, Moscow also regarded Štrougal as a potential new leader. However, Husák ultimately prevailed in the internal power struggle in April 1969. Under the resulting internal division of power within the state party, Štrougal assumed the less powerful office of prime minister at the beginning of 1970.

Following the events of 1968, he undoubtedly played an important role in consolidating the political system. At the same time, he favored a number of economic reforms and felt that he did not receive sufficient political support to implement them.

Together with Gustáv Husák, Štrougal came to represent, until the 1980s, a system characterized by repression, censorship, and the negative consequences of economic stagnation. Following Gorbachev's rise to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, however, Lubomír Štrougal aligned himself with the principles of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The reformist forces within the party were nevertheless eventually marginalized.

At the end of 1987, the hard-line Miloš Jakeš succeeded Husák as party general secretary. As Štrougal increasingly pressed for reforms, internal political conflicts eventually forced him to resign as head of government in 1988. He was subsequently removed from the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party as well.

During the Velvet Revolution in late 1989, Štrougal attempted to become chairman of the Communist Party but failed to secure election. Shortly afterwards, he was expelled from the party and permanently withdrew from public life. Following the regime change, legal proceedings were initiated against him on several occasions in connection with his former political activities, but these attempts ultimately proved unsuccessful.

Interestingly, the efforts to establish legal responsibility did not primarily target some of the older orthodox leaders of the regime but rather Štrougal, a politician associated with the consolidated phase of state socialism who had managed to preserve his position almost until the very end of the system.

Štrougal was a classical bureaucrat and an intelligent politician who favored reform, but only cautiously. He did not attempt what he regarded as impossible and generally pursued only changes that appeared realistically achievable. As a cool-headed pragmatist and skillful political navigator, he was able to remain at the highest levels of government for an exceptionally long period.

Concluding Remarks

Long-term government is closely associated with political stability, either because the durable possession of political power itself generates stability or because the stability of a political system makes prolonged periods of government possible. Several conditions for such political stability can be identified in the state-socialist Visegrád countries:

- **A secure party base behind the prime minister:** each head of government enjoyed strong and relatively stable support within the ruling state party.
- **A balanced relationship with other political actors:** beyond the party leadership itself, successful prime ministers were also capable of establishing effective relations with the bureaucracy and other relevant actors within the political system.
- **The absence of democratic institutions and genuine political pluralism:** because there were fewer competing political actors, prime ministers faced substantially less open competition in preserving their political positions.
- **A stable international environment:** relatively stable political arrangements depended on a predictable external environment that made longer-term political consolidation possible.
- **Appropriate professional experience:** experience in crisis management, together with substantial professional or bureaucratic expertise, could contribute to more effective governance and thereby enhance the stability of socialist governments.

The three political careers examined in this study emerged from three different domestic political contexts. Nevertheless, one important common feature can be identified in all three countries. Alongside economic and political stabilization and the normalization of relations with the Soviet Union, each system succeeded in establishing a distinctive internal political equilibrium. This balance, in turn, contributed to the stabilization of the state-socialist governmental system.

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Atlanticist Strategic Autonomy: The V4 and the Logic of Issue-Specific Cooperation

by Péter Stepper

Introduction

European strategic autonomy has evolved from a primarily defence-oriented concept into a broader debate concerning the European Union's capacity to protect its interests, reduce strategic dependencies, and preserve freedom of action. Although the concept initially focused on military capabilities and the Common Security and Defence Policy, it now also encompasses economic resilience, technological sovereignty, energy security, critical infrastructure, and supply-chain security (Perotto 2023; Juncos 2024; Michaels 2024).

This expansion reflects changes in the international environment, including intensifying great-power competition, uncertainty concerning transatlantic relations, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Michaels 2024; Fiott 2025; Wrange 2026). These developments have highlighted the risks associated with excessive dependence on external actors and have encouraged the European Union to pursue greater resilience without abandoning economic openness or international cooperation (Juncos 2024; Baldoni and Di Luna 2025).

Strategic autonomy remains contested among EU member states. France has generally supported a more ambitious interpretation centred on European sovereignty and defence capabilities, while several Central and Eastern European countries have expressed concern that the concept could weaken NATO or reduce the United States' security role in Europe (Kiliç 2024; Michaels 2024; Fiott 2025). The debate is therefore not simply about whether Europe should become more autonomous, but about the meaning, scope, and institutional framework of that autonomy.

The Visegrad Group provides a useful setting for examining these competing interpretations. Established in 1991, the V4 initially supported democratic transformation and Euro-Atlantic integration before developing into a platform for regional consultation and interest representation within the European Union (Garai 2018; Song 2022). Poland, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia share membership in NATO and the European Union, comparable historical experiences, and close economic ties. At the same time, they differ in strategic culture, threat perception, relations with Russia, and attitudes toward European integration (Strážay 2024).

These differences became particularly visible after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Poland and Czechia adopted strongly supportive positions toward Ukraine, whereas Hungary and Slovakia expressed greater caution regarding military assistance, sanctions, and the escalation of the conflict (Bútora 2024; Strážay 2024). Nevertheless, political disagreement has not eliminated V4 cooperation. The group continues to provide a framework for coordination in areas such as energy security, infrastructure, cohesion policy, economic competitiveness, and regional representation (Garai 2018; Song 2022).

This combination of disagreement and continued cooperation raises the central problem examined in this chapter: whether the V4 can contribute to European strategic autonomy without possessing a unified strategic position. How do the countries of the Visegrad Group interpret and operationalise European strategic autonomy, and what do these interpretations imply for the future of regional cooperation within the European Union? This is the main question of this chapter.

The chapter advances two related arguments. First, the V4 countries generally support a NATO-compatible form of European strategic autonomy. They favour stronger European capabilities and resilience, but do not seek to replace NATO or sever the United States' role in European security (Fiott 2025; Wrange 2026). Second, V4 cooperation is issue-specific rather than comprehensive. Cooperation is most likely where national interests converge, particularly in energy, infrastructure, economic resilience, and selected aspects of defence cooperation. By contrast, disagreements over Russia, Ukraine, and the political direction of European integration limit the group's ability to act as a unified geopolitical actor.

The chapter therefore treats the V4 as an issue-specific regional security framework. This perspective shifts attention away from the question of whether the group has achieved complete political consensus and toward the conditions under which selective cooperation remains possible. The analysis first establishes the conceptual relationship between European strategic autonomy and NATO, then examines the historical and institutional foundations of V4 cooperation. It subsequently compares the national approaches of Poland, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia before identifying the main areas of convergence and division.

This approach makes it possible to assess the V4 without reducing its members to a simple division between supporters and opponents of strategic autonomy. Instead, it examines how different national interpretations shape cooperation across specific policy sectors and what these patterns reveal about the future of the Visegrad Group within the European security order.

European Strategic Autonomy: From Defence Capability to NATO-Compatible Resilience

European strategic autonomy has evolved from a primarily defence-oriented concept into a broader approach to strengthening the European Union's capacity to protect its interests, reduce critical dependencies, and preserve freedom of action. Initially associated with autonomous military capabilities and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the concept gained institutional significance through initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund, and the Strategic Compass (Perotto 2023; Michaels 2024).

Since the late 2010s, however, strategic autonomy has expanded beyond defence. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains, while technological competition highlighted European dependencies in areas such as semiconductors, digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing (Juncos 2024; Baldoni, Di Luna 2025). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine further demonstrated the interdependence of military security, energy policy, economic resilience, critical infrastructure, and technological capacity (Juncos 2024; Wrange 2026). Strategic autonomy is therefore increasingly understood as including defence capabilities, economic resilience, technological sovereignty, energy security, cyber security, and the ability to withstand external coercion (Fiott 2025).

This broader understanding is often expressed through the concept of open strategic autonomy. Rather than seeking isolation or economic self-sufficiency, open strategic autonomy aims to preserve Europe's freedom of action while maintaining cooperation with international partners and participation in global markets (Juncos 2024). It therefore combines the reduction of excessive dependencies with continued economic openness and institutional cooperation.

The relationship between strategic autonomy and NATO remains one of the concept's most contested aspects. Critics argue that greater European autonomy could weaken NATO, reduce the United States' commitment to European security, or produce unnecessary duplication within the transatlantic security architecture (Michaels 2024; Fiott 2025). These concerns are particularly significant in Central and Eastern Europe, where historical experiences of Soviet domination and continuing perceptions of the Russian threat have reinforced the view that the United States remains the ultimate guarantor of European security (Kiliç 2024).

An alternative interpretation understands strategic autonomy as a means of strengthening, rather than replacing, NATO. From this perspective, stronger European military capabilities, defence-industrial cooperation, energy resilience, and technological capacity would enable European states to assume greater responsibility within the alliance while preserving the transatlantic partnership (Fiott 2025). Strategic autonomy would consequently represent enhanced European capability and burden-sharing, not strategic separation from the United States.

Recent geopolitical developments have made this interpretation increasingly relevant. The United States has encouraged its European allies to increase defence spending and improve their military capabilities, while uncertainty regarding the future allocation of American strategic resources has strengthened arguments for a more capable Europe (Fiott 2025). European autonomy is therefore increasingly framed as a way to improve resilience and collective responsibility within NATO rather than as an alternative to the alliance.

For the Visegrad countries, this distinction is particularly important. Although Poland, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia differ in their interpretations of European sovereignty, relations with Russia, and the appropriate scope of EU action, all remain formally committed to NATO and recognise the importance of transatlantic security ties. At the same time, they have participated to varying degrees in initiatives aimed at strengthening European defence capabilities, energy security, economic resilience, and critical infrastructure protection (Perotto 2023; Fiott 2025).

European strategic autonomy should therefore be understood as a multidimensional and contested process rather than as a fixed political project. For the purposes of this chapter, it refers to the European Union’s capacity to develop sufficient military, economic, technological, and political capabilities to protect its interests and act effectively, while remaining compatible with NATO and sustained transatlantic cooperation. This definition provides the basis for examining how the Visegrad countries interpret strategic autonomy across different policy sectors.

Visegrad Cooperation: Historical Development and Issue-Specific Regionalism

The Visegrad Group (V4) is one of the most durable frameworks of regional cooperation in Central Europe. It was established on 15 February 1991, when the leaders of Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia met in Visegrád to coordinate democratic transformation, economic modernisation, and integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Following the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia became independent members of the cooperation, creating the Visegrad Four in its present form (Garai 2018).

During its initial phase, Visegrad cooperation was primarily instrumental. The member states faced similar post-communist challenges and recognised that coordinated action could strengthen their efforts to join NATO and the European Union. Regional cooperation therefore served as a mechanism for promoting democratic reform, market transformation, and integration into Western institutions (Garai 2018). After all four countries joined NATO and the EU in 2004, the original purpose of the V4 changed. Rather than disappearing, the group adapted to its new institutional environment and became a platform for coordinating regional interests within the European Union and, to a lesser extent, NATO (Song 2022).

This transformation reflected the emergence of new common concerns. The V4 countries increasingly coordinated their positions on cohesion policy, agricultural subsidies, energy security, migration, infrastructure, and the distribution of authority between national governments and European institutions (Visegrad Group 2018). The group's relevance therefore shifted from supporting accession to influencing European policymaking and representing Central European interests.

A defining feature of the V4 is its limited institutionalisation. It has no permanent secretariat, legal personality, or supranational decision-making structure. Cooperation is conducted through regular meetings of political representatives, ministers, experts, and diplomats, while the rotating presidency provides continuity. The International Visegrad Fund, established in 2000, remains the group's only permanent institution and supports educational, cultural, scientific, and civil-society cooperation (Garai 2018).

This flexible structure has often been viewed as a weakness because it limits the group's ability to implement binding decisions. At the same time, the absence of strong institutional obligations has contributed to its resilience. Since cooperation is based mainly on consultation and political coordination, disagreement in one policy area does not necessarily prevent cooperation in another. The V4 can therefore maintain its overall framework even when its members hold different positions on major political or security questions (Song 2022).

The so-called “Spirit of Visegrad” reflects this informal and pragmatic character. The concept refers to the shared historical experiences, political expectations, and informal norms that encourage Central European cooperation. The member states have experienced foreign domination, communist rule, democratic transformation, and simultaneous integration into NATO and the European Union. They also occupy a similar geopolitical space between Western and Eastern Europe and face several comparable economic and security challenges (Garai 2018).

The Spirit of Visegrad does not, however, imply ideological unity or permanent political consensus. The member states have disagreed over relations with Russia, migration, energy policy, European institutional reform, and the future of European integration. Nevertheless, these disagreements have generally been managed through selective coordination rather than by abandoning the cooperation altogether (Strážay 2023). The V4 has remained functional because its members tend to concentrate on areas where common interests can be identified while limiting the effects of disagreement in other fields.

The migration crisis of 2015 demonstrated both the political potential and the limitations of this model. Hungary, Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia adopted broadly similar positions against the proposed EU relocation quotas and gained considerable visibility as a collective actor in European debates (Song 2022). The episode strengthened the group’s role as a platform for articulating Central European positions, but it also contributed to its association with disputes over national sovereignty, migration governance, and the future direction of European integration (Garai 2018).

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 produced even sharper divisions. Poland and Czechia became strong supporters of Ukraine, whereas Hungary and, later, Slovakia adopted more cautious positions concerning military assistance, sanctions, and the risk of escalation (Bútora 2024; Strážay 2024). These differences led some observers to question the future of the V4. However, the disagreement did not eliminate cooperation. The member states continued to coordinate in areas such as energy diversification, infrastructure, economic resilience, cohesion policy, and regional representation within European institutions (Strážay 2024).

The V4's persistence despite these divisions can be explained through the concept of an issue-specific regional security complex. Regional Security Complex Theory traditionally emphasises the importance of geographical proximity and shared security interdependence. However, contemporary regional challenges extend beyond military threats to include energy dependence, migration, technological vulnerability, cyber security, economic coercion, infrastructure, and supply-chain disruptions (Juncos 2024; Wrange 2026).

The V4 does not constitute a fully integrated strategic bloc because its members do not share identical threat perceptions or foreign-policy priorities. Instead, cooperation develops selectively in policy areas where interests and objectives converge. Energy security, infrastructure connectivity, economic competitiveness, technological resilience, and cohesion policy provide stronger foundations for cooperation than relations with Russia, military assistance to Ukraine, or the broader political direction of European integration (Strážay 2024).

This issue-specific character explains both the resilience and the limitations of Visegrad cooperation. The group does not require agreement on every major security or foreign-policy question. Its members can preserve cooperation by distinguishing between areas of common interest and issues on which national positions remain incompatible. Consensus is therefore partial and sectoral rather than comprehensive.

This framework is particularly useful for analysing the relationship between the V4 and European strategic autonomy. The four countries do not share a single understanding of autonomy. Poland emphasises deterrence and military resilience, Czechia focuses on European responsibility and capability development, Hungary prioritises sovereignty and strategic flexibility, and Slovakia generally combines European integration with pragmatic national interests. Despite these differences, all four countries have an interest in strengthening energy security, infrastructure, economic resilience, and technological capacity.

The Visegrad Group should therefore be understood neither as a unified geopolitical actor nor as an ineffective regional arrangement. Its principal function is to facilitate coordination among states with similar structural circumstances but divergent priorities. The "Spirit of

Visegrad" lies in this flexibility: the member states cooperate where collective action is beneficial, manage disagreements through political consultation, and preserve the broader framework even when comprehensive consensus is absent.

In this sense, Visegrad cooperation provides a regional model of selective coordination that can contribute to European strategic autonomy without requiring a common strategic vision across all policy areas. Its future relevance will depend on whether the member states can continue identifying shared interests in energy, infrastructure, economic competitiveness, technological development, and defence capability while containing disagreements over Russia, Ukraine, and the institutional future of the European Union.

Hungary: Strategic Autonomy through Sovereignty, Flexibility and Selective Alignment

Among the Visegrad countries, Hungary has adopted the most sovereignty-centred understanding of strategic autonomy. Poland largely frames autonomy through deterrence and military resilience, while Czechia links it to assuming greater European responsibility within the transatlantic alliance. Budapest, by contrast, has mainly understood autonomy as preserving national room for manoeuvre. This approach combines a formal commitment to NATO and EU membership with resistance to political, economic, and security constraints that could limit the government's discretion. Hungarian strategic autonomy thus represents less a project of European independence than an effort to maximise national flexibility within overlapping institutional and geopolitical frameworks.

This model became closely associated with Viktor Orbán's governments from 2010 to 2026. Hungary pursued a pragmatic, or "super-pragmatic," foreign policy that combined sovereignty-based narratives with economic and diplomatic choices driven by national interests (Schmidt & Glied, 2024). Although Budapest remained firmly embedded in NATO and the EU, it also cultivated alternative partnerships through its Eastern Opening strategy, cooperation with Russia in the energy sector, and stronger ties with China and other Asian countries (Motowidlak, 2025; Völgyi & Lukács, 2021).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought this approach into sharp focus. Hungary formally supported Ukrainian sovereignty but resisted or qualified several elements of the collective Western response. It criticised military assistance, challenged sanctions that threatened its economic interests, and repeatedly stressed that the war was "not Hungary's war" (Vidnianskyi, 2024). Poland and Czechia took much more supportive positions towards

Kyiv, while Slovakia moved closer to Hungary after Robert Fico returned to government in 2023 (Czyż, 2024). Within the issue-specific regional security complex framework used in this chapter, Hungary is best understood as a selective participant. It supports cooperation when this strengthens national resilience, advances economic interests, or increases bargaining power, but resists commitments it sees as incompatible with core national interests.

Security and Defence

Hungary's defence policy relies on NATO but also maintains a distinctive focus on diplomatic flexibility, border control, and limited involvement in external conflicts. Its geostrategic position exposes the country to challenges from both the east and south, including instability in the Western Balkans, irregular migration, terrorism, and the effects of conflict in Eastern Europe (Bak et al., 2020). As a result, defence planning connects territorial defence with border protection, counterterrorism, cyber defence, and migration management.

The Zrínyi defence modernisation programme is the clearest expression of Hungary's effort to strengthen national capabilities. By addressing deficiencies in equipment and readiness, it reflects the capability dimension of strategic autonomy: freedom of action also requires military, industrial, and technological capacity (Bak et al., 2020; Schmidt & Glied, 2024). Sovereignty-centred foreign policy therefore does not imply military disengagement; stronger national capabilities can reduce dependence while remaining compatible with NATO collective defence.

The main divergence from Poland and Czechia concerns Ukraine. The Orbán government rejected Hungarian weapons transfers, opposed using Hungarian territory for military deliveries, and portrayed continued Western military support as increasing escalation risks (Vidnianskyi, 2024). This generated distrust among allies and reinforced tensions with the EU, NATO, and Ukraine, including disputes over the Hungarian minority in Zakarpattia (Schmidt & Glied, 2024; Vidnianskyi, 2024). Yet Hungary did not abandon NATO commitments. Its position is better described as selective compliance: collective-security arrangements are accepted when they protect national territory and institutional benefits, while specific measures are contested when their political or economic costs are judged excessive.

