
European Studies

The Visegrád Countries against the Background of the Russian–Ukrainian Conflict

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Received June 11, 2022; revised August 29, 2022; accepted September 9, 2022

Abstract—An attempt is made to analyze the origins of the attitude of Central European countries to the current military conflict in Ukraine, as well as their historical fears and concerns that broke out against the background of Moscow’s proposals to return the European security system to the contours of 1997, which preceded the armed invasion on February 24, 2022. It was historical memory that largely formed the knowingly predictable position of these countries in the conflict and their unconditional support of the Ukrainian side. According to the author, the conflict overall contributed to the pro-Atlantic consolidation of the Central European region, deepened the gap in relations with Russia, and produced new nuances in relations within the Visegrád region. Nevertheless, the understanding of the importance of regional solidarity, strengthened over 30 years of democratic development, keeps the Visegrád Group countries together, preventing them from falling victim one by one to any of the modern geopolitical poles. In defining the events, particularly the essence of the military conflict in Ukraine, the author adheres to the terminology used in the political space of the region under analysis, which allows her to remain objective in describing what is happening.

Keywords: Visegrád Group, military conflict in Ukraine, refugees, humanitarian aid, military aid

DOI: 10.1134/S1019331622130081

The opinion of the Central European countries about the current events in Ukraine could well be expected by the Russian and world political elite. It was easy to calculate about 40 years ago, long before the beginning of the reform of socialist societies. It was then, in the mid-1980s, that the intellectuals’ meaningful opportunist movement was felt in this part of Europe, once again after the events of 1956, 1968, and 1980, which favored the search for an exit to the free European expanse. No doubt, the impetus to the emergence of numerous scientific works and philosophical essays on the topic of the European community and humanity was given by the reforms of M. Gorbachev, who came to power in Moscow in the mid-1980s. That euphoric period, which lasted until 1993, was the climax in the real mutual sympathies between the Russian and Central European peoples, determined by the liberation revolutionary movement. However, the romanticism in the relations came to an end quite soon, when the world saw footage of the tanks shooting the building of the Supreme Council in the center of the Russian capital. This event made Hungarians, Poles, Czechoslovaks, and others involved in building new societies recall similar pic-

tures on the streets of Budapest, Prague, and Bratislava in Eastern Europe. On the crest of these reminiscences, one after another, the states of Central Europe began to submit requests to join NATO and the European Union, where they were respectively accepted after long accommodations and negotiations with Moscow in 1999 and 2004. This was why the Russian proposal put forward in the winter of 2021/2022 to return the contours of European security to those of 1997 was perceived in the countries of the Visegrád Group as unrealistic and inadequate, to say the least. For these countries, it would mean their withdrawal from the EU and NATO and leaving them in an ambiguous status, which they had assessed as dangerous back in the early 1990s.

PROLOGUE OF THE CONFLICT: ATTITUDE TO RUSSIA’S PROPOSALS

Thus, the attitude of the political and intellectual strata of these countries to Moscow began to deteriorate long before the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine. We will not appeal to the time of the mass mutual expulsion of diplomats in 2021 and beyond, but at least a few months before February 24, after Russia’s demands on NATO had been voiced, the relations practically collapsed. One can only regret the time when the Czechs did not allow the United States

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to deploy elements of the American missile defense system on their territory (the last such proposal was made in August 2020) [Shishelina, 2021]. Meanwhile, immediately after the signal from Moscow, even Slovakia signed a previously unthinkable agreement with the United States, which caused a mixed reaction from the opposition.

The Visegrád countries met the proposals to return Europe to the security contours of 1997 with surprise and great concern about their security. According to Polish analysts, Russia meant the 14 countries that had joined NATO after 1997, including Poland, which, together with the Czech Republic and Hungary, became a member of NATO in 1999. This provided a good opportunity to appreciate the benefits of membership in a body for the collective defense of security: “The countries of the North Atlantic Alliance consider the demands of Russia unacceptable and emphasize that Moscow has no veto power on these issues,”¹ Poland and neighboring Central European countries responded.

Politicians and scientists were at variance concerning what could have caused such an inadequate reaction—external or internal factors. There have been many assumptions. As M. Świerczyński, a security analyst for the Polish newspaper *Polityka Insight*, wrote in his commentaries, the Russian proposal expressed, in essence, the sum of all Russian fears related to the expansion and strengthening of NATO, including in response to threats created by Russia itself. In his opinion, Russia wants to cancel in one motion the entire geopolitical revolution, which required 30 years of effort, colossal costs, sacrifices, and sometimes even risk from tens of millions of people. Russia called this revolution the greatest misfortune of the 20th century back 20 years ago and continues its attempts to stop and reverse it, either by force, as in Georgia and Ukraine, or otherwise, as now in negotiations with the United States and NATO [Świerczyński, 2021].

In addition, the Polish analyst noted that the document submitted for consideration “does not mention a word about restrictions on the number and deployment of troops, their equipping with offensive weapons, nor the scale and frequency of exercises on the Russian side.” Drawing attention to the complete isolation of the Russian proposal from modern European realities, he assessed it as nothing more than “an attempt to impose a declaration on NATO’s self-development on the eastern flank” and “an unsuitable condition for flight.”

¹ Rosja chce wyprowadzenia wojsk NATO z państw przyjętych do Sojuszu po 1997 roku, Jan. 21 (2022). [https://www.radiopik.pl/3,98137,rosja-chce-wyprowadzenia-wojsk-nato-z-panstw-prz;Rosja-przedstawia-warunki-Zachodowi,Jeden-dotyczy-m.in.Polski,Dec.17\(2021\).https://www.rp.pl/dyplomacja/art19208061-rosja-przedstawia-warunki-zachodowi-jeden-dotyczy-m-in-polski](https://www.radiopik.pl/3,98137,rosja-chce-wyprowadzenia-wojsk-nato-z-panstw-prz;Rosja-przedstawia-warunki-Zachodowi,Jeden-dotyczy-m.in.Polski,Dec.17(2021).https://www.rp.pl/dyplomacja/art19208061-rosja-przedstawia-warunki-zachodowi-jeden-dotyczy-m-in-polski). Cited September 18, 2022.

The proposal to return to the provisions of 1997 caused approximately the same reaction of rejection in all countries that had joined NATO after that date. It became clear that there would be no negotiations under such conditions posed by Russia; however, as junior members of the alliance, the countries of Central Europe continued to wait for several months for a reaction from Washington and concrete steps from its side, simultaneously expressing surprise at the very fact of the appearance of such a document: “It is difficult to assume that the Russians do not understand this and produce printed paper only to wave it in front of the cameras,” wrote Polish newspapers [Świerczyński, 2021].

At the same time, they put forward versions about the reasons for the appearance of such a document at that very moment, when the persistent movement of Russian troops near the eastern border of Ukraine was already causing great tension. Among those versions, many political scientists singled out the subordination of foreign policy to the internal narrative. According to this model, the addressee of this project was not NATO at all but the internal public opinion of Russia, which was expected to take a fancy for such an attempt to “make a fool” of the West and demonstrate the determination to reverse the unfavorable, from the point of view of imperial Russia, course of events of the last quarter of a century [Świerczyński, 2021].

However, drawing attention to the time when the document appeared, on Christmas eve, a special time for Europe, the author dwells on the unsettling foreboding that it was just a procedure to mask the true intentions of the Kremlin.

A. Legucka, an expert at the Institute of International Affairs, tends to similar conclusions when analyzing Moscow’s proposals [Legucka, 2021]. In an analytical report dated December 15, 2021, she wrote that “by making largely unrealistic demands, Russia wants to undermine NATO, divide the allies (especially on the issue of NATO expansion to the east), weaken their cooperation (primarily the military one with Ukraine), and, if possible, gain indirect influence on the decision-making processes of the allies.” She sees Russia’s main goal as setting up a political process that, under the best scenario, would allow it to launch a new conference on European security.

During such negotiations (for example, involving Russia, the United States, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and France), Russia will seek to adopt a legally binding agreement. The concept of the indivisibility of security promoted by Russia can be seen as an attempt to impose an international order based on cooperation between superpowers (concert of superpowers), in which other states have in practice a limited right to pursue an independent foreign and security policy.