Public opinion has largely reinforced this cautious approach. Support for Ukraine has been comparatively weaker in Hungary, although a majority or plurality has generally attributed responsibility for the war to Russia and supported some form of assistance (Thomson et al., 2023). Security and defence therefore remain the main sources of division within the V4. Nevertheless, cooperation can continue in defence-industrial development, military mobility, border management, and cybersecurity.

Energy Security

Energy security is the clearest domain in which Hungary's sovereignty-centred autonomy translates into sustained policy. Budapest treats secure and affordable energy as a core national interest and has resisted diversification measures that could sharply increase costs or undermine supply stability. After an initial post-communist period of privatisation and market opening, the second Fidesz government promoted stronger public authority and national control, associating energy policy with sovereignty, affordability, and protection from external shocks (Járosi & Kovács, 2018).

Continued access to Russian oil, gas, and nuclear cooperation became central to this model. Budapest argues that Hungary's landlocked geography, existing infrastructure, and limited short-term alternatives make rapid decoupling economically dangerous. When energy security is at stake, the government has challenged sanctions or sought exemptions (AKGUL DURAKCAY, 2023). Poland took a different path, investing earlier in LNG infrastructure, alternative supply routes, and interconnectors. Czechia and Slovakia have generally supported diversification and closer European coordination, although both remain sensitive to energy costs (Czyż, 2024).

Hungary's approach contains a paradox: Russian supplies reduce short-term adjustment costs, but they also limit the country's room for maneuver vis-à-vis Russia and the EU. Strategic autonomy, therefore, means not eliminating dependence but deciding which dependencies remain acceptable. The Eastern Opening reinforces this logic by expanding Hungary's economic ties beyond Western Europe (Motowidlak, 2025; Bándy et al., 2024). Within the V4, disagreements over Russian supplies make it harder to adopt common positions. Nevertheless, cooperation continues on interconnectors, electricity markets, gas storage, nuclear energy, and infrastructure protection (Trubalska, 2019).

Economic and Technological Sovereignty

Economic and technological sovereignty constitutes a second major pillar of the Hungarian model. The Eastern Opening policy, launched in 2012, sought to expand trade and investment relations with Russia, China, South Korea, India, Singapore, and other Asian economies (Völgyi & Lukács, 2021). Diplomatic missions, high-level contacts, strategic agreements, state grants, and investment-support services were used to attract foreign companies (Bándy et al., 2024; Völgyi & Lukács, 2021). The objective was not isolation but stronger bargaining power through connections to multiple centres of capital, technology, and influence.

Foreign direct investment has been especially important in automotive manufacturing, electronics, ICT, chemicals, and renewable energy. Chinese and Indian investment has strengthened Hungary's position in global production networks and its ambition to serve as a bridge between Western markets and Asian capital (Völgyi & Lukács, 2021). Yet Hungary remains deeply integrated into the European single market and dependent on multinational firms. Economic sovereignty therefore means balancing multiple dependencies rather than achieving self-sufficiency.

The same logic applies to technology. European debates increasingly define technological sovereignty as secure access to critical technologies and resilient infrastructure rather than autarky (Schmidt & Glied, 2024). Hungary broadly follows this interpretation but is more open than Czechia to non-Western partners. Chinese investment can support technological upgrading while raising concerns over data security, supply-chain dependence, and European de-risking. Slovakia, meanwhile, remains more dependent on European production networks (Halmai, 2023). Despite these differences, all V4 states share interests in infrastructure connectivity, resilient supply chains, digital security, and competitiveness, preserving scope for functional cooperation.

Strategic Autonomy and the European Union

Hungary's relationship with the European Union is the most politically contentious dimension of its strategic autonomy. Budapest accepts the economic and security benefits of membership while contesting EU authority in areas it regards as central to national sovereignty, producing recurrent conflict over the rule of law, migration, constitutional governance, sanctions, and EU competences.

Since 2010, the Orbán governments reshaped Hungary's political system in ways widely described as democratic backsliding, including consolidation of executive power, politicisation of constitutional governance, and extensive use of emergency powers (Halmai, 2023; Mészáros, 2024). Budapest has portrayed EU criticism as an attempt to constrain national self-government. European cooperation is therefore welcomed where it strengthens economic capacity, regional influence, and collective security, but supranational intervention is resisted where it affects domestic political authority.

The rule-of-law dispute has influenced Hungary's access to EU funds and its wider bargaining relationship with the Union. The Chapter 7 process and later mechanisms demonstrate both the EU's attempt to defend common values and the difficulty of defining the boundary between national competence and European oversight (AKGÜL DURAKÇAY, 2023; Daminova, 2021). At the same time, Hungary remains structurally dependent on the EU through the single market, development funding, investment, and the Euro-Atlantic security order. Its strategic autonomy therefore rests on bargaining from within rather than withdrawal.

This policy has had mixed effects on V4 cooperation. Earlier disputes over migration and sovereignty often supported common Central European resistance to Western European preferences, but since 2022 Hungary's positions on Ukraine and the rule of law have increasingly separated it from Poland and Czechia. Slovakia has sometimes shown greater sympathy under Fico, yet the V4 no longer acts as a consistently unified platform for challenging Brussels (Vedernikov, 2024). Cooperation has consequently shifted towards functional issues such as cohesion policy, energy, infrastructure, and competitiveness.

The post-2026 political transition under Péter Magyar may signal a change in relations with the EU, including a possible thaw, rule-of-law reforms, and a more conventional approach to Ukraine and European foreign policy. Yet structural interests remain: dependence on European markets, sensitivity to energy prices, foreign investment, national policy discretion, and Central Europe's geopolitical constraints. A Magyar government could therefore pursue a more cooperative version of strategic autonomy without abandoning the objective of national flexibility.

Hungary consequently represents neither an opponent of European strategic autonomy nor an advocate of fully integrated European sovereignty. Its sovereignty-centred model produces sharp disagreement with Poland and Czechia over Russia, Ukraine, and EU authority while leaving room for cooperation in energy infrastructure, economic resilience, technological development, and regional connectivity. The Hungarian case therefore supports understanding the Visegrad Group as an issue-specific regional security complex in which functional cooperation can persist despite divergent strategic narratives.

Poland: Strategic Autonomy through Security, Resilience and Regional Leadership

Among the Visegrad countries, Poland has emerged as the strongest advocate of a security-centred interpretation of European strategic autonomy. Polish strategic thinking has traditionally been shaped by the country's geopolitical position between Germany and Russia, historical experiences of partition and foreign domination, and a persistent concern with preserving national sovereignty. As a result, Polish policymakers have generally viewed strategic autonomy not as a project of European independence from the United States but as a process of strengthening both national and European capabilities within the framework of the transatlantic alliance (Michaels 2024; Fiott 2025).

This perspective reflects a broader feature of Polish strategic culture. Since the collapse of communism, successive governments have sought to combine three interconnected objectives: strong security guarantees from NATO, active participation in European integration, and the development of sufficient national capabilities to exercise regional influence. The interaction between these objectives explains Poland's distinctive approach to strategic autonomy and its growing importance within Central and Eastern Europe.

Security and Defence

Security remains the central pillar of Poland's approach to strategic autonomy. Unlike some Western European interpretations that emphasise European sovereignty or institutional autonomy, the Polish perspective is primarily driven by threat perception. Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reinforced long-standing Polish concerns regarding Russian revisionism and the vulnerability of the eastern flank of NATO (Michaels 2024).

Consequently, Poland has become one of the strongest supporters of military modernisation within Europe. Defence expenditures have increased substantially, placing Poland among the highest-spending NATO members relative to GDP. Large-scale procurement programmes involving American and South Korean military equipment have sought to strengthen deterrence capabilities and reduce strategic vulnerabilities. For Warsaw, military capability development represents an essential component of national resilience and therefore an important dimension of strategic autonomy (Fiott 2025).

At first glance, Poland's strong Atlanticism may appear inconsistent with support for European strategic autonomy. In reality, Polish policymakers increasingly view the two objectives as complementary. A stronger European defence-industrial base, improved military mobility, and enhanced capability development are seen as strengthening NATO's European pillar rather than creating an alternative security structure (Perotto 2023). Poland therefore supports many practical elements of European defence cooperation while remaining sceptical of initiatives that might weaken the transatlantic relationship.

The war in Ukraine further strengthened this position. Poland became one of Kyiv's most important political, military, and logistical partners, while simultaneously advocating a stronger NATO presence on the Alliance's Eastern Flank. As a result, Warsaw increasingly perceives strategic autonomy through the lens of deterrence, resilience, and collective defence rather than through the pursuit of independent European military action (Wrange 2026).

From the perspective of the issue-specific regional security complex developed in this chapter, Poland represents the member state most strongly committed to strengthening the security dimension of strategic autonomy. At the same time, its support remains conditional upon the preservation of NATO as the primary framework for European defence.

Energy Security

Energy security constitutes a second major component of Poland's approach to strategic autonomy. Long before the 2022 energy crisis, Polish governments had expressed concerns regarding excessive dependence on Russian energy supplies. These concerns were driven not only by economic considerations but also by broader geopolitical calculations, as energy dependence was often viewed as a potential instrument of political influence (European Commission 2024).

Poland therefore pursued a long-term strategy of diversification. Investments in liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure, interconnector projects, and alternative supply routes sought to reduce dependence on Russian gas and strengthen national energy resilience. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, these efforts acquired additional significance as energy security became increasingly integrated into broader European discussions on strategic autonomy (Juncos 2024).

The Polish approach illustrates how strategic autonomy extends beyond military security. Energy resilience is now widely regarded as a prerequisite for political autonomy and economic stability. In this respect, Poland's policies align closely with broader European efforts to diversify energy sources, strengthen critical infrastructure, and reduce strategic dependencies.

At the regional level, energy cooperation has also become an important area of convergence within the Visegrad Group and other Central European frameworks. Although differences remain regarding the pace of energy transition and climate policy, the shared objective of reducing external vulnerabilities creates opportunities for cooperation among neighbouring states (Strážay 2024).

Economic and Technological Sovereignty

The economic and technological dimensions of strategic autonomy have become increasingly important in Polish strategic thinking. While security concerns continue to dominate political discourse, policymakers increasingly recognise that long-term national resilience depends upon industrial competitiveness, technological innovation, and secure access to critical resources (Baldoni, Di Luna 2025).

Poland's economic development since EU accession has been closely linked to integration into European production networks and participation in the single market. Consequently, Warsaw does not view strategic autonomy as economic protectionism. Instead, the emphasis is placed on strengthening competitiveness, attracting investment, supporting domestic innovation, and reducing dependence in strategically important sectors (Juncos 2024).

Particular attention has been devoted to digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, critical technologies, and the protection of strategic sectors from external vulnerabilities. These priorities have become increasingly prominent following the pandemic and the growing global competition between major technological powers. In this context, technological sovereignty is understood not as complete independence but as the capacity to maintain access to critical technologies and ensure the continuity of essential economic functions (Baldoni, Di Luna 2025).

The Three Seas Initiative provides an important illustration of this broader understanding of strategic autonomy. Through investments in infrastructure, digital connectivity, transport corridors, and energy networks, Poland seeks to strengthen regional resilience while simultaneously enhancing its own position within Central Europe. Such initiatives demonstrate that strategic autonomy can be pursued through regional cooperation as well as through national policies (Song 2022).

Strategic Autonomy and the European Union

Poland's relationship with the European Union has often been characterised by a combination of support and scepticism. On the one hand, EU membership has contributed significantly to economic modernisation, infrastructure development, and international influence. On the other hand, Polish governments have frequently criticised aspects of European governance related to migration policy, institutional reform, climate policy, and questions of national sovereignty (Garai 2018).

These tensions have influenced Polish attitudes toward strategic autonomy. Warsaw generally supports initiatives that strengthen Europe's capacity to respond to security challenges, improve economic resilience, and reduce strategic dependencies. However, it remains cautious regarding proposals that could centralise authority at the European level or diminish the role of national governments in foreign and security policy (Kiliç 2024).

This position reflects a broader effort to reconcile national sovereignty with European cooperation. Poland's approach to strategic autonomy is therefore neither fully integrationist nor fundamentally sovereigntist. Instead, it seeks to strengthen Europe's capabilities while preserving the role of member states as the primary actors within the security domain.

From the perspective of the issue-specific regional security complex, Poland occupies a particularly influential position within the Visegrad Group. Its size, economic weight, military capabilities, and active regional diplomacy provide Warsaw with considerable agenda-setting capacity. At the same time, Poland's priorities increasingly extend beyond the V4 to encompass broader regional initiatives such as the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest Nine. These overlapping frameworks reflect Warsaw's ambition to shape the strategic future of Central and Eastern Europe while reinforcing both European resilience and transatlantic security.

Overall, Poland represents the most security-oriented interpretation of strategic autonomy among the Visegrad countries. Its approach combines strong Atlanticism, substantial investments in defence capabilities, growing attention to energy and technological resilience, and an ambition to exercise regional leadership. While Poland remains cautious regarding more ambitious visions of European sovereignty, it increasingly supports those dimensions of strategic autonomy that strengthen deterrence, resilience, and Europe's capacity to act within the framework of the transatlantic alliance (Fiott 2025; Michaels 2024).

Czechia: Strategic Autonomy through European Responsibility and Economic Resilience

Among the Visegrad countries, the Czech Republic represents perhaps the most balanced and integration-oriented approach to European strategic autonomy. While Poland primarily interprets strategic autonomy through the lens of security and deterrence, and Hungary emphasises sovereignty and strategic flexibility, Czech policymakers generally view the concept as a mechanism for strengthening Europe's capacity to act while preserving the transatlantic alliance. Consequently, Prague has emerged as one of the strongest Central European supporters of a pragmatic version of strategic autonomy that combines European capability development with continued NATO cooperation (Strážay 2023; Fiott 2025).

Czech foreign policy has traditionally been shaped by the country's position as a medium-sized Central European state deeply integrated into European political and economic structures. Since the democratic transition of 1989, successive governments have regarded NATO and EU membership as complementary pillars of national security and prosperity. Unlike some of its regional partners, the Czech Republic has generally perceived European integration not merely as an economic opportunity but also as a means of increasing national influence and reducing strategic vulnerabilities (Kořan 2023).

This strategic outlook has significantly influenced Czech attitudes toward European strategic autonomy. Rather than viewing the concept as a challenge to national sovereignty or transatlantic cooperation, Czech policymakers increasingly regard it as a necessary response to an evolving international environment characterised by geopolitical competition, technological transformation, and growing uncertainty within the global order (Fiott 2025).

Security and Defence

Security and defence remain fundamental components of the Czech approach to strategic autonomy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reinforced long-standing concerns regarding European security and accelerated Prague's support for stronger European defence capabilities (Votápek 2023).

Under the government of Petr Fiala, the Czech Republic emerged as one of the most active supporters of Ukraine within both the European Union and NATO. Military assistance, diplomatic support, and advocacy for a robust European response reflected the growing conviction that the security of Ukraine is directly linked to the security of Central Europe and the broader Euro-Atlantic community (Votápek 2023; ECFR 2024).

At the same time, Czech policymakers have consistently rejected interpretations of strategic autonomy that imply strategic separation from the United States. Instead, Prague supports the development of stronger European military capabilities as a means of reinforcing NATO's European pillar. Participation in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), support for the European Defence Fund, and involvement in joint capability-development projects all reflect this approach (Perotto 2023; Fiott 2025).

Unlike Poland, where strategic autonomy is often discussed primarily in relation to deterrence and territorial defence, Czech debates frequently emphasise burden-sharing, capability development, and European responsibility. The underlying assumption is that a stronger Europe contributes to a stronger alliance rather than creating an alternative security architecture (Fiott 2025).

Within the framework of the issue-specific regional security complex, Czechia therefore occupies a position that combines strong support for transatlantic cooperation with active engagement in European defence initiatives. This makes Prague one of the most consistent Central European advocates of a NATO-compatible interpretation of strategic autonomy.

Energy Security

Energy security has become an increasingly important component of Czech strategic thinking. Prior to 2022, the Czech Republic, like many European states, remained exposed to vulnerabilities associated with energy imports and external dependencies. Russia's invasion of Ukraine significantly accelerated efforts to diversify energy supplies and strengthen resilience within the energy sector (European Commission 2024).

The Czech approach closely aligns with broader European discussions concerning strategic autonomy. Policymakers increasingly recognise that energy dependence can create political vulnerabilities and reduce strategic freedom of action. Consequently, diversification, infrastructure development, and regional cooperation have become key priorities of Czech energy policy (Juncos 2024).

Particular emphasis has been placed on reducing vulnerabilities through greater integration into European energy networks, investment in alternative supply routes, and support for long-term energy transformation strategies. These initiatives are viewed not only as economic measures but also as instruments for enhancing national and European resilience (European Commission 2024).

At the regional level, energy security continues to provide opportunities for cooperation among the Visegrad countries despite political disagreements in other areas. Shared concerns regarding infrastructure connectivity and supply security demonstrate the continued relevance of the issue-specific cooperation model described earlier in this chapter (Strážay 2024).

Economic and Technological Sovereignty

The economic and technological dimensions of strategic autonomy occupy a particularly important place in Czech policy debates. As one of the most industrialised and export-oriented economies in Central Europe, the Czech Republic is deeply integrated into European production networks, particularly those linked to Germany and the broader EU single market (European Commission 2024).

This economic structure shapes Prague’s understanding of strategic autonomy. Czech policymakers generally reject protectionist interpretations of the concept and instead emphasise competitiveness, innovation, and resilience. Strategic autonomy is therefore understood less as independence from global markets and more as the ability to maintain secure access to critical technologies, resources, and industrial capabilities (Juncos 2024).

Growing concerns regarding technological dependencies have further reinforced this perspective. Issues such as semiconductor production, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and supply-chain resilience have become increasingly prominent in Czech strategic discussions. Policymakers view technological sovereignty as an essential prerequisite for long-term economic competitiveness and national security (Baldoni, Di Luna 2025).

The Czech Republic has also sought to strengthen its position within emerging European industrial and technological initiatives. Participation in innovation programmes, research networks, and advanced manufacturing projects reflects a broader effort to ensure that Central Europe remains integrated into the most dynamic sectors of the European economy (European Commission 2024).

From the perspective of strategic autonomy, Czechia therefore represents a model that links economic resilience and technological competitiveness directly to broader questions of security and geopolitical influence.