This is exactly what worries the Central European countries, which do not want to fall into the same trap

of comprehensive dependence from which they got out 30 years ago. At the same time, the Polish expert saw in Russia's demands a deliberate presentation of unacceptable proposals aimed at showing "that the West's refusal to enter into a dialogue on the Russian proposals will lead to the justification of the 'preemptive' use of military force against Ukraine." Thus, the Polish expert community viewed Moscow's proposals as nothing more but blackmail to increase the willingness of Western partners to enter into a dialogue with Russia on issues "which were seen as the foundations of the legal and political order in Europe after 1989 (or may simply serve as a justification for military action against Ukraine)."

Under these conditions, the analyst believes, Poland could point out that engaging in a dialogue with Russia on the terms it proposed would be extremely detrimental to European security since it would divide Europe into zones of privileged super-power interests.

The conflict was brewing on the eve of the Czech Republic's accession to the presidency of the EU Council, so Czech analysts treated what was happening with special attention. Like their Polish colleagues, they viewed Moscow's proposal as a kind of request from Russian officials to NATO for "security guarantees," "which mainly concern the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Namely, we mean a 'return' to the position before 1997, that is, before the countries of Central Europe, including the Czech Republic, joined NATO" [Svoboda, 2022].

Back in January, regarding the clearly escalating situation on the Russian–Ukrainian border, the Czech media called Moscow's proposal "staking everything" in order to increase rates and put pressure on the West, the European Union, and NATO.²

According to an expert from the European Values Center for Security Policy, the Russian President put forward absolutely unacceptable and unrealistic demands on the North Atlantic Alliance, such as the withdrawal of the alliance forces from Romania and Bulgaria or a return to the situation of 1997, that is, before its expansion at the expense of post-communist countries, including the Czech Republic: "Any country has the right to join any alliance, and Russia must respect this."³ Among the versions of why the Kremlin needs this, two were noted. The first is the desire of the Russian leader to retain power in the face of a decline in popularity, and the second is the desire to push transit countries out of control over oil and gas flows.

K. Svoboda from Charles University recalls that the Russian President does not fall out of the ranks of

Russian rulers who were afraid of revolutions. "Vladimir Putin relatively recently admitted his negative attitude to Lenin as a revolutionary who had turned a centralized state into a confederation, where nations even got the right to leave it." Thus, the modern struggle against revolutions is nothing that Russia has not experienced in the past. There is nothing illogical in this because in countries where governments do not change through elections, there is no other way to replace a bad government with another one [Svoboda, 2022].

Since the Czech Republic was to take the chair of the high European Assembly, most experts, proceeding from the experience of 2014, proposed to start introducing preventive sanctions [Svoboda, 2022].

In fact, the Czech presidency of the EU Council began when the hostilities in Ukraine were already in full swing and there was no time to retreat. Czech politicians declared that they would dedicate their presidency to helping Ukraine on a Europe-wide scale. The crisis made it necessary to adjust the program to the changed political situation. Under these conditions, V. Havel's value rhetoric about conscience in politics and the world's fate gained new momentum and acquired additional meaning [Vedernikov, 2022]. The main priorities announced by Prague in June 2022 were the following: (1) resolving the migration crisis caused by the influx of Ukrainian refugees into the EU and the postwar reconstruction of Ukraine; (2) energy security; (3) strengthening European defense capability and cybersecurity; (4) strategic recovery of the European economy; and (5) support for democratic institutions [Program, 2022]. The developers of the program of the Czech presidency called for decisive action based on universal values and the common destiny of European peoples. Although the presidency program contained five priorities, the speech of Prime Minister P. Fiala on July 1, 2022, made it clear that only two of them were prevailing, namely, the Ukrainian issue and the achievement of EU energy independence [Vedernikov, 2022].

Moscow's demands to go 25 years back caused a mixed reaction even in Hungary, which at first shied away from direct accusations against Moscow in unleashing the conflict in Ukraine, although they sounded with might and main in politicians' speeches designed for domestic audiences and those in Brussels. Expert circles assessed the hidden meaning of Moscow's proposal in almost the same way. One of the political analysts [Rácz, 2022] predicted back in January 2022 that, despite the recognition of the fact that Russians and Ukrainians had been shooting at each other for eight years, now the likelihood of an escalation was greater than ever. A. Rácz rightly emphasized that "diplomacy has little chance now. Russia has put forward unrealistic and impracticable demands. Among other things, it wants NATO to retreat beyond the borders of 1997, which would also

² Rusko hraje vabank: Je čas obrátit role a uvalit preventivní sankce, navrhuje analytik Stulík, Rozhlas, Jan. 21 (2022). <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/rusko-hraje-vabank-je-cas-obratit-role-a-uvalit-preventivni-sankce-navrhuje-8665125>. Cited September 18, 2022.

³ Ibid.

mean the withdrawal of Hungary from membership in NATO, which Hungary joined in 1999.” He assessed the Kremlin’s proposal rather as an attempt to justify a possible military conflict. However, he suggested that “this war will most likely remain a Ukrainian–Russian bilateral war, it will not spread to the territory of Hungary, and the Hungarian soldier will certainly not have to fight. However, if a war breaks out in our neighborhood, we will feel its indirect consequences in Hungary.”

It is noteworthy that, just as during the war in neighboring Yugoslavia in 1999, the Hungarians were distinguished by their concern about the fate of the Transcarpathian Hungarians, who could either volunteer for the Ukrainian army or be called up there.

Thus, not a single Central European country supported Moscow’s proposals to return the configuration of European security to 1979. On the contrary, they perceived these proposals as a threat to their own and regional security, forcing them to rally around NATO, which was also evidenced by the steps of Finland and Sweden—countries much more independent in their history.

Such a reaction from these countries was but natural. A year before, relations with the Czech Republic had been spoiled before this state was awarded the status of “unfriendly”; modern Russia’s relations with Poland had not worked out before, and now they turned almost into hostile ones. In the summer of 2022, Slovakia also entered the status of unfriendly.

If, when preparing the document, the possible reaction of the addressees of the message had been considered, the position of these countries on Crimea should have also been taken into account, i.e., their position after the tragic events on the Maidan in 2014, when they divided among themselves the spheres of assistance to neighboring Ukraine and helped this neighboring country for eight years. Thus, from the point of view of analyzing the international situation, Russia should initially have been ready for the sharpest reaction from the Visegrád countries regarding its forthcoming actions in Ukraine. Politicians in Central Europe followed closely the course of events, but no one expected that the tension, which had been steadily growing over the past two years, would result in the “operation” of the Russian armed forces on the territory of the neighboring state on February 24, 2022.

THE POSITION OF THE VISEGRÁD GROUP

Against the backdrop of obvious international aggravation, a unique situation was created, when the Visegrád Group, chaired by Hungary until June 1, 2022, initially reacted very sluggishly to the military confrontation in its neighborhood. Unlike even the crisis of fall 2021 on the Polish–Belarusian border [Shishelina, 2021], it formulated fewer joint statements than during the confrontation with Minsk. Per-

haps this was to some extent predetermined by the position taken by Hungary. Since the first days to the present, Budapest has been tirelessly declaring its desire, on the one hand, to remain out of military confrontation and, on the other, its interest in the soonest end of the most serious military conflict in Eastern Europe since the Second World War. As for the first position of V. Orbán’s cabinet, one should emphasize not only the special nature of his personal relationship with the President of Russia but also the existing historical precedent when Hungary evaded participation in the war in Yugoslavia unleashed by NATO immediately after the Central European states had been admitted to this organization. While condemning Moscow’s actions, Hungary at first did not consider it necessary to take a more active part in helping Ukraine as opposed to its partners in the Visegrád Group.

During the meeting of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries in London with the British Prime Minister on March 8, a joint statement and communiqué was adopted. It read as follows:⁴

We, the leaders of the Visegrád Group (V4) Countries and the UK, stand united in condemning Russia’s aggression on Ukraine—a brutal, unprovoked and premeditated attack against a sovereign, peaceful democratic state. The actions of Russia, and those who enable them, represent an egregious violation of international law and the UN Charter that undermines European security and stability.