Strategic Autonomy and the European Union

The Czech Republic's relationship with the European Union has generally been more cooperative than that of several other Visegrad countries. Although Prague has occasionally expressed concerns regarding excessive centralisation and the protection of national competences, Czech governments have largely positioned themselves as constructive participants in European policymaking (Kořan 2023).

This orientation has had important implications for debates on strategic autonomy. Czech policymakers tend to view the concept as a mechanism for enhancing Europe's effectiveness rather than as a vehicle for expanding supranational authority. As a result, Prague has often acted as a bridge between more integrationist Western European positions and the more sovereignty-oriented perspectives found elsewhere in Central Europe (ECFR 2024).

The Czech approach reflects a broader belief that Europe's ability to address contemporary challenges depends upon stronger coordination in selected policy areas. Defence-industrial cooperation, cybersecurity, technological innovation, energy resilience, and critical infrastructure protection are frequently cited as examples of domains where collective European action can generate clear benefits without undermining national sovereignty (Fiott 2025).

Within the Visegrad Group, Czechia has increasingly occupied an intermediary position. While sharing many security concerns with Poland, Prague has often maintained a more integration-friendly approach toward European institutions. At the same time, the Czech Republic continues to support regional cooperation and regards the V4 as an important framework for representing Central European interests within the European Union (Strážay 2023).

From the perspective of the issue-specific regional security complex, Czechia demonstrates how regional cooperation and European integration can be mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. The Czech case suggests that strategic autonomy can be pursued simultaneously through stronger European coordination and continued regional cooperation.

Overall, the Czech Republic represents the most consistently pro-European interpretation of strategic autonomy among the Visegrad countries. Its approach combines strong support for NATO, active participation in European defence initiatives, commitment to energy diversification, and growing attention to technological sovereignty and economic resilience. Unlike more sovereignty-centred approaches, the Czech model views strategic autonomy primarily as a means of enhancing Europe's collective capacity to act while preserving the foundations of the transatlantic partnership. Consequently, Prague is likely to remain one of the most important Central European advocates of a stronger European role within, rather than outside of, the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture (Fiott 2025; Juncos 2024).

Slovakia: Between Euro-Atlantic Integration and Pragmatic Sovereignty

Among the Visegrad countries, Slovakia occupies a position that often combines elements of both the Czech and Hungarian approaches to European strategic autonomy. Since independence in 1993, Slovak foreign policy has been shaped by the country's status as a small Central European state whose security, prosperity, and international influence depend heavily on integration into European and transatlantic institutions. At the same time, domestic political developments have periodically strengthened sovereignty-oriented perspectives that emphasise national interests, economic stability, and pragmatic diplomacy (Duleba 2022; Bútora 2023).

As a result, Slovak attitudes toward strategic autonomy have often appeared ambivalent. While successive governments have generally supported stronger European capabilities in defence, energy, and economic resilience, they have also remained cautious regarding initiatives that might weaken NATO or undermine national decision-making authority. This dual orientation reflects the broader tension between Slovakia's strong Euro-Atlantic identity and its tradition of pragmatic foreign policy (Fiott 2025).

Within the framework developed in this chapter, Slovakia represents an important case because it illustrates how strategic autonomy can be interpreted differently depending on domestic political circumstances while remaining anchored in a relatively stable set of institutional commitments.

Security and Defence

Security and defence remain central components of Slovak strategic thinking. Since the late 1990s, Slovak governments have generally regarded NATO membership as the cornerstone of national security. The country's accession to NATO in 2004 marked the culmination of a strategic effort to overcome the international isolation that characterised parts of the Mečiar era and firmly embed Slovakia within the Euro-Atlantic community (Duleba 2022).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reinforced the importance of collective defence within Slovak security policy. Under the government of Eduard Heger, Slovakia became one of the earliest supporters of Ukraine among Central European states, providing military assistance and strongly supporting NATO and EU responses to Russian aggression (Mesežnikov 2023). This policy reflected a broader consensus among Slovak foreign-policy elites that regional security depended upon preserving the credibility of both NATO and the European security order.

However, the parliamentary elections of 2023 introduced important changes in emphasis. The government led by Robert Fico adopted a more cautious position regarding military assistance to Ukraine and increasingly highlighted the importance of diplomatic solutions to the conflict (Bútora 2024). While this shift generated political controversy, it did not fundamentally alter Slovakia's strategic orientation. NATO membership, participation in European defence initiatives, and support for collective security remained largely uncontested pillars of Slovak policy.

This continuity is visible in Slovakia's defence modernisation efforts. Major procurement programmes, including the acquisition of F-16 fighter aircraft and other NATO-compatible systems, demonstrate a continued commitment to strengthening national capabilities within the transatlantic framework (NATO Defence College 2024). Consequently, Slovakia's support for strategic autonomy remains closely linked to the objective of reinforcing European contributions to NATO rather than creating alternative security arrangements.

From the perspective of the issue-specific regional security complex, Slovakia occupies an intermediate position between the stronger security activism of Poland and the more cautious strategic posture often associated with Hungary. While tactical differences may emerge regarding specific policy responses, broad consensus remains regarding the importance of collective defence and Euro-Atlantic security cooperation.

Energy Security

Energy security has become one of the most important dimensions of strategic autonomy in Slovak policy debates. Like several Central European states, Slovakia has historically depended on external energy supplies and has therefore been particularly sensitive to disruptions affecting regional energy markets (European Commission 2024).

The consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted the strategic risks associated with energy dependence and accelerated discussions concerning diversification, infrastructure development, and energy resilience. Slovak policymakers increasingly recognised that energy security can no longer be viewed solely as an economic issue but must also be understood as a component of national and European security (Juncos 2024).

At the same time, Slovakia's economic structure imposes important constraints on energy policy. As a highly industrialised economy integrated into European manufacturing networks, the country requires stable and affordable energy supplies to maintain competitiveness. Consequently, Slovak governments have generally pursued a pragmatic approach that seeks to balance diversification objectives with economic considerations (Globsec 2024).

This approach is broadly consistent with the logic of open strategic autonomy. Rather than pursuing complete independence from external suppliers, Slovakia seeks to reduce vulnerabilities while preserving economic efficiency and integration within European markets. Such an approach reflects the realities faced by many small and medium-sized European states, whose prosperity depends on maintaining openness while simultaneously strengthening resilience (Juncos 2024).

Regional cooperation remains particularly important in this area. Infrastructure connectivity, energy interconnections, and coordinated responses to supply disruptions continue to provide strong incentives for cooperation within both the V4 and wider Central European frameworks (Strážay 2024).

Economic and Technological Sovereignty

The economic dimension of strategic autonomy occupies a distinctive place in Slovak strategic thinking. Unlike Poland, which increasingly aspires to regional leadership, or Hungary, which emphasises diversification through global connectivity, Slovakia's priorities are closely linked to maintaining competitiveness within the European economic system (Duleba 2022).

Slovakia is among the most economically integrated countries in Central Europe. Membership in the Eurozone has strengthened its position within the European Union while simultaneously increasing dependence on the stability and performance of the broader European economy. As a result, Slovak policymakers generally view economic resilience and European integration as mutually reinforcing objectives rather than competing priorities (Duleba 2022).

The growing European debate on technological sovereignty has also influenced Slovak policy discussions. Concerns regarding supply-chain disruptions, access to critical technologies, cybersecurity, and industrial competitiveness have become increasingly prominent since the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation of geopolitical competition among major powers (Baldoni, Di Luna 2025).

Although Slovakia possesses more limited technological capacities than some larger EU member states, it has actively supported European initiatives designed to strengthen innovation, industrial resilience, and technological cooperation. Participation in broader European projects is generally viewed as the most effective means of reducing technological vulnerabilities and maintaining competitiveness within global markets (European Commission 2024).

From the perspective of strategic autonomy, Slovakia therefore emphasises resilience through integration rather than autonomy through separation. Economic security is understood as a function of stable participation in European production networks, access to technological innovation, and the preservation of open markets.

Strategic Autonomy and the European Union

Among the Visegrad countries, Slovakia has often been regarded as one of the most integration-oriented members of the European Union. Membership in the Eurozone, support for European cooperation, and the absence of prolonged institutional conflicts with Brussels have distinguished Slovakia from some of its regional partners (Duleba 2022).

This orientation has significantly influenced Slovak attitudes toward strategic autonomy. Unlike more sovereignty-centred interpretations, Slovak policymakers generally perceive stronger European capabilities as compatible with both national interests and European integration. Strategic autonomy is therefore commonly understood as a mechanism for enhancing Europe's resilience and effectiveness rather than as a project of geopolitical independence (Fiott 2025).

Nevertheless, domestic political developments have introduced varying degrees of scepticism regarding particular aspects of European policy. Questions related to sanctions, military assistance to Ukraine, migration, and economic regulation have occasionally generated tensions between national and European priorities (Bútora 2024). These debates reflect differences regarding policy instruments rather than fundamental disagreement about Slovakia's place within the European project.

Within the Visegrad Group, Slovakia frequently occupies a mediating position. Its foreign policy combines elements of the Czech emphasis on European cooperation with aspects of the Hungarian preference for pragmatic sovereignty. This dual orientation allows Slovakia to participate effectively in regional cooperation while maintaining strong engagement with European institutions (Strážay 2024).

From the perspective of the issue-specific regional security complex, Slovakia illustrates how cooperation can be sustained despite changing domestic political circumstances. Although governments may differ regarding specific policies, broad consensus persists concerning NATO membership, EU membership, economic integration, and participation in regional cooperation frameworks.

Overall, Slovakia represents a pragmatic interpretation of strategic autonomy that combines support for Euro-Atlantic institutions with an emphasis on economic stability and national flexibility. While political debates may influence the degree of support for particular initiatives, the country's strategic orientation remains firmly anchored within the European and transatlantic communities. Consequently, Slovakia is likely to continue supporting those dimensions of strategic autonomy that strengthen resilience, competitiveness, and collective security while remaining cautious regarding initiatives perceived as weakening NATO or imposing excessive constraints on national decision-making (Fiott 2025; Globsec 2024).

Viewed through the lens of the issue-specific regional security complex, Slovakia demonstrates that strategic autonomy can serve as a platform for selective cooperation rather than a source of division. Its experience highlights the importance of balancing national interests, European integration, and regional coordination in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

Comparative Perspectives on Strategic Autonomy in the V4

The preceding country analyses demonstrate that the Visegrad countries do not share a single interpretation of European strategic autonomy. Their approaches are shaped by distinct historical experiences, threat perceptions, economic structures, and foreign policy traditions. Nevertheless, important areas of convergence remain visible. All four states are members of NATO and the European Union, all support the strengthening of European resilience in at least some policy sectors, and all recognise that the changing international environment requires greater attention to security, energy, technology, and economic competitiveness.

This chapter compares the national approaches of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia across five dimensions: security and defence, energy security, economic and technological sovereignty, relations with the United States, and relations with the European Union. The comparison demonstrates that while strategic autonomy remains a contested concept within the V4, the countries of the region continue to cooperate on a range of issues that support the broader objectives of European resilience and strategic capacity.

Defence and Security

The most significant differences among the Visegrad countries are visible in the field of security and defence. Although all four states identify Russia’s actions as a major challenge to European security, they differ considerably in their assessment of the appropriate policy response.

Poland represents the most security-oriented interpretation of strategic autonomy. Polish policymakers view Russia as the principal threat to European stability and therefore prioritise military modernisation, deterrence, and close cooperation with the United States. Strategic autonomy is supported insofar as it strengthens NATO and enhances Europe's capacity to contribute to collective defence (Fiott 2025; Michaels 2024).

The Czech Republic adopts a similar assessment of the security environment but places greater emphasis on European responsibility and capability development. Prague generally supports European defence initiatives as complementary instruments that reinforce the transatlantic alliance and improve Europe's ability to manage regional security challenges (ECFR 2024; Fiott 2025).

Hungary and Slovakia have tended to adopt more cautious approaches. Although neither country fundamentally challenges NATO's role, both have periodically emphasised diplomatic solutions, conflict management, and the avoidance of escalation in relation to the war in Ukraine (Springer 2023; Bútora 2024). These positions have contributed to disagreements within the V4 but have not altered the broader commitment of either state to collective defence and Euro-Atlantic security structures. Despite these differences, an important area of convergence remains visible. None of the V4 countries supports a version of strategic autonomy that would replace NATO or create a European defence architecture independent of the transatlantic alliance. All four states continue to regard NATO as the cornerstone of European security and generally support the strengthening of Europe's capabilities within that framework (Fiott 2025; Wrange 2026).

Energy Security

Compared to defence policy, energy security offers substantially greater opportunities for convergence within the V4. The energy crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the strategic risks associated with external dependencies and accelerated efforts to strengthen resilience across the region (European Commission 2024).

Poland entered this period with a relatively advanced diversification strategy, having invested for years in alternative supply routes, LNG infrastructure, and regional energy connectivity. Consequently, Warsaw increasingly views energy resilience as a central component of both national security and strategic autonomy (European Commission 2024).

Hungary has pursued a more pragmatic approach, emphasising supply stability and affordability while maintaining relationships with multiple energy partners. Although this strategy differs from the Polish model, it is similarly motivated by concerns regarding vulnerability and national resilience (AIES 2023).

The Czech Republic and Slovakia occupy intermediate positions. Both countries support diversification, infrastructure development, and stronger European coordination while seeking to balance strategic objectives with economic considerations (European Commission 2024; Globsec 2024).

These differences concern methods rather than objectives. All four countries seek to reduce critical vulnerabilities, improve energy security, and strengthen infrastructure connectivity. As a result, energy policy constitutes one of the strongest examples of issue-specific cooperation within the V4 framework (Strážay 2024).

Economic and Technological Sovereignty

The economic and technological dimensions of strategic autonomy have become increasingly important in European debates since the COVID-19 pandemic and the intensification of global technological competition (Juncos 2024; Baldoni, Di Luna 2025).

In this area, the Visegrad countries display a relatively high degree of convergence. None of the four states advocates economic isolationism or strategic decoupling from global markets. Instead, all seek to strengthen resilience while preserving the benefits of economic openness.

Poland increasingly emphasises technological competitiveness, infrastructure development, and strategic industrial policy as instruments of national resilience and regional influence (Juncos 2024). Hungary focuses on connectivity, foreign investment attraction, and diversification of economic partnerships as mechanisms for reducing vulnerability (AIES 2023).

The Czech Republic views technological sovereignty primarily through the lens of innovation, industrial competitiveness, and secure integration into European value chains (Kořan 2023). Slovakia, meanwhile, prioritises economic stability, participation in the single market, and integration into European production networks (Duleba 2022).

Although the specific strategies differ, the underlying objective remains similar: strengthening national and European resilience in an increasingly competitive international economy. This common concern creates favourable conditions for regional cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, digitalisation, industrial policy, and supply-chain security (Baldoni, Di Luna 2025).

Relations with the United States

Relations with the United States constitute another important dimension of strategic autonomy. Historically, the countries of Central Europe have regarded the United States as the principal guarantor of regional security. This perception remains visible across all four Visegrad countries, although important differences exist regarding the relative importance of transatlantic and European frameworks.

Poland maintains the strongest strategic partnership with Washington. Military cooperation, defence procurement, and support for an enhanced American military presence in Europe remain central pillars of Polish security policy (Michaels 2024).

The Czech Republic similarly values close transatlantic cooperation but generally places greater emphasis on balancing American engagement with stronger European capabilities (ECFR 2024).

Hungary has traditionally sought a more diversified foreign policy, pursuing relations with a wider range of international actors while remaining formally committed to NATO (AIES 2023). Slovakia occupies an intermediate position, combining support for the transatlantic alliance with strong participation in European integration processes (Duleba 2022).

Despite these differences, all four countries continue to regard the United States as an indispensable actor in European security. Consequently, support for strategic autonomy across the V4 remains conditional upon maintaining a strong transatlantic relationship. This represents one of the most important distinctions between Central European and some Western European interpretations of strategic autonomy (Kiliç 2024).

Relations with the European Union

The final area of comparison concerns relations with the European Union itself. Here, the Visegrad countries demonstrate the greatest diversity of political attitudes.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia generally adopt more integration-oriented positions and frequently support stronger European coordination in areas such as security, energy policy, and economic resilience (Kořan 2023; Duleba 2022). Poland occupies a more complex position, combining strong support for European security initiatives with periodic disputes regarding sovereignty, institutional reform, and selected policy areas (Garai 2018).

Hungary has consistently placed the strongest emphasis on national sovereignty and has often challenged prevailing EU approaches concerning migration, governance, and institutional development (European Parliament 2025). Nevertheless, Budapest supports many practical aspects of strategic autonomy, particularly those related to economic competitiveness, infrastructure development, and energy security (AIES 2023).

These differences demonstrate that debates on strategic autonomy cannot be reduced to a simple division between supporters and opponents of European integration. Rather, they reflect competing visions regarding the appropriate balance between national sovereignty and collective European action (Kiliç 2024).

The V4 and the Logic of Issue-Specific Cooperation

The comparative analysis confirms the central argument developed throughout this chapter: the Visegrad Group functions as an issue-specific regional security complex rather than as a fully coherent strategic actor. The member states do not possess identical threat perceptions, foreign policy priorities, or visions of European integration. Nevertheless, cooperation persists because it is based on selective convergence rather than comprehensive consensus.

The strongest areas of convergence are visible in energy resilience, economic security, infrastructure development, technological competitiveness, and the strengthening of Europe's capacity to withstand external shocks. By contrast, security policy and relations with Russia continue to generate the greatest divisions within the group (Strážay 2024).

This pattern helps explain both the resilience and the limitations of the V4. The cooperation is unlikely to evolve into a unified geopolitical bloc capable of articulating a single position on all aspects of strategic autonomy. At the same time, it remains a relevant framework for coordinating regional interests and contributing to selected dimensions of European resilience.

Viewed through the lens of strategic autonomy, the significance of the Visegrad Group lies not in its capacity to eliminate political differences but in its ability to facilitate cooperation where common interests exist. In this respect, the V4 continues to demonstrate the practical relevance of issue-specific regional cooperation in an increasingly complex European security environment.

Conclusion

The concept of European strategic autonomy has become one of the defining strategic debates of the European Union in the twenty-first century. Initially associated with defence policy and military capability development, the concept has gradually expanded to encompass a broader range of issues, including energy security, technological sovereignty, economic resilience, supply-chain security, and the protection of critical infrastructure. This evolution reflects the increasingly interconnected nature of contemporary security challenges and the growing recognition that Europe's ability to act depends not only on military capabilities but also on economic and technological resilience (Juncos 2024; Michaels 2024).

Within this context, the countries of the Visegrad Group occupy a distinctive position. Located at the intersection of Western and Eastern Europe and shaped by common historical experiences, the V4 countries share many structural characteristics while simultaneously exhibiting important differences in strategic culture, threat perception, and foreign policy orientation. These similarities and differences have significantly influenced their respective approaches to European strategic autonomy.

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that the Visegrad countries cannot be classified simply as either supporters or opponents of strategic autonomy. Such a dichotomy fails to capture the complexity of national positions and overlooks the multidimensional nature of the concept itself. Instead, the V4 countries support different aspects of strategic autonomy to varying degrees, depending on how these dimensions relate to national interests, security priorities, and broader geopolitical objectives.

Poland represents the most security-oriented interpretation of strategic autonomy. Its approach is shaped primarily by concerns regarding deterrence, territorial defence, and the long-term implications of Russian revisionism. Consequently, Warsaw strongly supports capability development, military modernisation, and initiatives that strengthen NATO's eastern flank while simultaneously contributing to European resilience (Fiott 2025; Michaels 2024). Czechia adopts a similar assessment of the security environment but generally places greater emphasis on European responsibility, burden-sharing, and the strengthening of

European capabilities within the framework of the transatlantic alliance (ECFR 2024; Fiott 2025).

Hungary and Slovakia, by contrast, have tended to place greater emphasis on sovereignty, economic stability, and strategic flexibility. Although neither country challenges the importance of NATO membership or participation in European integration, both have demonstrated greater caution regarding certain aspects of the EU's response to geopolitical crises, particularly in relation to the war in Ukraine (AIES 2023; Bútora 2024). Nevertheless, they continue to support many practical dimensions of strategic autonomy, especially in the fields of energy security, economic resilience, infrastructure development, and technological adaptation.

These differences should not be interpreted as evidence of strategic fragmentation. Rather, they illustrate the central argument advanced throughout this chapter: the Visegrad Group functions most effectively as an issue-specific regional security complex. Unlike traditional models of regional cooperation that depend upon comprehensive political consensus, the V4 operates through selective convergence. Cooperation develops in those sectors where common interests exist, while disagreements in other areas are managed without undermining the overall framework of cooperation.

The comparative analysis confirms this interpretation. The strongest areas of convergence among the V4 countries are visible in energy security, infrastructure connectivity, economic resilience, technological competitiveness, and the reduction of strategic vulnerabilities. In these domains, the member states share broadly similar objectives and recognise that regional cooperation can enhance both national and collective resilience (European Commission 2024; Strážay 2024). By contrast, the greatest differences emerge in relation to threat perceptions, relations with Russia, and the political management of security crises. These divisions are particularly visible in the debate surrounding Ukraine but do not extend uniformly across all dimensions of strategic autonomy.

The findings also suggest that discussions of strategic autonomy within Central Europe have evolved considerably since the publication of the EU Global Strategy in 2016. Earlier concerns focused primarily on the possibility that strategic autonomy could weaken NATO or diminish the American commitment to European security. While such concerns have not disappeared entirely, recent developments have encouraged a more pragmatic interpretation. The growing uncertainty of the international environment, intensified geopolitical competition, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the consequences of the war in Ukraine have reinforced the perception that stronger European capabilities are necessary complements to transatlantic cooperation rather than substitutes for it (Fiott 2025; Wrange 2026).

In this respect, the Visegrad countries increasingly support a version of strategic autonomy that may be described as Atlanticist strategic autonomy. Such an approach seeks to strengthen Europe’s capacity to act while preserving NATO as the foundation of collective defence. The objective is not strategic separation from the United States but the development of greater European resilience and responsibility within a continuing transatlantic partnership. Although national variations remain significant, this general orientation can be identified across all four Visegrad countries.

The future role of the V4 in debates on strategic autonomy will depend on its ability to adapt to a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Several trends are likely to influence this process. First, the economic and technological dimensions of strategic autonomy will probably become increasingly important. Questions related to critical technologies, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, supply chains, and strategic raw materials are likely to occupy a more prominent place in European policy discussions than in the past (Baldoni, Di Luna 2025; Juncos 2024). These areas may provide particularly favourable opportunities for V4 cooperation because they are less politically divisive than questions related to military intervention or relations with Russia.

Second, energy security will remain a central challenge. Although significant progress has been made in reducing vulnerabilities, the broader objective of building resilient and sustainable energy systems will require long-term investments, regional coordination, and continued cooperation within the European Union (European Commission 2024). Given the strategic importance of energy infrastructure and connectivity, this area is likely to remain one of the most important pillars of regional cooperation.

Third, the future evolution of transatlantic relations will continue to shape Central European attitudes toward strategic autonomy. The Visegrad countries have consistently supported strong ties with the United States, but they also recognise that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own security and resilience. The challenge will therefore be to balance these two objectives in a manner that strengthens both European capabilities and the transatlantic alliance.

Ultimately, the significance of the Visegrad Group does not lie in its capacity to generate complete political consensus. The history of the cooperation demonstrates that such consensus has rarely existed even during periods commonly regarded as successful. Instead, the strength of the V4 derives from its flexibility, pragmatism, and capacity to identify areas where collective action serves the interests of all participants. This characteristic has allowed the cooperation to survive repeated political crises and adapt to changing international circumstances over more than three decades (Garai 2018; Song 2022).

The concept of European strategic autonomy is likely to remain a central element of European political debate for the foreseeable future. As the European Union seeks to strengthen its capacity to respond to geopolitical, economic, technological, and security challenges, the contribution of regional frameworks such as the Visegrad Group will remain important. The V4 is unlikely to become a fully unified strategic actor, nor is it likely to speak with a single voice on every issue. Nevertheless, as an issue-specific regional security complex, it retains the capacity to contribute meaningfully to the development of European resilience and strategic capacity.

In this sense, the future relevance of the Visegrad Group will depend not on the elimination of political differences but on the preservation of the pragmatic spirit that has characterised the cooperation since 1991. If the member states continue to identify common interests in areas such as energy security, economic competitiveness, technological innovation, infrastructure connectivity, and defence capability development, the V4 can remain a significant contributor to both European strategic autonomy and the broader project of European integration in the decades ahead (Garai 2018; Strážay 2024).

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Part II.

How to live together?

Authenticity, Consumer Culture, and the Contemporary Subject: A Critical Synthesis

Introduction[3]

Questions of authenticity have become increasingly central to contemporary cultural and consumer life. Across diverse domains, people evaluate objects, identities, and practices through distinctions between what appears “real” and what seems artificial, imposed, or merely performative. Recent scholarship suggests that authenticity is not a singular or self-evident concept, but a cluster of related concerns that organize judgment and behavior in distinct ways (Newman, 2019). At the same time, consumer research has shown that consumption is never only economic; it is also symbolic, sociocultural, and ideological, with markets serving as important sites in which identity and meaning are produced (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). These two literatures intersect in especially revealing ways in contemporary consumer culture, where people are repeatedly encouraged to “be themselves,” express individuality, and pursue self-realization through consumption, even as such selfhood is shaped by broader cultural logics and market structures.

This chapter argues that authenticity has become a key organizing ideal within consumer culture, but one that is increasingly ambivalent and socially regulated. The contemporary subject is not simply free to discover an inner self; rather, authenticity is often demanded, marketed, and standardized. In this context, the call to authenticity may function less as liberation than as a mechanism of cultural discipline. The chapter draws on work in authenticity studies, consumer culture theory, and related analyses of digital and neoliberal subjectivity to examine how authenticity is conceptualized, how it is embedded in consumer culture, and why it remains a morally and psychologically charged ideal (Newman, 2019) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) (Plesa, 2021). It also uses the supplied lecture material as a conceptual supplement, especially for its discussion of the shift from older cultural forms of discipline to contemporary imperatives of self-realization.

The discussion proceeds in four parts. First, it outlines recent efforts to clarify the psychology of authenticity and to distinguish among different forms of authenticity. Second, it situates authenticity within consumer culture theory and the broader study of consumption as a

[3] This chapter has been written and edited by Péter Stepper based on the interview with Tamás Ulmann, available on the website of METU https://www.metropolitan.hu/hu/esemenyek/mecenatura-project-international-conference-on-central-europe and directly on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdgJ8fyWkuU.

cultural process. Third, it examines the contemporary consumer subject as one shaped by self-optimization, idealized selfhood, and the cultural demand to be authentic. Fourth, it considers the implications of these developments for understanding the tensions of late modern consumer life, especially the ways in which authenticity can both animate and constrain subjectivity.

Authenticity as a Psychological and Conceptual Problem

Although authenticity is often treated as intuitively meaningful, recent research has emphasized that the concept is difficult to define with precision. One influential attempt to bring conceptual clarity to the topic proposes three broad kinds of authenticity: historical, categorical, and values authenticity (Newman, 2019). Historical authenticity concerns whether something is genuinely what it purports to be in terms of its origin or provenance; categorical authenticity concerns whether it belongs to the relevant kind or category; and values authenticity concerns whether it expresses the values or commitments it claims to express (Newman, 2019). This framework is important because it shows that people's judgments of authenticity are not reducible to a single criterion. Rather, authenticity is evaluated through different lenses depending on the object or person under consideration (Newman, 2019).

The significance of this distinction extends beyond theory. The study reported in The Psychology of Authenticity found a "striking degree of convergence" in support of the three broad dimensions, suggesting that ordinary conceptions of authenticity naturally organize around these forms (Newman, 2019). The same chapter also indicates that different populations may be differentially sensitive to different kinds of inauthenticity (Newman, 2019). This is an important point for the present chapter because it implies that authenticity is not only an abstract ideal but also a socially patterned concern. What counts as authentic may vary depending on context, group, and evaluative purpose.

A related attempt to refine authenticity theory expands earlier models by adding continuity to consistency, conformity, and connection, resulting in a "4C-view" of authenticity (Dammann et al., 2021). This proposal underscores that authenticity is not merely a matter of being true to oneself in a simple or static sense. Rather, it involves a process of relating present identity to past experience, social expectations, and interpersonal ties (Dammann et al., 2021). The emphasis on congruence in this account is especially relevant, since it suggests that authenticity may be understood as a relation among multiple dimensions rather than as an isolated inner essence (Dammann et al., 2021). Together, these sources indicate that authenticity is best understood as a complex evaluative category that is socially situated and structurally mediated (Newman, 2019) (Dammann et al., 2021).

The lecture material supplied with the draft further reinforces the instability of authenticity as a concept. It contrasts "false security" and "false insecurity" with what it calls authentic or true conditions, stressing that authenticity can be understood only in relation to perceived reality and existential fit 3. It also notes that authenticity is difficult to enact under conditions where people are repeatedly commanded to be autonomous or self-creating, because autonomy cannot simply be produced by command 4. This is not presented as a formal academic argument in the source materials, but it is consistent with the broader scholarly concern that authenticity may be simultaneously valued and structurally constrained (Plesa, 2021).

Consumer Culture Theory and the Social Life of Consumption

Consumer culture theory provides a particularly useful framework for thinking about authenticity because it treats consumption as a cultural and symbolic practice rather than merely a market exchange. The foundational CCT chapter characterizes the field as research on the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It argues that CCT offers a distinctive body of theoretical knowledge about consumption and marketplace behavior, and it emphasizes the cultural dimensions of the consumption cycle (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This orientation matters for authenticity because the latter is frequently produced, evaluated, and circulated through consumption practices. What people buy, wear, display, and endorse may function as a statement about who they are or who they wish to become.

CCT is especially concerned with the ways markets shape meaning and identity. By highlighting the ideological dimensions of consumption, the field makes it possible to see authenticity not simply as an inner psychological property but as a social effect embedded in consumer environments (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The chapter on global versus local consumer culture likewise shows how culture and consumption are intertwined with broader processes of globalization, acculturation, and market change (Steenkamp, 2019). It notes that global consumer culture has emerged as an important force in the marketplace, while renewed attention to local consumer culture reflects the significance of place, identity, and cultural specificity (Steenkamp, 2019). This distinction is relevant because authenticity often operates precisely at the intersection of the global and the local: products, lifestyles, and identities may be judged authentic insofar as they appear rooted in local tradition, or in contrast may be valued for their connection to a broader cosmopolitan consumer world (Steenkamp, 2019).

The 2024 chapter on the platformization of consumer culture further complicates this picture by theorizing consumer culture in an environment increasingly shaped by digital platforms. It identifies tensions such as datafication versus liquification, standardization versus ephemerality, interaction versus mediation, and immateriality versus materiality (Caliandro et al., 2024). These tensions are significant for authenticity because platformized consumption may intensify both the visibility and the instability of authentic self-presentation. If consumer culture is increasingly organized around platforms that mediate attention, identity, and exchange, then authenticity becomes less a private moral state and more a public performance structured by digital forms of circulation (Caliandro et al., 2024). The chapter on digital capitalism similarly argues that media organized around the extraction of user data extend commodification deeper into personhood itself, and that public life increasingly becomes organized around identity and difference (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021). In that context, "truth as identity" becomes a meaningful description of how knowing and self-presentation collapse into each other (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021).

Taken together, these studies support the view that authenticity is inseparable from consumer culture. Markets do not merely respond to authentic identity; they help define the forms authenticity can take. At the same time, the more authenticity becomes a commodity or a brand attribute, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish authentic self-expression from strategically curated performance (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) (Caliandro et al., 2024) (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021).

The Contemporary Subject: Self-Realization, Idealization, and Discipline

A central tension in modern consumer culture is that individuals are increasingly expected to realize themselves, yet the terms of that realization are socially prescribed. The lecture material captures this shift with unusual clarity. It describes an earlier cultural order in which individuals were expected to be disciplined, work, and integrate into society, whereas the modern subject is tasked with creating the self. In the contemporary setting, however, this self-creation is not simply spontaneous. Instead, people are surrounded by imperatives to be themselves, fulfill themselves, enjoy life, and live authentically 6. The lecture material also notes that this imperative can become a “double bind,” because being told to be autonomous does not actually make one autonomous.

This tension is echoed in the academic literature on neoliberal subjectivity and authenticity. One chapter explicitly argues that freedom and authenticity, especially as theorized in the Sartrean tradition, have been commodified by the neoliberal self-help industry into universalizing and uncritical concepts (Plesa, 2021). The concern here is not simply that authenticity is overused, but that it is transformed into a normative demand that organizes inclusion and exclusion (Plesa, 2021). Under this logic, certain subjectivities are recognized as capable of authenticity, while others may be implicitly marked as deficient or inauthentic (Plesa, 2021). This is a crucial move because it shifts authenticity from a descriptive claim about personal expression to a regulatory ideal that ranks selves and lifestyles.

The psychological consequences of this regulatory ideal are also important. The lecture material suggests that the contemporary insistence on self-realization can produce both anxiety and depression, particularly when people are governed by an ideal self that they feel unable to achieve 8. While this is not an empirical claim developed in the cited academic sources, it aligns with the broader concern in the authenticity literature that inauthenticity is not merely a theoretical concept but a lived experience with emotional significance (Newman, 2019). In this respect, authenticity functions as a promise of coherence that may be difficult to fulfill under contemporary conditions.

Another chapter on self-help literature and psychopolitics extends this argument by showing that neoliberal subject formation depends not only on cultivating a desirable self but also on stigmatizing undesirable forms of social relation (Vukomanović, 2024). Its focus on “emotional vampires,” “toxic” people, “psychopaths,” and “narcissists” indicates that self-making is partly defined through avoidance and exclusion (Vukomanović, 2024). Although this chapter is not primarily about authenticity, it is relevant because it shows how norms of selfhood are produced relationally. The successful self is not only authentic in a positive sense; it is also protected from contamination by others who are cast as pathological or threatening (Vukomanović, 2024). This relational dimension resonates with the authenticity literature’s emphasis on connection and conformity as dimensions of authenticity (Dammann et al., 2021).

Authenticity, Identity, and the Cultural Logic of Late Consumerism

If authenticity has become a dominant cultural value, it is partly because late consumer culture increasingly frames identity as a project of continuous self-expression. The lecture material describes the contemporary period as one in which people are encouraged to construct themselves, enjoy themselves, and realize their potential, even as these imperatives are embedded in a broader consumer logic 9 10. This helps explain why authenticity is so often linked to consumption: goods and lifestyles appear to provide the materials through which the self can be displayed, tested, and affirmed. The CCT literature offers the appropriate analytic vocabulary for understanding this process because it takes seriously the symbolic and ideological dimensions of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

At the same time, authenticity in consumer culture is shaped by competing cultural scales. The GCC/LCC literature suggests that consumers navigate tensions between globalized forms of culture and locally rooted meanings (Steenkamp, 2019). These tensions matter because authenticity is often attached to locality, tradition, or specificity, while global consumer forms may be perceived as standardized or homogenizing. Yet authenticity can also be claimed within global consumer culture through selective appropriations of heritage, difference, and identity (Steenkamp, 2019). The point is not that global culture is inherently inauthentic or local culture inherently authentic, but that authenticity judgments are made within these shifting cultural fields.

The platformization literature deepens this insight by showing that consumer culture is increasingly structured by digital infrastructures that mediate interaction and data extraction (Caliandro et al., 2024). In such contexts, authenticity may be performed through highly curated visibility. Yet the same platforms that enable self-presentation also organize it through algorithmic and commercial logics. This raises a central contradiction: the more consumer culture rewards authenticity, the more authenticity may be produced through formats that standardize and monetize self-expression (Caliandro et al., 2024) (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021). The result is not the disappearance of authenticity but its transformation into a managed and circulated value.

The conceptual instability of authenticity is also visible in research that attempts to classify "kinds" of authenticity. The three-dimensional framework proposed in 'The Psychology of Authenticity' shows that authenticity can refer to provenance, kind membership, or value expression (Newman, 2019). The four-dimensional model similarly indicates that authenticity depends on consistency, conformity, connection, and continuity (Dammann et al., 2021). These frameworks do not eliminate ambiguity, but they clarify why authenticity can be mobilized in so many different consumer and cultural settings. A product may be authentic because it is "original," a person may be authentic because they are "true to themselves," and a social practice may be authentic because it coheres with a valued tradition (Newman, 2019) (Dammann et al., 2021). Such flexibility helps explain authenticity's persistence as a cultural ideal, but it also makes the term vulnerable to appropriation and empty repetition.

The Contradictions of Authenticity

The core contradiction emerging from the source materials is that authenticity is simultaneously emancipatory and disciplinary. On the one hand, it promises self-knowledge, coherence, and meaningful expression. On the other hand, it becomes a norm that people are expected to satisfy, often through consumer choices and public self-presentation (Plesa, 2021) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The lecture material captures this contradiction with its observation that authenticity has become almost a slogan—something one can buy or perform rather than simply live 11. This observation is especially resonant in digital and platformized consumer culture, where identity is continuously displayed, measured, and circulated (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021) (Caliandro et al., 2024).