Orbán, Fiala, M. Morawiecki, E. Heger, and B. Johnson expressed their full support for the President, government, and people of Ukraine, who found themselves in war conditions and defended the sovereignty of their country. The prime ministers agreed to coordinate as allies their response to Russia “through the most punitive sanctions and measures, including referral to the ICC.” Regarding Ukraine, the leaders of the five states agreed to support the growing number of refugees, mostly women, children, and the elderly, fleeing the bombing of civilian targets.

In addition to the topic of cybersecurity raised during the meeting, the heads of the governments also discussed the problem of reducing dependence on natural fuels from Russia as part of improving the collective energy security.

The next meeting within the V4 framework was held in Budapest on June 30, 2022. It discussed the results of the Hungarian presidency and officially proclaimed the transfer of control levers from Hungary to Slovakia based on the principle of rotation, enshrined in the Visegrád community. At the same time, a meet-

⁴ V4 + United Kingdom Joint Statement of Prime Ministers March 8, 2022, London. <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=488>. Cited September 18, 2022.

ing of the ministers of internal affairs of the Visegrád Group countries was held.⁵ The need for this was caused by another wave of refugees—this time from neighboring Ukraine. The issue of migration from Russia of those who disagree with V. Putin's policy was also on the agenda.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, as of March 13, the number of refugees from Ukraine accepted by the countries of Central Europe directly bordering Ukraine was 2593236 people, including 2180380 people in Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland. In addition, 132591 people moved to Russia and Belarus.⁶ By the end of May, the picture had changed. Three months later, 3251955 refugees from Ukraine were registered in Poland, 577820 in Hungary, and 406833 in Slovakia.

During the meeting in Budapest, the interior ministers of the Visegrád Group countries agreed on their commitment to curb illegal migration in the region, particularly in the Western Balkans, which was increasing. However, the main topic was still new developments on the eastern borders of the European Union. As emphasized, they require that the EU adapt the existing legal framework to the new situation, which will enable member states to respond effectively to the coming challenges. The ministers condemned Russia's actions and expressed their support for Ukraine. They agreed that the war in Ukraine presents an unprecedented challenge to the European Union and the member states of the Central European region, which account for a significant share of the flow of war refugees. At the same time, they noted that the prolongation of the conflict would have further long-term consequences of global significance and assured each other that Budapest, Bratislava, Prague, and Warsaw could count on each other to solve these problems. The meeting expressed the confidence that V4 would be able to provide adequate protection to refugees arriving from Ukraine in accordance with the relevant EU legislation and the national legislation of the countries. It was decided to ask the European Commission to ensure that appropriate EU resources would be made available to the member states caught in this complex crisis.

On October 11, in Bratislava, a meeting of the presidents of the Visegrad Four was held already within the framework of the presidency of Slovakia. In its course, Katalin Novak, Andrzej Duda, Zuzana Čaputová, and Miloš Zeman confirmed their position on the events in Ukraine, condemning Russia's aggression. Since

the meeting took place after the referendums held in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, the heads of state also announced the nonrecognition of their results. Thus, Novak, who took part in the B4 presidential summits for the first time, said, "We strongly condemn Putin's aggression, condemn the armed attack on a sovereign independent country, condemn the announcement of the annexation of Ukrainian territories and the bombing of civilian objects. The threat of using nuclear weapons is unacceptable. We will do everything that it is in our power to create the conditions for a just world as soon as possible, because we must preserve the secure life we have been given for our children and grandchildren." Nevertheless, the hostess of the summit, Čaputová, noted in her speech the absence of a unified position of the Visegrad countries on the supply of arms to Ukraine, referring to Hungary. However, Czech President Zeman stood up for Budapest, saying that Hungary is actively involved in demining objects on the territory of Ukraine. In addition, he expressed his desire to accept Slovenia into the Visegrad Group, which for many years fully shared its aspirations.