Another contradiction lies in the relation between authenticity and social belonging. Authenticity is often imagined as a matter of being true to oneself, but the scholarly sources repeatedly show that selfhood is relational. The 4C model includes connection and conformity as dimensions of authenticity (Dammann et al., 2021), while the psychopolitics of self-help literature demonstrates that defining the self often involves defining what kinds of others should be avoided (Vukomanović, 2024). Likewise, consumer culture theory shows that meaning is produced in social and ideological contexts rather than in isolated interiority (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Authenticity, then, is not a private essence hidden beneath social life; it is a socially mediated achievement shaped by norms, categories, and relations.

A final contradiction concerns the moral force of authenticity in late modernity. Because authenticity is associated with truth, honesty, and integrity, inauthenticity carries strong negative valuation (Newman, 2019). Yet once authenticity becomes ubiquitous, it risks losing its critical edge. The lecture material's description of authenticity as a demand rather than a freedom suggests that the ideal may be hollowed out by overuse 12. This problem is not merely rhetorical. If authenticity is constantly invoked by markets, media, and self-help discourses, then its authority may depend increasingly on the very systems it was once supposed to resist (Plesa, 2021) (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021).

Conclusion

Authenticity remains one of the most influential and contested ideals in contemporary consumer culture. The sources reviewed here show that authenticity is not a singular essence but a multidimensional concept, involving historical, categorical, and values-based judgments, as well as consistency, conformity, connection, and continuity (Newman, 2019) (Dammann et al., 2021). Consumer culture theory demonstrates that consumption is deeply symbolic and ideological, making consumer markets central sites in which authenticity is produced and evaluated (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Recent work on global/local consumer culture and platformization further suggests that authenticity is shaped by globalization, digitization, and the changing architectures of market life (Steenkamp, 2019) (Caliandro et al., 2024) (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021).

The central argument of this chapter has been that authenticity now functions as both a promise and a problem. It promises self-realization, coherence, and truthful expression, but it also operates as a social demand that can discipline subjectivity and intensify anxiety about the self (Plesa, 2021). The lecture material underscores this tension by portraying the contemporary subject as one compelled to be authentic, even though authenticity cannot simply be commanded 13. In this sense, authenticity is best understood not as an untouched interior truth but as a culturally organized and institutionally mediated aspiration.

Future inquiry should continue to examine how authenticity is differentiated across social settings, platforms, and consumer practices. The available sources suggest that different populations may value different forms of authenticity and that authenticity judgments vary with context (Newman, 2019). What remains clear is that authenticity will continue to matter because it speaks to enduring questions about identity, belonging, and value in a consumer society whose cultural logic increasingly invites people to make their lives into expressions of the self.

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Helplessness, Freedom, Autonomy, Agency, and Social Determination

Introduction[4]

The problem of helplessness is often approached in ordinary speech as a matter of inability: one says that something is "impossible," that one "cannot" do it, or that circumstances simply do not permit action. The philosophical significance of the concept, however, lies precisely in the fact that this everyday usage points beyond mere lack of skill or temporary incapacity. The present argument begins from the thought that helplessness concerns the relation between human beings and the field of necessity within which they act, and therefore bears directly on freedom, responsibility, and moral agency.

This chapter develops that line of thought by treating helplessness not as a private psychological state alone, but as a condition shaped by social institutions and by the conceptual forms through which individuals understand their possibilities. Concepts matter here because they do not merely describe experience; they help constitute the common world in which action becomes intelligible and shareable. For that reason, the question of helplessness must be asked alongside the question of freedom: if helplessness names a form of blocked agency, then freedom names not simply the opposite of constraint, but the capacity to act within and against historically formed structures of determination (Cooke, 2023).

To articulate this relation, the chapter follows the conceptual trajectory established in the outline: it moves from the distinction between everyday and philosophical helplessness, through an account of freedom as postulate and action, to an analysis of institutions and social inertia, and finally to the implications for autonomy and democracy. Along the way, it places the discussion in dialogue with broader theories of agency and autonomy, including the distinction between agency and autonomy in contemporary social theory, the account of agency as self-determining organization in autonomy theory, and critical analyses of

[4] This chapter has been written and edited by Péter Stepper based on an interview with Lóránt Kicsák, available on the website of METU https://www.metropolitan.hu/hu/esemenyek/mecenatura-project-international-conference-on-central-europe and directly on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrWfG8JPdpk&t=1s.

domination and structural injustice (Dobryakova & Yurchenko, 2023) (Virenque & Mossio, 2023) (Gädeke, 2021).

From Everyday Inability to Philosophical Helplessness

The first task is conceptual clarification. In ordinary usage, helplessness often names a practical situation in which more knowledge, more determination, or greater competence would suffice to overcome a difficulty (Mohanty et al., 2015). But the deeper philosophical issue is not whether a person can perform a task efficiently. It concerns whether the person can act at all as a responsible and self-determining being within a world experienced as structured by necessity.

The distinction between capable/incapable or talented/untalented does not exhaust the meaning of helplessness (Mohanty et al., 2015). This is important because helplessness is not simply the negation of some isolated capacity. It is a more comprehensive condition in which action seems foreclosed by the way the world is represented and inhabited. The resulting question is not merely whether one has the means to act, but whether one experiences oneself as able to begin, to intervene, or to transform.

The comparison with physical inertia clarifies the point. Inertia is not a deficit but a property of existence itself; yet what appears inert is still involved in a network of relations and effects. Human helplessness can be thought analogously: the person is not simply absent from the world, nor merely inactive, but situated in a field of forces larger than the self. This conceptual move matters because it dislodges the moralizing tendency to reduce helplessness to laziness or weakness. It makes room instead for a more serious account of blocked agency.

A related issue concerns the relationship between helplessness and socialization. Studies of learned helplessness emphasize that negative influences in socialization can suppress competence as effectively as positive influences can foster it (Mohanty et al., 2015). This supports the broader philosophical claim that human growth is shaped by external conditions, and that inhibition is as significant as development in understanding agency (Mohanty et al., 2015). Likewise, work on social learned helplessness shows that repeated negative experiences can produce patterns of passive adaptation rather than active participation (Bezerra de Medeiros et al., 2024). These findings do not settle the philosophical question, but they reinforce the need to treat helplessness as socially mediated rather than as a purely individual failing (Mohanty et al., 2015) (Bezerra de Medeiros et al., 2024).

Freedom as Postulate and Moral Action

The next step is to clarify the relation between helplessness and freedom. Freedom cannot be established by theoretical proof alone; it must be enacted in practical reason and action. In this respect, freedom is not a fact simply observed from outside, but a standpoint performed in and through moral agency (Rickless, 2013) (Zimmerman, 1982).

This is philosophically decisive. If freedom must be postulated, then helplessness cannot be overcome by demonstration alone. It is overcome when one acts as though one is free, thereby affirming responsibility rather than resignation (Rickless, 2013). Freedom in this sense is practical before it is theoretical. It appears in the refusal of passive surrender to what merely seems necessary (Paloma Figueroa, 2025).

The discussion of action also benefits from the distinction between possibility and actuality. Action serves as how what is possible, becomes real, but genuine action is not merely the execution of a pre-given possibility. It may require attempting what has no established precedent and even what appears impossible (Paloma Figueroa, 2025).

This combination is significant because it allows a stronger conception of agency. Agency is not merely efficient execution within existing parameters. It also includes the capacity to introduce novelty, to interrupt patterns, and to create new forms of social meaning. That idea resonates with broader accounts of agency as transformative rather than merely adaptive. One recent distinction between agency and autonomy argues that agency is oriented toward change through consciously constructed identity and values, whereas autonomy can denote mastery within existing norms and roles (Dobryakova & Yurchenko, 2023). From that perspective, the present argument aligns with an account of agency as a capacity for transformation rather than reproduction (Dobryakova & Yurchenko, 2023).

The same point can be framed in more general terms through autonomy theory. Agency, in this literature, is a purposive and functional capacity through which living beings regulate their interaction with the environment and sustain their own existence (Virenque & Mossio, 2023). Although this biological account differs from the political and philosophical one developed here, it is compatible with the claim that agency is not exhausted by passive reception of conditions. On the contrary, it involves self-determining organization and adaptive response (Virenque & Mossio, 2023). The present chapter extends that insight into the social and normative domain.

Institutions, Social Inertia, and the Limits of Determination

The chapter’s most important social claim is that helplessness must be understood through institutions. Social life is organized by institutions, and institutions regulate speech, thought, behavior, aspiration, and desire. They establish norms, sanction deviation, and often present their own rules as sacred or untouchable. This is one of the main sources of social helplessness: people come to experience existing arrangements as necessary rather than made.

Yet institutions are not simply instruments of repression. They make coordinated social life possible, and they endure because they work to a significant extent. At the same time, they emerge through selection processes that reflect power relations and can reproduce injustice, especially when they prevent some members of society from flourishing equally (Gädeke, 2021). The institution therefore appears as both enabling and constraining, both stabilizing and deforming.

This duality is central to any adequate account of social determination. Institutions do not determine everything. The outline notes that they cannot institutionalize all of life, since encounter with other societies loosens the apparent necessity of one’s own order, and the unconscious resists complete institutional capture. This leaves room for novelty, interruption, and critique. The artist is one figure through whom society renews itself by introducing new meanings and possibilities. Creation is thus not merely private expression; it is a social process through which the common world is reconfigured.

This emphasis on the non-totality of social determination is important for two reasons. First, it shows why helplessness is never absolute: even where institutions are powerful, they are not all-encompassing. Second, it explains why autonomy remains possible within social life rather than outside it. A similar insight appears in political theory on autonomy, where autonomy means recognizing that institutions are human creations and therefore transformable (Damasceno, 2018). This does not abolish institutions; it situates them within a self-reflective social practice.

Autonomy, Agency, and Social Transformation

Autonomy is often mistaken for mere independence, but the collected sources suggest a more precise distinction. In pedagogical and sociological usage, autonomy and agency are not synonymous: autonomy can mean the capacity to function within existing norms, whereas agency involves the desire and ability to initiate change through identity and values (Dobryakova & Yurchenko, 2023). That distinction is useful here because helplessness concerns not only whether people can manage within a social order, but whether they can question and transform that order.

The political significance of autonomy is therefore democratic. If institutions are humanly made, then society can reflect on what it has made and decide what should be preserved and what should be altered (Damasceno, 2018). Democracy, on this view, is not reducible to voting or formal procedure. It is a way of life in which collective reflection on institutions remains open and ongoing (Damasceno, 2018). Freedom is likewise not a permanent possession but a practice that must be enacted repeatedly, because new systems of necessity continually arise.

This emphasis on repeated enactment aligns with recent social and political accounts that reject the idea of freedom as a merely private state. One contemporary analysis of freedom as non-domination argues that liberty depends on institutional arrangements that prevent arbitrary power and secure basic interests (Costa, 2025). Another argues that freedom should be understood as self-directing, self-transforming agency within a democratic political context, especially under ecological conditions that expose the inadequacy of mastery-oriented models of agency (Cooke, 2023). These works do not simply repeat the present argument, but they support its central premise: freedom is social, institutional, and transformative rather than merely inward or possessive (Costa, 2025) (Cooke, 2023).

The relation between agency and domination is especially significant. Structural injustice can persist when people occupy positions that reproduce domination, whether as dominators, dominated, or bystanders (Gädeke, 2021). If that is so, then helplessness cannot be overcome solely by individual resolve. It must be addressed through collective responsibility for the structures that sustain disempowerment (Gädeke, 2021). A similar point appears in work on moral responsibility under conditions of domination, where the structural dimension of injustice complicates simple individualistic models of blame (Gädeke, 2021). This reinforces the claim that institutions can stabilize social life while also generating forms of incapacity.

The question of blame is also relevant to the relation between agency and freedom. One recent discussion of predisposed agency argues that individuals are shaped by genetics, environment, habits, and prior experience, and therefore do not deserve unlimited blame or praise even if they are responsible for what they do (Firestone, 2023). That claim is compatible with the broader thesis defended here: social and psychological predispositions matter, but they do not exhaust agency (Firestone, 2023). Responsibility remains meaningful precisely because action occurs within conditioned circumstances rather than outside them.

Freedom, Responsibility, and the Democratic Reconstitution of Agency

What, then, follows for democracy? The argument suggests that democracy is the political form in which autonomy becomes socially explicit: society recognizes itself as the maker of its own institutions and therefore as capable of changing them (Damasceno, 2018). This is not a utopian escape from determination. It is a practical and collective reorientation toward the fact that social necessity is historically produced.

This democratic insight also clarifies why helplessness is not destiny. The final claim is that helplessness remains a permanent possibility, but not a permanent fate. Human beings are capable of recognizing that the social world is made, and therefore capable of remaking it. That capacity is the basis of autonomy in the strongest sense.

A related contemporary line of thought conceptualizes freedom as self-transformation in relation to both human and nonhuman contexts, especially in ecological conditions that reveal the limits of mastery and control (Cooke, 2023). While the present chapter does not adopt the ecological emphasis directly, it shares the central anti-sovereign intuition: freedom cannot be reduced to domination over circumstances. It must instead be understood as the capacity to reorient practices, institutions, and forms of life (Cooke, 2023).

This is why the relation between autonomy and democracy is inseparable from critique. To call a society autonomous is not to say that it has no institutions, but that it can bring them into question and modify them through collective reflection (Damasceno, 2018). Such reflection requires that citizens not only obey or function within established forms but participate in revising the meanings that govern common life. In that sense, democracy is the institutional expression of the refusal of helplessness.

Conclusion

The conceptual path followed in this chapter begins with ordinary expressions of inability and ends with a robust political conception of autonomy. Helplessness, on the argument developed here, is not merely lack of competence or laziness. It is a condition in which action is experienced against a background of necessity that seems given rather than made (Mohanty et al., 2015). Freedom, by contrast, is not a metaphysical guarantee but a practical postulate enacted in moral and creative action (Rickless, 2013) (Paloma Figueroa, 2025).

The analysis of institutions shows why helplessness is socially produced and why it cannot be overcome by individual will alone. Institutions structure behavior, stabilize social life, and often reproduce power relations, but they are never absolute, because they are human creations and therefore revisable (Gädeke, 2021). This is the basis on which autonomy becomes democratic: society can understand itself as both the author and the critic of its own forms (Damasceno, 2018).

Accordingly, freedom should be understood neither as total independence nor as simple resistance to constraint. It is the collective capacity to recognize socially constituted necessity and to transform it. Helplessness remains a real possibility, but it is not the final word. Human beings remain capable of reconstituting their institutions, their norms, and their shared world. That is the deepest philosophical and political claim at stake: freedom survives wherever societies can still learn to see themselves as able to begin differently.

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Digital public sphere – Where society discusses the present

Introduction[5]

The present is often taken to name a simple temporal interval, yet in contemporary social and philosophical analysis it increasingly appears as a contested field in which coexistence, mediation, and planetary crisis are inseparably entangled. In the urban and political traditions, public space and the public sphere have long been understood as central sites of democratic life, but also as domains marked by struggle over access, organization, and control (Bodnar, 2015). More recent work extends this concern into the digital age, where the public sphere is reshaped by platforms, algorithms, and networked communication, raising questions about whether democracy and public discourse remain co-constitutive under conditions of digital transformation (Trenz, 2023), (Ritzi, 2023).

At the level of political theory, the digital public sphere has often been evaluated through the lens of Habermasian deliberation, with social media understood as a possible digital representation of the liberal public sphere (Viader Guerrero, 2024), (Fuchs, 2021). Yet this normative framing is increasingly challenged by the empirical and structural realities of digital capitalism. One account identifies the colonization and commodification of both the digital commons and the digital public sphere, arguing that capitalism converts what should remain common into proprietary infrastructures and extractive markets (Fuchs, 2021). On this view, the task is not merely to preserve communication online, but to distinguish between capitalist, public-service, and civil-society forms of Internet organization, and to defend alternative models located outside capitalist control (Fuchs, 2021).

This shift in emphasis is important because the digital public sphere cannot be reduced to a neutral space of equal participation. Surveys of users show that although social network sites are often described as new spaces for public deliberation, people rarely actually use them in that way (Sakariassen, 2020). Other analyses likewise suggest that the public sphere in digital media is marked by deep disruptions in the balance between privacy and publicity, in the truth orientation of debate, and in the empowerment of citizens' political will (Trenz, 2023). At the same time, however, the digital public sphere is not exhausted by disruption. Its

[5] This chapter has been written and edited by Péter Stepper based on an interview with Ádám Takács. The interview is available on the website of METU https://www.metropolitan.hu/hu/esemenyek/mecenatura-project-international-conference-on-central-europe and directly on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWNHCFjq5sM.

resilience depends on self-corrective mechanisms, and therefore the critical task is to understand both the fractures and the capacities for renewal that digital communication still contains (Trenz, 2023).

A further complication arises when the digital public sphere is considered not only as a communicative arena but also as a field of design and technological mediation. One recent contribution argues that ethically informed design practices often preserve an implicit ideal of democracy modeled on procedural deliberation, while overlooking the political ontology of algorithmic technologies themselves (Viader Guerrero, 2024). Against this, it proposes starting from disagreement and from the distribution of the sensible, and reconceiving algorithmic systems as open-ended assemblages of human bodies and technological devices (Viader Guerrero, 2024). Such a perspective shifts attention away from the assumption that democratic communication can simply be encoded as procedure and toward the way technological systems shape what can be perceived, said, and shared in the first place (Viader Guerrero, 2024).

If the digital public sphere concerns coexistence among citizens, it also concerns the conditions under which publics can continue to recognize one another as co-present in a shared world. Here the literature on public space remains instructive. Public space has been treated as a historically variable but politically decisive domain, shaped by privatization, commercialization, and securitization, as well as by struggles over democratic access and urban life (Bodnar, 2015). More recent planning scholarship adds that public environments should not only serve distinct age groups but also support intergenerational engagement, offering settings in which youth and older adults can encounter one another across generational lines (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022). This emphasis on intergenerational public space underscores a broader point: coexistence is not merely the absence of conflict, but the active construction of shared environments in which difference can be sustained and negotiated (Bhatia, 2021), (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022).

At the same time, coexistence must now be understood under Anthropocene conditions, where the human relation to the more-than-human world can no longer be treated as a background assumption. Recent Anthropocene scholarship argues that the epoch is better understood not as a fixed stratigraphic unit with a single beginning, but as an ongoing, intensifying, diachronous event whose effects unfold unevenly across time and space (Walker et al., 2023). Other work presents the Anthropocene as a comprehensive conceptual framework for systemic and interdisciplinary analysis of human impact on the Earth system, while insisting that this framing should neither collapse into apocalypse nor into complacent optimism (Leinfelder, 2020). Instead, it calls for attention to planetary boundaries, continuous monitoring, and the coordination of politics, science, business, administration, civil society, and individuals in the shaping of a permanently habitable future (Leinfelder, 2020).