AID TO UKRAINE

The countries of Central Europe called the actions started by Russia in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, "aggression" and "war" using different degrees of expression. The leaders and leading politicians of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia in the very first weeks after the start of the conflict, or in the very first days, visited Kyiv to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people and personally shake hands with President V. Zelenskii. Thus, President of Poland A. Duda after February 24 visited Kyiv four times and spoke in the Rada; President of Slovakia Z. Čaputová came to Kyiv once and also spoke to the deputies of the Ukrainian parliament. The Prime Ministers of Slovakia and Poland, Heger and Morawiecki, and ministers of their cabinets visited Kyiv several times and met with senior officials. Together with the leaders of Poland, Lithuania, and Slovenia, on March 15, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Fiala visited Kyiv and met with the President, and Foreign Minister J. Lipavský visited Kyiv in the summer. From Hungary, Parliamentary Secretary of State and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs L. Magyar visited Ukraine.

As in 2014, Central European politicians decided to help repair the damage caused to Ukraine. Moreover, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia also carried out military—technical supplies. Like the Baltic countries, they handed over to Kyiv outdated in terms of modernization but fully functional Soviet-style military equipment. Hungary refused to supply equipment and weapons for reasons of principle. In addition, Czech President M. Zeman signed a law allowing

⁵ Meeting of the ministers of interior of the Visegrád group, Budapest, June 30, 2022, Joint declaration. <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=497>. Cited September 18, 2022.

⁶ Ukraine Refugee situation, UNCHR. https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine#_ga=2.57038255.465250922.1663537917-1988921164.1663537917. Cited September 18, 2022.

Czech volunteers to take part in hostilities on the territory of Ukraine.

Poland has provided Ukraine with weapons and other military equipment worth at least \$1.7 billion, said President Duda,⁷ who repeated his call for the country's allies to help it fill the gap caused by the transfer to Kyiv. "We are giving Ukraine the greatest military aid we have ever provided to any country," said Duda. "We are also the main supplier of heavy weapons to Ukraine. We are talking about hundreds of tanks, combat vehicles, and artillery, as well as drones, anti-aircraft launchers, ammunition, spare parts, and other equipment." As follows from the same source, Poland is the third country in terms of military supplies to Ukraine after the United States and Britain.⁸ According to Bloomberg, Poland's total aid to Ukraine in 2022 may exceed \$5 billion.⁹

The data show that Estonia (0.83%) was the leader in terms of supply value (i.e., in terms of national GDP) for the period from January to August; it was followed by Latvia (0.8%) and Poland (0.49%).¹⁰ The volume of the aid from the Czech Republic and Slovakia was the same, 0.19%. Aid from Hungary amounted to 0.03% at that time. For comparison, Germany's aid amounted to 0.08%, and that of France, to 0.04% of the GDP of these countries. The content of the aid also varies. While Estonia supplies Ukraine exclusively with military aid, the Polish package is dominated by financial support.¹¹

Speaking at a donor conference in Warsaw in May, Czech Foreign Minister Lipavský said that the Czech government would allocate an additional €18 mln (about 443 mln CZK) to Ukraine as humanitarian aid. By that time, the Czech Republic had already provided Kyiv with assistance in the amount of €22 million (more than 540 million CZK). According to the minister, during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of the year, the Czech Republic could also hold a donor conference. At the same time, states and organizations

pledged to allocate a total of \$6.5 billion (more than 150 billion CZK).¹²

Aid from the Czech Cabinet of Ministers will amount to about one billion CZK. According to Lipavský, much larger sums were in the accounts of humanitarian organizations. "For this, we must thank all the citizens of the Czech Republic, who help the Ukrainians in this difficult situation in any way they can." Lipavský also recalled that the Czech Republic had accepted more than 300,000 Ukrainian refugees. The conflict in Ukraine and its associated humanitarian and geopolitical implications also set the priorities for the upcoming Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. "We are ready to initiate a comprehensive program of stabilization, reconstruction, and resilience of Ukraine with regional coverage of Moldova and Georgia," he said.