Within this broader context, the notion of coexistence can no longer be limited to human communities. Work on disconnection from nature argues that human-nature relations must be understood through social, institutional, socio-cultural, and power dimensions, rather than as solely individual matters of attitude or experience (Beery et al., 2023). Related reflections on more-than-human worlds emphasize that human agency is permeated by wider causal relations and that Anthropocenic thinking requires a more-than-humanized account of the human (Affifi, 2017). Another contribution to reformulating human security in the Anthropocene likewise moves beyond a simple nature-culture divide, foregrounding the intertwined relations among ecological imbalance, social imbalance, racism, care, and neoliberal extraction (Hiroyuki et al., 2023). Taken together, these studies suggest that coexistence in the present must be imagined across human and non-human domains, and in relation to the unequal structures that shape both ecological and social vulnerability (Beery et al., 2023), (Hiroyuki et al., 2023).

The implication is that the present should be approached as a layered temporal and political condition. It is the time of digital publics whose forms of deliberation are unstable and uneven (Trenz, 2023), (Sakariassen, 2020). It is also the time of commons under pressure from capitalist appropriation (Fuchs, 2021). And it is the time of an intensifying Anthropocene, in which human futures are inseparable from planetary processes and from the social organization of care, security, and collective responsibility (Walker et al., 2023), (Leinfelder, 2020), (Hiroyuki et al., 2023). In this sense, the present is not a neutral "now," but a field of coexistence that extends across generations, infrastructures, publics, and species (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022), (Beery et al., 2023).

Seen from this angle, the digital public sphere is one of the central sites where the present is being negotiated. Its democratic promise lies not in an idealized transparency, but in the possibility of building public infrastructures that support communication, participation, and common life without being fully colonized by market logics (Fuchs, 2021), (Hudák, 2015). Its risks lie in fragmentation, misinformation, depoliticization, and the weakening of local or regional informational worlds (Ritzi, 2023), (Trenz, 2023). Its theoretical challenge lies in understanding how publics are constituted through both discourse and technological mediation, and how this constitution is inseparable from broader social and ecological conditions (Viader Guerrero, 2024), (Beery et al., 2023). The present, then, is best understood not as a self-contained interval, but as a shared and contested horizon of coexistence: digital, democratic, intergenerational, and more-than-human (Fuchs, 2021), (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022), (Leinfelder, 2020).

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Transformation of Capitalist Development

Introduction[6]

The chapter argues that capitalism should not be treated as a timeless or homogeneous system defined simply by private property and markets. Instead, it presents capitalism as a historically specific and internally diverse social order shaped by growth, concentration, and the restriction of competition. This claim is consistent with scholarship that warns against treating capitalism as a single fixed type and instead emphasizes its varieties, institutional differences, and changing forms over time (Baumol et al., 2007), (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2015), (Alami & Dixon, 2019). A more adequate account of capitalism therefore begins not from abstract definitions, but from the historically variable institutions and power relations through which capitalist economies are organized.

This chapter develops that argument by moving beyond simplified oppositions between market and state, competition and monopoly, or economic and political power. Its central contribution is to show that capitalism is best understood as a shifting and uneven system whose dominant tendencies are shaped by concentration, institutional design, and state support. In this sense, the chapter does not merely describe a set of economic features; it advances a political-economic interpretation of capitalism as a historically produced social order. That approach is especially important because recent research has increasingly challenged broad universal claims about capitalism and has instead emphasized institutional variation, endogenous change, and the role of political structures in shaping economic outcomes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2015), (Baumol et al., 2007).

The chapter's central analytical move is to reverse the common assumption that capitalism is naturally competitive. Rather than depicting competition as capitalism's stable core, it emphasizes the tendency toward monopoly and concentration. This is particularly visible in the contemporary digital economy, where major platforms expand by acquiring, copying, or absorbing rivals. Literature on Big Tech similarly describes the rise of oligopolistic corporate structures and renewed concern about market monopolization (Conyon et al., 2022). Related work shows that rising monopoly power has become an important feature of the U.S. economy, with increasing markups and growing divergence between returns and output

[6] This chapter has been written and edited by Péter Stepper based on an interview with Zoltán Pogátsa, available on the website of METU https://www.metropolitan.hu/hu/esemenyek/mecenatura-project-metu-asu-geopolitical-series-ii and directly on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjeuvl6jOhE.

patterns (Eggertsson et al., 2018). More broadly, analyses of neoliberalism argue that deregulation, non-intervention, free markets, and free trade have not reduced corporate power but have often strengthened it, producing more oligopolistic economic structures (Hathaway, 2020). In this sense, the chapter's claim that monopoly is not an exception to capitalism but one of its recurring tendencies is well grounded in recent scholarship.

At the same time, the chapter's emphasis on monopoly should not be read as a narrow claim about market structure alone. The broader point is that capitalist competition often operates through processes that weaken competition over time. Large firms grow not only by outperforming rivals but also by reshaping the conditions under which rivalry takes place. They can use scale, finance, data, and regulation to entrench their position, thereby turning apparent competition into concentration. This is one reason why scholarship on monopoly capitalism remains relevant in the analysis of contemporary markets, including digital platforms and global corporate networks (Conyon et al., 2022). The chapter uses this tendency to challenge the assumption that capitalism's defining logic is open competition rather than accumulation through concentration.

The chapter also stresses that capitalism cannot be understood apart from the state. Rather than treating the state and market as separate spheres, it portrays large firms and state institutions as mutually implicated. This emphasis is supported by research on state capitalism, which shows that the term refers not to a single model but to a wide range of policy tools, strategic objectives, and institutional forms involving different degrees of state participation (Alami & Dixon, 2019). Scholarship on business power adds that when states delegate public functions to private actors, they can generate institutional business power and long-term dependency on business commitments (Busemeyer & Thelen, 2020). Comparative and geopolitical studies of contemporary state capitalism likewise reject simple binaries between state and market, instead highlighting the shifting and often tense relations among territorial, commercial, and geopolitical logics (Alami et al., 2021). Research on China reinforces this point by showing how statecraft can mobilize market mechanisms while simultaneously pursuing sovereign and territorial goals, producing a dynamic tension between capital accumulation and territorial rule (Su & Lim, 2022), (Wu et al., 2024). Taken together, these studies support the chapter's argument that capitalism is always politically constituted and that state power is not external to capitalist development but integral to it.

This state-centered perspective also clarifies why capitalism should be understood as an evolving configuration of power rather than as a self-regulating market order. States do not simply intervene from outside; they help organize the conditions of accumulation, competition, and corporate expansion. In some contexts, state support can enable new sectors, firms, or technologies; in others, it can stabilize established concentrations of power. The literature on institutional business power is especially useful here because it shows how public delegation can create durable dependence on private actors (Busemeyer & Thelen, 2020). Similarly, work on geopolitical state capitalism demonstrates that state involvement in the economy cannot be reduced to a single institutional model or ideology (Alami et al., 2021). The chapter's treatment of state power therefore fits within a wider body of scholarship that sees capitalism as inseparable from political institutions and strategic state action.

A further contribution of the chapter is its insistence on capitalism's historical and spatial diversity. It sketches a series of "models" of capitalism, including Anglo-Saxon, Rhine, Scandinavian, Mediterranean, East Asian developmental, offshore, and petro-state forms. While such labels are necessarily simplified, the broader claim that capitalism takes multiple institutional forms is strongly supported by comparative political economy. Work on varieties of capitalism has long argued that there is no single capitalist template, but rather distinct configurations shaped by institutions, regulation, and growth strategies (Baumol et al., 2007). Likewise, critiques of general laws of capitalism argue that broad economic regularities cannot be understood without embedding them in political and institutional contexts (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2015). The chapter therefore reads less as a description of fixed national types than as an attempt to show that capitalism is a mutable order whose concrete organization depends on historical circumstance, state structure, and patterns of accumulation (Alami & Dixon, 2019), (Alami et al., 2021).

This comparative dimension matters because it prevents capitalism from being treated as a singular and universal model. Different capitalist formations distribute power differently across firms, states, and sectors. Some are more coordinated, some more liberalized, some more export-oriented, and some more dependent on extractive or financial mechanisms. Even within these broad patterns, however, the chapter's deeper point is that capitalist diversity is not accidental. It reflects the fact that capitalism is made through institutions, policy choices, and long-term historical trajectories. Scholarship on state capitalism makes this explicit by emphasizing the wide range of policy instruments and institutional forms through which state involvement is organized (Alami & Dixon, 2019). The chapter thus places diversity at the center of analysis rather than treating it as a deviation from an imagined norm.

The chapter also challenges the idea that capitalism follows naturally from human nature. It treats capitalism as historically produced rather than universal, and it rejects the notion that perpetual growth or accumulation are innate features of all societies. This position is compatible with literature that treats capitalism as contingent and institutionally constructed rather than natural or inevitable. For example, work on post-foundational political economy emphasizes that private property and economism are contingent foundations of capitalism rather than timeless facts (Sundell, 2021). Similarly, accounts of capital as power redefine capital not as a neutral economic thing, but as a quantified form of organized power embedded in social and political relations (Nitzan & Bichler, 2009). From this perspective, capitalism is sustained not by a natural propensity toward exchange, but by institutions and power relations that channel social life toward accumulation and expansion. The chapter's historical framing therefore aligns with a broader critical literature that places contingency, power, and institutional design at the center of capitalist analysis.

The chapter's rejection of naturalized explanations also strengthens its account of economic behavior. If capitalism is historically constructed, then the drive toward accumulation must be explained through social arrangements rather than universal human tendencies. This point is echoed in critical work on capital as power, which argues that capital is best understood as an organized social force rather than a purely economic object (Nitzan & Bichler, 2009). It also resonates with post-foundational approaches that treat private property as a contingent foundation of capitalist order (Sundell, 2021). In this light, the chapter's argument is not simply that capitalism exists in different forms, but that its very categories—property, competition, growth, and state power—must be understood as historically produced relations rather than timeless abstractions.

At the same time, the chapter's emphasis on concentration and power helps explain why capitalism often appears self-reinforcing. Once firms become large enough, they can shape markets, influence regulation, and expand through scale advantages rather than open competition. This dynamic is visible in debates over monopoly capitalism and in recent work on monopsony, which extends analysis of market power to the buyer side of global value chains and labor markets (Nathan, 2021). It is also consistent with research on the economic power of capital, which argues that capitalism reproduces itself through "mute compulsion," shaping the social environment in ways that compel individuals and firms to act within the constraints of capital accumulation (Shafer, 2023). The chapter's account of large corporations absorbing new competitors thus captures not just a descriptive feature of contemporary markets, but a broader mechanism through which capitalist power tends to consolidate itself over time.

This dynamic also helps explain why the chapter's critique is politically significant. If concentration and state support are recurring features of capitalism, then the persistence of corporate power should not be treated as an anomaly or temporary distortion. Rather, it should be understood as part of the ordinary functioning of capitalist political economy. That understanding alters how one interprets deregulation, privatization, and market liberalization. As the literature on neoliberalism as corporate power shows, policies framed as market-enhancing have often deepened oligopolistic structures and strengthened corporate influence (Hathaway, 2020). Likewise, the literature on business power demonstrates how institutional design can lock in asymmetric dependencies between the state and private actors (Busemeyer & Thelen, 2020). The chapter's analysis therefore points toward a more realistic view of capitalism's political foundations.

The chapter is also useful because it brings together several strands of critical scholarship without collapsing them into a single theory. It acknowledges the diversity of capitalism, the importance of monopoly, the role of the state, and the contingency of capitalist institutions. In doing so, it avoids presenting capitalism as either a purely economic mechanism or a purely political conspiracy. Instead, it depicts capitalism as a historically evolving order in which economic and political relations are tightly interwoven. This is consistent with recent work on the geopolitics of state capitalism, which argues that binaries such as state/market and commercial/geopolitical are inadequate for understanding contemporary capitalist transformation (Alami et al., 2021). It is also consistent with research on China that frames state-led development as a tension-filled sovereignty–accumulation nexus (Su & Lim, 2022), (Wu et al., 2024). The chapter's contribution lies in drawing these insights together into a concise but coherent critique of simplistic accounts of capitalism.

In conclusion, the chapter’s core argument is that capitalism is best understood as a historically contingent system organized around growth, concentration, and power, not as a universal or naturally competitive order. Its most important analytical insight is that capitalism varies across time and space, and that any adequate account must examine the changing relations among firms, markets, and states (Alami & Dixon, 2019), (Alami et al., 2021), (Busemeyer & Thelen, 2020). By linking monopoly, state power, and institutional diversity, the chapter offers a concise but substantial critique of simplified views of capitalism. Expanded into a fuller journal-style chapter, that critique shows why capitalism should be analyzed as a changing political economy whose dominant forms are shaped by historically specific institutions, strategies, and power relations rather than by timeless economic laws (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2015), (Nitzan & Bichler, 2009).

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Intimacy, Self-Disclosure, and Relationship Life in Social Media Contexts

Introduction[7]

The chapter advances a clear and intentionally skeptical position, contemporary relationship life is difficult not primarily because individuals are uniquely deficient, but because social relations themselves have become more volatile, reflexive, and structurally demanding. Fáber explicitly rejects a "positive" psychology of relationship management in favor of a sociological approach that identifies negative social conditions and the mechanisms through which they shape intimate life. (Fáber, 2026) Within that frame, social media is presented as a key site where intimacy is both displayed and transformed. It encourages self-presentation, intensifies self-monitoring, and renders even private moments potentially visible to others. The chapter's central concern is therefore not only that people disclose too much online, but that the very meaning of disclosure changes once intimacy becomes publicly legible and communicatively valuable.

The chapter frames this issue through a broader critique of contemporary culture. It argues that social media invites users to construct idealized self-images, to seek validation through others' responses, and to convert emotional life into material or symbolic gain. Intimacy, in this account, is no longer simply shared experience; it becomes something that can be "sold off" or converted into attention, visibility, and profit. At the same time, the lecture resists reducing these practices to individual moral failing. Instead, it treats them as consequences of a wider social environment in which relationships are increasingly reflexive and subject to ongoing revision. This chapter preserves that thesis while grounding it in the strongest available empirical studies on self-disclosure, privacy, and relational intimacy.

Social Media Self-Disclosure and the Limits of the Privacy Paradox

A major strand of the literature addresses the so-called privacy paradox: the frequent mismatch between privacy concern and actual disclosure behavior online. Early work showed that privacy concerns do not straightforwardly determine self-disclosure, and that other variables such as perceived social relevance, application use, and general willingness to

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[7] This chapter has been written and edited by Péter Stepper based on an interview with Ágoston Fáber, available on the website of METU https://www.metropolitan.hu/hu/esemenyek/mecenatura-project-metu-asu-geopolitical-series-ii and directly on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fd3F17KYpw.

disclose matter more strongly, especially for sensitive information (Taddicken, 2013). This finding is important because it already complicates any simplistic assumption that users disclose because they are unaware of privacy risks. Rather, disclosure appears embedded in broader social and motivational contexts.

Subsequent studies refine this picture. An integrated model of self-disclosure in social networking sites found that social influence had the strongest effect on disclosure, followed by perceived benefits, whereas perceived privacy risk did not significantly affect self-disclosure (Cheung et al., 2015). In a similar vein, a representative U.S. sample confirmed an extended privacy calculus model and showed that benefits outweighed privacy concerns in predicting self-disclosure, while privacy concerns and privacy self-efficacy predicted self-withdrawal behavior such as deleting posts (Dienlin & Metzger, 2016). These findings matter for the present argument because they suggest that disclosure online is neither a simple act of unguarded self-expression nor merely a direct response to privacy worry. It is, rather, a patterned practice shaped by anticipated rewards, social expectations, and the possibility of later revision or withdrawal (Dienlin & Metzger, 2016).

Other work has cautioned against treating self-disclosure as a single undifferentiated behavior. In a cross-national Canadian study, researchers distinguished public and private accounts and found that privacy concerns related weakly, but meaningfully, to multiple dimensions of self-disclosure, with different kinds of concerns associated with different disclosure patterns (Gruzd & Hernández-García, 2018). That study did not support a strong privacy paradox and found no meaningful difference between patterns of self-disclosure on private versus public accounts (Gruzd & Hernández-García, 2018). This is especially relevant to the lecture’s concern with commodified intimacy, because it indicates that the visibility of disclosure cannot be understood solely as a matter of public versus private technical settings; rather, disclosures are situated within multiple privacy concerns and communicative intentions (Gruzd & Hernández-García, 2018).

The broader implication is that social media disclosure is best understood as managed communication rather than pure exposure. Research on disclosure management found that users adapt what they share according to both communication channel and type of information, and that trust toward contacts and privacy settings matter differently in one-to-many and one-to-one communication contexts (Masur & Scharkow, 2016). Likewise, a study combining privacy and flow perspectives found that privacy risk, privacy awareness, privacy concerns, privacy invasion experience, interaction, and perceived control all predicted self-disclosure, though with varying strength (Ampong et al., 2018). Collectively, these studies support a more relational and contextual account of disclosure than the privacy paradox debate alone often allows (Masur & Scharkow, 2016) (Ampong et al., 2018).

Reflexive Visibility and the Reorganization of Intimate Life

Ágoston Fáber claims that social media alters intimacy is not limited to general self-presentation. (Fáber, 2026). He also emphasizes that users increasingly think about how lived experience will appear once posted, documented, or shared. Fáber describes how trips, leisure time, and even weddings may be planned in anticipation of their eventual social-media appearance, and how intimate events can be repeated until the image or recording is satisfactory. This suggests a form of reflexive mediation in which lived moments are no longer simply experienced but also formatted for future visibility (Fáber, 2026).

Empirical work on relationship visibility supports this broader concern. In a qualitative study of Facebook users in long-term relationships, researchers found several distinct practices: overt relationship-status disclosure, implied disclosure through images and tags, the deliberate non-disclosure of relationship status, and later erasure or revision of disclosures (Robards & Lincoln, 2016). The study also argued that Facebook may produce normative "relationship traces" that privilege linearity and monogamy while obscuring the complexity of actual relationships (Robards & Lincoln, 2016). This finding closely aligns with Fáber's argument that social media does not merely record intimacy; it helps produce particular forms of relational legibility. In this sense, intimacy becomes both narrated and normalized, with visible traces standing in for the relationship itself (Robards & Lincoln, 2016).

The same concern appears in experimental research on online disclosure and relationship quality. A series of studies found that greater disclosure was associated with higher intimacy and satisfaction offline, but lower intimacy and satisfaction when disclosure occurred online in romantic relationships, especially when recipients were perceived as highly inclusive (Lee et al., 2019). The negative association did not appear in friendships, and focusing online disclosure on the partner or relationship weakened the negative effect (Lee et al., 2019). This is a strong empirical basis for the claim that online disclosure is contextually different from offline disclosure and may be experienced not simply as openness but as exposure to a wider and less bounded audience. It also reinforces the lecture’s concern that intimacy becomes vulnerable once it is folded into public or semi-public platforms (Lee et al., 2019).

At the same time, not all online disclosure is relationally corrosive. Research on transnational family life showed that social media can afford both ambient and more immersive forms of communication, and that carefully shifting between these modes helps produce emotional intimacy under conditions of long-distance separation (Alinejad, 2019). Similarly, work on new fathers’ mental health struggles emphasized that disclosure on networked media can support negotiating and reciprocating emotional intimacies, while also shaping existing ties (Das & Hodkinson, 2019). These studies are important because they prevent an overly deterministic reading of social media. They show that platform-mediated disclosure can support intimacy when it is embedded in care, selectivity, and relational responsiveness, even though disclosure by itself does not automatically equal intimacy (Alinejad, 2019) (Das & Hodkinson, 2019). The lecture’s thesis is therefore best refined rather than simply affirmed: social media does not abolish intimacy, but it reorganizes the conditions under which intimacy can be enacted, interpreted, and sustained. (Alinejad, 2019) (Das & Hodkinson, 2019).

Commodification, Narcissistic Self-Presentation, and the Logic of Platform Visibility

A distinctive feature of the lecture is its insistence that social media commodifies intimacy. The speaker argues that self-disclosure may appear selfless, yet ultimately serve selfish ends by generating profit, image value, or symbolic advantage. Fáber also highlights the importance of curated positivity, construction of success narratives, and the avoidance of embarrassing “accidents” that ordinary social interaction can produce. While the notion of commodification is primarily theoretical here, several studies provide indirect support by showing that disclosure is often driven by anticipated benefit, social influence, and the search for validation rather than by privacy risk alone (Cheung et al., 2015) (Taddicken, 2013) (Dienlin & Metzger, 2016).

Fáber also invokes the idea that social media is a privileged terrain for narcissistic self-display and dependence on external confirmation. Although the lecture uses these references in a critical sociological register, the empirical literature reviewed here does not establish personality pathology as a general explanation for social media use. Indeed, one reason to avoid an overly individualistic interpretation is that disclosure decisions are consistently shown to depend on social context, communication channel, and perceived norms (Masur & Scharkow, 2016) (Cheung et al., 2015). The literature therefore supports a more restrained claim: social media can encourage forms of self-presentation that reward visibility, recognition, and selective revelation, but these practices are not adequately explained by personal disposition alone (Taddicken, 2013) (Cheung et al., 2015) (Ampong et al., 2018).

This caution is especially important when considering the lecture's critique of "vulgar-psychological" explanations. The speaker argues that common interpretations of relational difficulty—such as the idea that men simply cannot commit—misrecognize structural change as individual deficiency. Fáber attributes this to broader transformations in marriage, childbearing, and the temporal organization of adult life, rather than to isolated psychological traits. This position is consistent with the empirical literature's repeated demonstration that online disclosure is shaped by social influence and affordances as much as by individual concern. It also helps explain why the discourse of "authentic sharing" on platforms may coexist with highly strategic self-presentation: the platform environment rewards visibility while making the relationship between openness and intimacy unstable (Cheung et al., 2015) (Robards & Lincoln, 2016).

Reflexive Relationships and the Broader Social Context of Intimacy

The lecture situates social media within a wider transformation of modern relationships. Drawing on the idea of reflexive modernity, it argues that social relations are continuously re-evaluated and no longer stabilized by tradition alone. This is more than a backdrop to social media; it is the broader social condition that makes platform-mediated intimacy intelligible. If relationships must constantly justify themselves, then visible disclosure, feedback, and ongoing relational narration become especially important. Social media intensifies this reflexivity by making relationship life more observable, revisable, and comparable.

The lecture's account of accumulating relational functions also fits this framework. It describes contemporary partnerships as expected to provide emotional support, friendship, sexuality, shared interests, intellectual compatibility, and mutual validation all at once. This accumulation increases vulnerability because the relationship becomes responsible for more dimensions of well-being. While the sources reviewed here do not directly test this claim, they do show that relationship quality is influenced by the context in which disclosure occurs, and that disclosure can be beneficial or harmful depending on how it is framed and received (Lee et al., 2019) (Das & Hodkinson, 2019). In other words, relational expectations are not merely private preferences; they are embedded in communicative norms and platform structures.

The study of psychological flexibility offers a useful counterpoint to individualistic simplification. It found that greater psychological flexibility was associated with higher positive affect, lower negative affect, and, in turn, higher relationship quality, including actor and partner effects in couples (Twiselton et al., 2020). This suggests that individual capacities do matter, but only in relation to interpersonal processes and relationship functioning. The study does not support a narrow view of the self as isolated from context; rather, it connects individual well-being to relational quality (Twiselton et al., 2020). This resonates with the lecture's insistence that the proper object of analysis is not the isolated person but the social organization of intimacy.

Critiques of Individualistic Psychology and the Need for Sociological Explanation

Fáber's most important interventions is its rejection of an exclusively psychological explanation of relationship problems. The speaker explicitly distances the analysis from the idea that relationship strain is mainly due to insufficient emotional skill, inadequate self-expression, or a lack of commitment on the part of individuals. Instead, the lecture argues that structural change, shifting temporal conditions, and the reflexive character of modern life are more adequate explanatory frames. This critique is reinforced by broader scholarship on psychology itself. A systematic review of critiques of positive psychology identified recurring concerns about weak theorizing, measurement problems, lack of evidence, poor replication, decontextualized neoliberal ideology, and commodification (van Zyl et al., 2023). Although this review concerns positive psychology specifically, its themes are relevant to the lecture's broader skepticism about individualistic psychological frameworks that detach well-being and intimacy from social context.

There is also an instructive contrast between the lecture's sociological orientation and empirical findings that make relational embeddedness unavoidable. Studies on self-disclosure repeatedly show that privacy concern is not enough to explain behavior; social influence, perceived benefits, communication channel, trust, and affordances are all part of the picture (Taddicken, 2013) (Cheung et al., 2015) (Masur & Scharkow, 2016). Likewise, research on individualism suggests that more individualistic values can be negatively associated with close friendships and subjective well-being in some contexts (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014). While this does not directly establish a theory of social media, it does support the lecture's broader suspicion that individually centered accounts can obscure the relational conditions under which intimacy flourishes or deteriorates (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014). Finally, broader positive psychology work has itself moved toward acknowledging context and interpersonal relationships as central to flourishing (Scorsolini-Comin et al., 2013), which indicates that the most credible psychological approaches are already moving beyond narrow individualism.

Taken together, these sources suggest that the lecture's critique should be understood not as anti-psychological, but as anti-reductionist. Personal traits, preferences, and styles are relevant, yet they cannot by themselves explain why self-disclosure online is so pervasive, why intimacy is increasingly displayed rather than merely felt, or why relationship life is experienced as fragile and open to renegotiation. For these questions, sociological explanation remains indispensable (Masur & Scharkow, 2016) (Dienlin & Metzger, 2016).

Conclusion

Fáber's central thesis can be sustained in light of the existing literature: intimacy in social media contexts is increasingly reflexive, visible, and susceptible to commodification, and these developments cannot be adequately understood through individualistic psychology alone. Empirical studies show that online self-disclosure is shaped by social influence, perceived benefits, channel conditions, and privacy management strategies rather than by privacy concern in isolation (Taddicken, 2013) (Cheung et al., 2015) (Masur & Scharkow, 2016). Research on relationship visibility demonstrates that social media produces normative relationship traces and can alter the meaning of disclosure in romantic life (Robards & Lincoln, 2016) (Lee et al., 2019). At the same time, studies of transnational families and new fathers show that social media can support intimacy when used with care and selectivity, reminding us that the platform effect is not uniformly negative (Alinejad, 2019) (Das & Hodkinson, 2019).

The most defensible conclusion is therefore neither celebratory nor purely pessimistic. Social media does not simply destroy intimacy, nor does it straightforwardly deepen it. It reorganizes intimacy by making it more visible, more managed, and more dependent on reflexive interpretation. In doing so, it contributes to a culture in which self-disclosure may function simultaneously as connection, performance, and exchange. The lecture’s strength lies in insisting that this transformation should be analyzed sociologically, as part of broader changes in modern relationships, rather than psychologized as the failings of isolated individuals. That remains the most coherent way to preserve both Fáber’s critical force and the empirical complexity of the literature (Robards & Lincoln, 2016) (Lee et al., 2019).

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From Victimhood to Memory Politics: Cosmopolitan Memory and Its Discontents

Introduction[8]

Máté Zombory works for the ELTE Social Science Research Centre in the field of sociology. The METU research team interviewed him about victimhood and how it affect memory politics. Zombory begins from the observation that victimhood has become increasingly visible in public life over recent decades, including through the growing popularity of the language of trauma. It suggests that the issue is not necessarily that suffering itself has objectively increased, but rather that the category of victimhood has expanded and arguably become inflated as a social and political idiom. Zombory therefore treats victimhood not as a self-evident description of injury, but as a historically and politically mediated claim to recognition (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2022), (Snyder, 2010).

This diagnosis is aligned with scholarship that conceptualizes victimhood as a status category. Rather than assuming that status derives only from strength or dominance, recent research shows that perceived weakness can also confer recognition, moral authority, and social standing when suffering is publicly acknowledged as legitimate (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2022). At the same time, this recognition is uneven. Some victims are celebrated as "good" or "innocent," while others are censured, ignored, or treated as undeserving (Lawther, 2021). Zombory's opening claim therefore situates victimhood as a contested political resource rather than a fixed identity.

Zombory also proposes a political reading of victimhood. Instead of focusing primarily on psychological or strictly legal dimensions, it emphasizes the political status attached to victimhood and asks why "the age of victims" has emerged as a salient feature of contemporary politics. This focus on status is consistent with scholarship showing that victimhood may be mobilized in struggles over legitimacy, rights, and power (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2022), (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). Zombory thus frames victimhood as an idiom through which competing political projects seek recognition and authority.

[8] This chapter has been written and edited by Péter Stepper based on an interview with Máté Zombory, available on the website of METU https://www.metropolitan.hu/hu/esemenyek/mecenatura-project-metu-asu-geopolitical-series-ii and directly on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjVFG-FPBH8.

Victimhood as a contested status

A central claim in the interview is that victimhood is inherently unstable as a status category. It is repeatedly described as disputed, and recent years are presented as having witnessed striking examples of this instability. Zombory moves from victimhood as a claim to recognition toward victimhood as a politically strategic position, suggesting that the language of suffering can be used not only by marginalized groups but also by actors with significant power.

This emphasis is supported by scholarship on the construction of victim status. Research shows that victimhood is not simply given by suffering; rather, it is produced through recognition processes, social comparison, and hierarchical distinctions between different kinds of victims (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2022), (Lawther, 2021). In transitional contexts, scholars have shown that the celebration of some victimhoods often goes hand in hand with the censure of others, thereby producing hierarchies of deservingness (Lawther, 2021). Zombory's insistence on victimhood as a disputed status thus resonates with this literature.

He also describes a broader historical shift in which martyr-like victimhood gradually loses prominence and is replaced by trauma as a cultural language of suffering. Trauma becomes the dominant idiom through which injury is made visible, narrated, and recognized. Scholarship on trauma similarly notes that trauma has become a major signifier in modern moral discourse and that it has been used as a resource for recognition, testimony, and compensation, though not without exclusions and asymmetries (Snyder, 2010), (Muldoon et al., 2020). Zombory does not argue that older forms of victimhood disappear entirely; rather, it suggests that trauma increasingly becomes the culturally preferred way to articulate suffering (Snyder, 2010).

This shift matters because trauma language can widen the field of recognition while also narrowing it. On the one hand, it enables victims to make claims in public space and can support legal, political, and humanitarian acknowledgment (Snyder, 2010). On the other hand, it can impose a standardized vocabulary that obscures the diversity and complexity of lived experience (Snyder, 2010), (Budryte, 2016). Zombory's political reading of victimhood therefore emphasizes not only visibility, but also the conditions under which visibility is granted.

The emancipatory promise of cosmopolitan memory

Zombory then reconstructs what it calls the emancipation-oriented program of memory politics. In this account, memory politics was expected to foster reconciliation and planetary coexistence. The historical narrative it describes begins with the Holocaust and moves from silence to speech, from hidden suffering to public recognition, and from heroic sacrifice to the interpretation of suffering through trauma. This trajectory is broadly consistent with the concept of cosmopolitan memory, which has been described as a form of collective memory that becomes transnational and universalized through globalization (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015), (Baer & Sznaider, 2015), (Filipovic, 2023).

Zombory explicitly links this development to Holocaust memory, understood as the basis for a cosmopolitan or reflexive memory culture. It presents cosmopolitan memory as universal in two senses. First, it is said to rest on the unprecedented historical character of the Holocaust as a benchmark of suffering. Second, it is described as generating solidarity across national boundaries through universal human rights and recognition. This is consistent with scholarship on cosmopolitan memory that emphasizes the transnational circulation of Holocaust memory and its role in broader memory cultures (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015), (Baer & Sznaider, 2015).

He also invokes the idea that human rights–oriented memory politics represents a new political rationality. While the chapter does not independently verify specific formulations, the general point is supported by scholarship that portrays cosmopolitan memory as a normative project connected to global memory formation, solidarity, and the ethics of witnessing (Filipovic, 2023). At the same time, recent work has cautioned that cosmopolitan memory depends on processes of canonization, archival selection, and the transformation of living memory into public cultural forms (Filipovic, 2023). In this sense, the universal aspirations of cosmopolitan memory are inseparable from political and ethical tensions.

Zombory's account of cosmopolitan memory is thus not simply celebratory. It acknowledges that memory politics was imagined overcoming national particularism while also recognizing that such projects require selective narratives and institutional mediation. The promise of cosmopolitan memory lies in its capacity to extend recognition beyond the nation-state; its difficulty lies in the very act of translating memory into a universal idiom (Filipovic, 2023), (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015).

Trauma, recognition, and the rise of a universal moral language

Within this account, trauma becomes the key category through which suffering is universalized. Zombory suggests that trauma replaces martyrdom as the culturally dominant form of victimhood and that this shift can be linked to public testimony, legal recognition, and the visibility of victims in public space. Trauma is not treated as a purely clinical concept, but as a moral and political language through which suffering becomes legible (Snyder, 2010), (Muldoon et al., 2020).

This argument is compatible with work showing that trauma has become a central category in public discourse and that its recognition is tied to social and political processes rather than purely psychological ones (Snyder, 2010), (Muldoon et al., 2020). The social identity approach to trauma further shows that trauma and its aftermath are linked to group membership, sociopolitical capital, and power, rather than being reducible to individual experience alone (Muldoon et al., 2020). Zombory's broader implication is that trauma language helps render suffering comparable across contexts, but it also participates in the moral elevation of some forms of suffering over others.

Zombory's emphasis on visibility is important here. Once trauma becomes the dominant idiom of suffering, claims to recognition may increasingly depend on the ability to fit experience into this idiom. This can create asymmetries between those whose suffering is recognized as traumatic and those whose experiences remain outside the field of public empathy (Snyder, 2010), (Budryte, 2016). In that sense, trauma is both inclusive and selective: it broadens the moral imagination while also standardizing the terms on which suffering must be presented.

Zombory does not pursue a clinical argument about trauma, nor does it reduce victimhood to psychology. Instead, it highlights the political effects of trauma discourse. That emphasis is consistent with scholarship showing that trauma interweaves the personal with the political, shaping how groups understand themselves, how they seek justice, and how they respond to stigma and mistrust (Muldoon et al., 2020). Zombory thus positions trauma as a medium of recognition whose universality remains unstable.

The failures of memory politics

Zombory's main turn is from promise to failure. It argues that memory politics has not simply universalized recognition; instead, it has generated multiple crises and distortions. The Zombory identifies three main contexts of failure: the post-socialist context, the Yugoslav/post-conflict context, and a postcolonial context.

In the post-socialist case, Zombory notes that European integration created a soft expectation that accession countries would confront their responsibility for the Holocaust, but that this produced counter-memory centered on the victims of communism. Rather than consolidating a single cosmopolitan memory, this dynamic generated competition over victimhood and an insistence on equal recognition of communist suffering. Such dynamics are consistent with research on memory politics in Europe that emphasizes the interaction between local and transnational memory frameworks (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015). They also align with studies showing how hierarchies of victimhood emerge when some pasts are recognized while others are marginalized (Lawther, 2021), (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2022).

Zombory's account suggests that post-socialist memory politics is shaped by the tension between external normative frameworks and internal claims to historical specificity. As scholarship on transnational memory notes, memory narratives can travel across borders while remaining rooted in local contexts and political struggles (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015). The resulting tensions can encourage both recognition and resistance. The Zombory's point is not that Holocaust memory is illegitimate, but that its universalization can provoke competitive claims when other histories of suffering are perceived as excluded.

In the Yugoslav case, Zombory refers to the representation of Srebrenica through a Holocaust model and argues that this may have reproduced moral hierarchies by placing other victims, including Croats and Serbs, in the background. The claim is carefully framed as an account of lived experience and public controversy rather than an objective measurement of suffering. This is consistent with work on memory conflicts that shows how commemorative practices around genocide can provoke recognition struggles among different victim groups (Orjuela, 2023), (Lawther, 2021). It also echoes broader findings that victimhood comparisons can easily turn competitive when groups experience their own suffering as unrecognized (Bachleitner, 2024).

In the postcolonial case, Zombory describes a Holocaust education program in Mozambique that was supposed to support local reconciliation but was reportedly reinterpreted, adapted, or rejected by participants. This example is used to argue that top-down memory frameworks do not transfer smoothly into different contexts and may lose their intended meaning. Recent scholarship on memory politics likewise emphasizes that global memory projects are shaped by local rootedness and by the ethical and political problems of universalization (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015), (Filipovic, 2023). More broadly, his critique is compatible with scholarship on decolonizing trauma and memory politics, which warns against treating trauma as a singular universal script and urges attention to difference and vulnerability (Budryte, 2016).

Taken together, these three examples show that memory politics does not simply disseminate a shared moral lesson. It can also produce new exclusions, generate resistance, and intensify competition over recognition. Zombory therefore treats the failure of cosmopolitan memory not as a minor deviation from an otherwise stable norm, but as a structural risk built into universalizing memory frameworks.