At the same conference, Hungarian Foreign Minister P. Szijjártó, according to the MTI agency, offered Ukraine €37 million (911 million CZK) as aid and "condemned Russian aggression and gross violations of human rights." "We can clearly tell the attacker from the attacked," he said.¹³

Prime Minister of Slovakia Heger also stated that his country is in solidarity with Ukraine and is its loyal neighbor. "The security and prosperity of Ukraine are also our concern. In addition to financing humanitarian aid and ensuring the vital needs of refugees, we have allocated another five million euros for the development of Ukrainian regions as part of the Slovak–Ukrainian cross-border cooperation."¹⁴

During his visit to Kyiv and meeting with Zelenskii, the Slovak Prime Minister said that Slovakia had taken a clear position regarding the events in Ukraine from the very beginning.¹⁵

Our government has offered aid to the Ukrainian military, for example, in the form of repairing their damaged or obsolete equipment. We can also recall the donation of the S-300 air defense system, an event that caused controversy among Slovaks. However, we also sent millions of euros worth of other equipment and military equipment to Ukraine. It also includes Zuzana 2 howitzers and 30 armored personnel carriers.

⁷ Poland has given Ukraine military aid worth at least \$1.7 billion and expects allies to help fill the gaps. Notes from Poland, June 15 (2022). <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/06/15/poland-has-given-ukraine-military-aid-worth-at-least-1-7bn-expects-allies-to-help-fill-the-gaps/>. Cited September 9, 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Poland will spend 1% of GDP to aid Ukraine refugees, Study Shows, Bloomberg, July 27 (2022). <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-27/poland-will-spend-1-of-gdp-to-aid-ukraine-refugees-study-shows>. Cited September 18, 2022.

¹⁰ Total bilateral aid commitments to Ukraine as a percentage of donor gross domestic product (GDP) between January 24 and August 3, 2022, by country, Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1303450/bilateral-aid-to-ukraine-in-a-percent-of-donor-gdp/>. Cited September 18, 2022.

¹¹ Pomoc dla Ukrainy: Wsparcie z Polski należy do największych, wyjaśniamy czyja to zasługa, Apr. 23 (2022). <https://300gospodarka.pl/analizy/pomoc-dla-ukrainy-wsparcie-z-polski-nalez-do-najwiekszych-wyjasniamy-czyja-to-zasluga>. Cited September 18, 2022.

¹² Česko dá dalších téměř 450 milionů Kč na humanitární pomoc Ukrajině, České Noviny, May 5 (2022). <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/cesko-da-dalsich-temer-450-milionu-kc-na-humanitarni-pomoc-ukrajine/2201733>. Cited September 18, 2022.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Slovensko poskytne Ukrajině pomoc viac ako 530 miliónov eur zo zdrojov EÚ. <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/slovensko-poskytne-ukrajine-pomoc-viac-ako-530-milionov-eur-zo-zdrojov-eu/>. Cited September 18, 2022.

¹⁵ Slovenská pomoc Ukrajině v pomere so štátnym HDP: Sme vo svetovej top desiatke pred Českom. <https://www.startitup.sk/slovenska-pomoc-ukrajine-v-pomere-so-statnym-hdp-sme-vo-svetovej-top-desiatke-pred-ceskom/>. Cited September 18, 2022.

The Slovak Prime Minister also explained that Slovakia received compensation from its NATO allies for these deliveries.

In September, Czech Defense Minister J. Černochová also mentioned compensation from the Western allies in an interview. According to her, the Czech Republic supplied Ukraine with about four billion crowns worth of weapons and equipment and could be compensated for up to 80% of the military aid it sent to Ukraine from European Union funds.¹⁶ According to the minister, since the Czech Republic was one of the first countries to send weapons to Ukraine, Czech arms companies have a chance to work more closely with Ukraine. They can also raise funds from multiple foundations. At the summer donor conference for Ukraine in Copenhagen, the Czech Republic presented about 50 industrial projects that the Czech defense industry would be able to implement in the coming months in cooperation with the Ukrainians.