Strategic reversals of victimhood

A crucial part of his concerns the reversal of victimhood. It argues that contemporary political actors often appropriate universal human rights language while using it to challenge the very norms that support recognition and asylum. Zombory offers examples in which dominant groups present themselves as victims and cast marginalized groups or outsiders as threats. This is strongly supported by recent scholarship on strategic victimhood and "hijacked victimhood," which shows how political leaders can portray dominant groups as endangered and in need of protection while blunting the claims of subordinated groups (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024).

The concept of hijacked victimhood is especially relevant here because it captures a reversal of the victimizer–victim dichotomy, a teleological ordering of past and future harms, and the mobilization of security threats in the service of dominant-group power (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). Zombory's examples include refugees, white South Africans presented as victims of alleged persecution, and majority populations depicted as threatened by minorities. These examples are used to show a general mechanism: the language of victim protection can be inverted so that the presumed victim becomes the threat. This is in line with research showing that majority groups may be positioned as victims while minorities are cast as offenders (Aronson, 2020).

Zombory also discusses competition between Holocaust memory and communist victimhood, describing this as a form of “mimetic” victimhood competition. The term is used to indicate that critics of Western double standards adopt the same idiom of victim recognition that they contest. While Zombory’s specific terminology is original to the author, the underlying observation is supported by research on hierarchies and competition among victim groups, where recognition for one group can imply the marginalization of another (Lawther, 2021), (Bachleitner, 2024).

This dynamic is not limited to elite rhetoric in a narrow sense. It is embedded in broader public struggles over legitimacy, belonging, and historical interpretation. Zombory suggests that victimhood can become an especially powerful resource precisely because it carries moral authority. Yet once that authority is recognized as politically valuable, it can also be strategically manipulated (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2022), (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). The result is a politics in which the vocabulary of suffering is mobilized to sustain existing hierarchies rather than to challenge them.

The limits of decontextualized universality

Zombory further argues that a politics of decontextualized recognition can fail because it strips victimhood of historical specificity. It cites the example of a 2009 European Parliament resolution on European conscience and totalitarianism, which it interprets as declaring that the reasons for victimization are less important than the fact of victimization itself. The Zombory treats this as a problem because a universal claim to recognition may prevent historical lessons from being transmitted.

This criticism is compatible with scholarship that warns against the moral and political costs of universalization. Work on cosmopolitan memory notes that global memory formation often depends on the transformation of embodied memory into archive and canon, which raises ethical problems about difference and witness (Filipovic, 2023). Similarly, studies of trauma politics show that selective recognition can erase complexity and leave some forms of suffering outside the field of public empathy (Snyder, 2010), (Budryte, 2016). Zombory’s argument is not that universal recognition is intrinsically wrong, but that it becomes problematic when it detaches suffering from its historical context and thereby weakens memory's pedagogical function.

This point is especially relevant to the relationship between memory and political education. He implies that a lesson about past violence cannot be reduced to a formal recognition of victim status alone. If the specific structures of violence, responsibility, and historical circumstance are bracketed, then memory may lose its capacity to illuminate the present. In that sense, decontextualized universality risks substituting symbolic recognition for substantive understanding (Filipovic, 2023), (Budryte, 2016).

At the same time, Zombory does not reject universalism altogether. Rather, it questions the conditions under which universal claims remain meaningful. Universal recognition can still matter, but only if it is attentive to difference, history, and the asymmetries of suffering. The tension between universality and specificity therefore remains central to Zombory's critique of memory politics.

Conclusion

Zombory presents victimhood politics as a field marked by expansion, instability, and reversal. Victimhood has become a powerful moral and political status, but it is also increasingly contested and vulnerable to strategic appropriation. The emancipatory aspirations associated with cosmopolitan memory—universal recognition, postnational solidarity, and democratic reckoning with the past—remain important, yet he argues that these aspirations have often failed in practice (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015), (Filipovic, 2023).

Instead of producing a stable universal moral order, memory politics has frequently generated competitive victimhood, selective recognition, and political uses of suffering that invert the original logic of protection. This pattern appears in post-socialist disputes over Holocaust and communist memory, in post-conflict struggles over genocide commemoration, and in postcolonial settings where imported memory frameworks do not travel as intended (Lawther, 2021), (Orjuela, 2023), (Budryte, 2016). His core insight is that the very languages intended to secure recognition can also be used to exclude, displace, or dominate.

This chapter tried to offer a concise but significant critique of memory politics. It is consistent with research showing that victimhood is a status category tied to recognition and hierarchy

(Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2022), that trauma is politically and socially mediated (Muldoon et al., 2020), and that cosmopolitan memory is ethically fraught because it universalizes suffering while risking the flattening of difference (Filipovic, 2023). Therefore, suggests a research agenda focused on the tension between universal recognition and historical specificity, and on the ways political actors can exploit even the most universal moral languages for exclusionary purposes (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024), (Lawther, 2021).

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Education, Democracy, and the Redistribution of Knowledge: Pedagogy and Postwar Educational Reform

Introduction[9]

The relationship between education and democracy is not merely instrumental. Education does not simply serve democracy as one policy area among others; rather, it helps constitute the social, intellectual, and institutional conditions under which democratic life can persist. Across democratic theory and educational scholarship, a consistent concern emerges: democracies depend on forms of learning that distribute knowledge broadly, cultivate judgment, and prepare citizens for participation in public life (Culp et al., 2023), (KIRA, 2019). This essay argues that democratic education should be understood as a project of knowledge redistribution, social integration, and civic formation. When knowledge remains confined to elites or detached from ordinary public life, education risks reproducing hierarchy rather than enabling citizenship (Voß et al., 2021), (Deng, 2022). By contrast, democratic pedagogy seeks to widen access to socially meaningful knowledge, create participatory classrooms, and prepare learners to act as equals in a shared political world (Culp et al., 2023), (Sant et al., 2020).

This argument gains historical force when viewed through the postwar educational reforms that sought to rebuild democratic societies after authoritarian collapse. In the aftermath of the Second World War, educational reform was understood in several contexts as inseparable from democratization, civic reconstruction, and the reorientation of public institutions toward participation and responsibility (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022), (KIRA, 2019). Postwar reforms therefore illuminate a larger theoretical point: democracy survives not only through constitutions and elections, but also through educational arrangements that make democratic habits, capacities, and shared knowledge accessible to wider publics (Culp et al., 2023), (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024). The essay proceeds in five sections: first, it examines education as a democratic institution; second, it explores knowledge redistribution as a political and pedagogical imperative; third, it considers democratic pedagogy and the role of conflict, participation, and student agency; fourth, it analyzes postwar educational reform as democratic reconstruction; and finally, it reflects on the continuing relevance of these issues for contemporary education.

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[9] This chapter has been written and edited by Péter Stepper based on an interview with Zsolt K. Horváth, available on the website of METU https://www.metropolitan.hu/hu/esemenyek/mecenatura-project-metu-asu-geopolitical-series-ii and directly on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgNX8DInB80.

Education as a Condition of Democracy

Democratic education rests on a simple but demanding premise: citizens are not born ready-made for democracy, but must be educated into its practices, values, and responsibilities (KIRA, 2019), (Culp et al., 2023). The Cambridge Handbook of Democratic Education emphasizes both the historical roots and contemporary challenges of democratic education, indicating that the field is concerned not only with institutional design but also with the broader philosophical and political conditions that sustain democratic life (Culp et al., 2023). Democracy requires more than formal rights; it requires the cultivation of capacities for deliberation, cooperation, critical reflection, and shared decision-making (Culp et al., 2023), (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022).

John Dewey remains central to this tradition because he treated democracy as a way of life rather than a mere system of government (KIRA, 2019), (Salome Pataridze et al., 2015). In this perspective, schooling is not external to democracy but one of the primary sites in which democratic habits are learned and enacted (Salome Pataridze et al., 2015), (KIRA, 2019). The significance of this claim becomes clearer when one recognizes that democracy is fragile. Contemporary democratic education scholarship frequently returns to the problem of democratic crisis, noting that democratic institutions can erode when civic knowledge is weak, participation is narrow, and political judgment is poorly distributed (Culp et al., 2023), (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024). Education, then, is not merely a support for democracy after the fact; it is part of the ongoing reproduction and renewal of democratic society.

This is why the long-standing separation between democratic theory and pedagogy is so consequential. When political philosophy treats democracy as a purely institutional or procedural matter, it neglects the educational processes through which citizens learn how to inhabit those institutions (Culp et al., 2023), (J, 2017). Several of the supplied studies explicitly connect civic education with democratic vitality, whether through project-based civic learning, mock elections, or democratic schools (Sundawa et al., 2022), (de Groot & Eidhof, 2019), (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024). These studies do not suggest that education alone can solve democratic problems; rather, they show that democratic competence is cultivated in educational settings where participation, reflection, and agency are taken seriously (Sundawa et al., 2022), (de Groot & Eidhof, 2019).

Knowledge Redistribution and the Public Purpose of Schooling

If democracy depends on education, then the distribution of knowledge becomes a democratic question. Education cannot be reduced to credentialing or workforce preparation, because its public value lies partly in enabling broader access to powerful, socially consequential knowledge (Deng, 2022), (J, 2017). Curriculum scholarship on powerful knowledge argues that educational content matters because some forms of knowledge open intellectual, practical, and civic possibilities that are otherwise inaccessible (Deng, 2022). A knowledge-rich curriculum, in this sense, is not an elite curriculum. Rather, it is one that selects and organizes knowledge for its educational potential and uses teaching to unlock that potential for all learners (Deng, 2022).

This emphasis on knowledge is important for democratic reasons. If knowledge remains concentrated in narrow social groups, democracy risks becoming formally inclusive but substantively unequal. A democratic public requires more than procedural membership; it requires access to the intellectual tools through which people can interpret institutions, evaluate claims, and participate meaningfully in public life (Culp et al., 2023), (J, 2017). Bernstein's sociology of knowledge is relevant here because it helps explain how educational structures organize what counts as valid knowledge and how such organization shapes educational opportunity (J, 2017). From this angle, knowledge redistribution is not only about making more information available. It is about altering the social organization of curriculum and pedagogy so that learners are enabled to engage with disciplinary, civic, and critical forms of understanding (J, 2017), (Deng, 2022).

This point also clarifies why a merely utilitarian view of schooling is inadequate. If education is oriented only toward labor-market flexibility or performance metrics, then the school's democratic function is narrowed (Culp et al., 2023). Democratic education requires a broader conception of human development, one that connects knowledge to autonomy, judgment, and responsible participation (Deng, 2022), (KIRA, 2019). In this respect, civic education is not a supplementary subject. It is one of the ways in which schools redistribute the knowledge necessary for public life. Studies of civic education reforms likewise support this view: critical consciousness approaches argue that civic education must emphasize knowledge and critical thinking if it is to increase civic engagement (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2020). Similarly, project-based civic learning can function as an incubator for democratic education when it supports active participation rather than passive instruction (Sundawa et al., 2022).

Knowledge redistribution therefore has two dimensions. First, it concerns equitable access to substantive knowledge. Second, it concerns the transformation of pedagogy so that learners can use that knowledge in democratic ways. These dimensions cannot be separated. Knowledge that is technically available but pedagogically inaccessible is not truly redistributed. Democratic education requires both curricular inclusion and participatory enactment (Deng, 2022), (Culp et al., 2023).

Democratic Pedagogy: Participation, Conflict, and Agency

Democratic pedagogy is best understood as pedagogy that treats learners not as passive recipients but as participants in shared inquiry and collective life. The literature provided here offers several complementary approaches to this idea. Some emphasize participatory learning and student agency, while others foreground conflict, emotion, and disagreement as necessary features of democratic practice (Sundawa et al., 2022), (Sant et al., 2020). Together, they challenge the assumption that democratic education should simply aim at consensus or social harmony.

The study on agonistic democracy and citizenship education is especially useful in this regard. It argues that normative deliberative pedagogies can obscure the role of conflict in democratic life, and therefore proposes pedagogical activities that normalize disagreement, create channels for political emotions, and generate opportunities for new subjectivities (Sant et al., 2020). This does not mean that education should become antagonistic or uncontrolled. Rather, it means that democratic pedagogy must help students encounter difference, practice disagreement, and recognize conflict as something that can be politically productive when held within shared norms (Sant et al., 2020). The importance of this approach lies in its realism: democracy is not a state of consensus but a field of ongoing negotiation among unequal, diverse, and sometimes opposing perspectives (Culp et al., 2023), (Sant et al., 2020).

Other studies in the set point in a similar direction. Mock elections can support democratic development, but the research shows that their educational value depends on whether they are embedded in deeper activities that cultivate critical democratic citizenship and a democratic school culture (de Groot & Eidhof, 2019). When mock elections are limited to a short exercise, they risk becoming symbolic rather than formative (de Groot & Eidhof, 2019). Likewise, project citizen approaches in civic education can strengthen democratic education when they move beyond abstract instruction to active engagement with problems, action, and collective responsibility (Sundawa et al., 2022). These findings reinforce a central claim: democratic pedagogy requires not just content about democracy, but forms of teaching and learning through democracy.

Democratic schooling studies also underline the importance of student agency and self-governance. Research on democratic schools concludes that when students are given authority to decide what and how they learn, they are more likely to develop responsibility for their own education and for communal life (KIRA, 2019). The 2024 study on democratic schools similarly suggests that distributed leadership, self-governance, and student agency are central to the reinvigoration of democracy in the twenty-first century (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024). In these contexts, the school is not only preparing students for democracy; it is itself a democratic institution in miniature, a space where democratic practices are lived, tested, and refined (Culp et al., 2023), (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024).

At the same time, democratic pedagogy should not be romanticized. The agonistic study notes that older participants were less positive toward conflict-oriented pedagogy and that abstract discussion alone did not foster affective engagement (Sant et al., 2020). This suggests that democratic learning is demanding and context-sensitive. It requires careful design, attention to participants, and awareness that learners may differ in their readiness for conflict-based approaches (Sant et al., 2020). Democratic pedagogy therefore involves not a single method but a family of practices oriented toward participation, recognition, and shared problem-solving.

Postwar Educational Reform and Democratic Reconstruction

The postwar period is crucial for understanding the connection between education and democracy because it illustrates how democratic reconstruction was often pursued through educational reform. The supplied material indicates that after the Second World War, education was viewed as central to rebuilding democratic life, especially in contexts where authoritarianism had weakened civic institutions and political trust (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022), (KIRA, 2019). Postwar reform was not only about expanding access or reorganizing administration. It also involved the reorientation of schooling toward democratic values, civic responsibility, and broader participation (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022), (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024).

The case of democratic reform in postwar Germany is especially informative. Research on democratic schooling and the restoration of democracy in Germany emphasizes that educational reform contributed to the broader project of political democratization (KIRA, 2019). The claim is not that schools alone created democracy, but that democratic institutions were stabilized through educational practices that fostered participation, responsibility, and civic learning (KIRA, 2019). This is consistent with the wider literature on civic education as transformative education, which sees educational change and social transformation as mutually implicated (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022). In postwar conditions, education became a means of reconstructing the social foundations of democracy.

The importance of this reconstruction can also be seen in the role of educational reform models and transnational exchange. The literature on knowledge flows in democratic innovation shows that democratic practices often spread through infrastructures of learning, mutual exchange, and translocal collaboration (Voß et al., 2021). Although this study concerns mini-publics rather than schools, its central insight is relevant: democratic innovation depends on the circulation of know-how and the creation of shared learning spaces (Voß et al., 2021). Postwar educational reform likewise relied on the movement of ideas, institutions, and pedagogies across borders, as reformers sought workable models for democratic schooling and civic formation (KIRA, 2019), (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022).

What distinguishes the postwar moment is the scale of the democratic challenge. Societies emerging from war and authoritarian rule needed not only constitutional reform but also educational systems capable of cultivating democratic dispositions at population scale (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022), (KIRA, 2019). That task involved addressing knowledge inequality, reforming curricula, and fostering school cultures that encouraged participation. The historical evidence provided here supports the view that democratic education was understood as a foundational component of democratic rebuilding rather than a secondary cultural project (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024), (KIRA, 2019).

The Continuing Challenge of Democratic Education

The contemporary relevance of these debates is evident across the supplied scholarship. Democratic education remains a live issue because current democracies continue to face crises of participation, polarization, and institutional trust (Culp et al., 2023), (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022). In such conditions, the educational task is not simply to transmit civic facts. It is to build the intellectual and social capacities that allow citizens to engage with difference, understand public problems, and participate in common decision-making (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2020), (Sant et al., 2020).

At the same time, the literature suggests that educational systems often fall short of this task. Mock election research shows that participatory exercises may be too limited in duration or depth to produce robust democratic learning (de Groot & Eidhof, 2019). Civic engagement research indicates that engagement levels can remain low unless education explicitly fosters critical consciousness and links knowledge to action (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2020). Democratic school research warns that democratic practices remain difficult to sustain within broader systems structured by hierarchy and standardization (KIRA, 2019), (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024). These findings do not undermine the democratic education project; rather, they show why it matters.

The most promising direction across the literature is the integration of knowledge, participation, and civic purpose. A democratic curriculum must be knowledge-rich without becoming exclusionary, participatory without becoming shallow, and critical without losing sight of shared public responsibility (Deng, 2022), (Sundawa et al., 2022), (Sant et al., 2020). This balance is difficult, but it is precisely what democratic education requires. It demands institutions that distribute knowledge more equitably, pedagogies that invite student agency, and civic aims that treat democracy as something to be learned, practiced, and continually reconstructed (Culp et al., 2023), (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Education and democracy are bound together by a shared dependence on public knowledge. Democracy cannot endure if knowledge remains concentrated, if schooling is reduced to labor-market preparation, or if learners are excluded from meaningful participation in their own education (Deng, 2022), (Culp et al., 2023). The supplied literature supports a clear conclusion: democratic education is fundamentally about the redistribution of knowledge and the cultivation of democratic capacities through pedagogy (J, 2017), (Sundawa et al., 2022). It is through schools, civic programs, democratic classrooms, and participatory practices that learners come to understand themselves as members of a political community (KIRA, 2019), (Rojas Ayala et al., 2024).

Postwar educational reform demonstrates the historical significance of this insight. In the wake of authoritarian devastation, democratic societies recognized that rebuilding public life required educational systems oriented toward participation, critical judgment, and civic reconstruction (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022), (KIRA, 2019). That lesson remains urgent today. The challenges facing democracy cannot be met by institutions alone; they require educational forms that spread powerful knowledge, normalize democratic conflict, and support agency across social divisions (Sant et al., 2020), (Voß et al., 2021). Democratic pedagogy is therefore not a technical supplement to politics. It is one of democracy’s primary conditions of possibility.

In the end, the central issue is not whether education should support democracy, but what kind of education can do so responsibly and justly. The answer suggested by the scholarship is clear: education must redistribute knowledge, cultivate participation, and form citizens capable of sustaining a shared democratic world (Culp et al., 2023), (Deng, 2022), (KIRA, 2019).

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