The relations of Budapest and Kyiv, unlike those of other Visegrád capitals, did not go well for a long time. The former ambassador to Budapest, L. Nepop, openly supported the opposition during the 2022 parliamentary elections. The two national leaders also used every chance to offend one another. Like the Brussels authorities, Zelenskii reproached Orbán for his ties with Moscow, with Putin. Nevertheless, the Hungarians did not refuse to help the neighboring state. In addition to helping during the international donor marathon, Hungary supplied medical equipment and food. After having visited Kyiv and the world-famous settlement of Bucha near Kyiv, Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary Magyar announced Hungary's readiness to build there a kindergarten, a hospital, a post office, and a building for the city administration.¹⁷ At the same time, Magyar announced Hungary's readiness to create opportunities to bring Ukraine's grain exports to world markets.¹⁸

It is difficult to establish comparatively how many refugees within these countries were assisted since most of them move around Europe, return to their homeland, or even leave for relatives in Russia. Thus, in the six months since the start of the military operation, 5.6 million Ukrainians entered Poland, and 3.6 million later crossed the border in the opposite

direction. In the case of Slovakia, this is 713 000, and 448 000 returned to Ukraine. Hungary accepted 1 342 000 refugees, but there is no data on departure.¹⁹ According to data as of mid-September 2022,²⁰ 1 379 000 Ukrainians were registered in Poland, 93 000 in Slovakia, 29 000 in Hungary, and 431 000 in the Czech Republic. Note that, unlike other countries, the Czech Republic decided to help not only Ukrainian refugees but also politicians, journalists, and scientists persecuted in Russia. This is quite in accordance with the tradition of 100 years ago, when the first President of Czechoslovakia T. Masaryk announced assistance to the Russian professorial emigration.

In all the countries, special websites and information services for Ukrainian refugees were opened. At first, they received housing or a temporary place of residence, and they were provided with a social package comparable to that provided by the state to its own citizens, but with time restrictions. On September 1, refugee children went to schools and kindergartens. Accordingly, additional opportunities were opened for Ukrainian youth to enter local universities. Thus, in Poland, 142 000 Ukrainian children were placed in state educational institutions, and in the Czech Republic, 43 500.²¹

CONCLUSIONS

To assess what is happening in Ukraine after February 24, 2022, and, consequently, to determine the measure of participation in helping the suffering side, the countries of the Visegrád Group have already been pretty heated by the discussion about Moscow's proposals on the topic of "1997." They were united internally by the expectation that the discussion between Moscow and Washington would be resolved—and then the tragedy in the immediate neighborhood followed. Differences in approaches, especially distinguishable between Warsaw and Budapest, did not create conditions for a split within the group, although, of course, they somewhat slowed down its collective activity. The reason for this was, among others, the unrelenting tension in relations between both capitals and Brussels, in which they are in dire need of each other's support. It outweighs, as events show, different approaches to the issue of solidarity with Ukraine. Poland has somewhat reduced its former attachment to Budapest because of its position on Ukraine; however, it prefers not to break relations completely, as it needs the support of Orbán. Orbán, on the other hand, explains the contradiction that has arisen by differences in the approaches of the heart and mind to the

¹⁶EU by mohla Česku proplatit až 80 procent vojenské pomoci Ukrajině, uvedla ministryně Černochová. <https://www.e15.cz/valka-na-ukrajine/eu-by-mohla-cesku-proplatit-az-80-procent-vojenske-pomoci-ukrajine-vedla-ministryne-cernochova-1393114>. Cited September 18, 2022.

¹⁷Magyarország segít Ukrajnának az újjáépítésben. Mandiner. https://maniner.hu/cikk/20220720_magyar_levente_kulugymi_niszterium_magyarorszag_ukrajna_segitsegnuyitas_ujjaepites. Cited September 18, 2022.

¹⁸Magyar Levente: Magyarország folytatja Ukrajna támogatását, Origo, July 18 (2022). <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20220718-magyarorszag-tovabbra-is-tamogatja-ukrajnat.html>. Cited September 18, 2022.

¹⁹Ukrainian refugees by country CEE 2022, Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293403/cee-ukrainian-refugees-by-country/>. Cited September 18, 2022.

²⁰Ukraine Refugee situation, UNCHR. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>. Cited September 18, 2022.

²¹Refugee flows from Ukraine, Data.europa.eu. <https://data.europa.eu/en/datastories/refugee-flows-ukraine>. Cited September 18, 2022.

Ukrainian problem. This is not the first time that Hungary has demonstrated a more flexible position in military conflicts in its region. For example, it avoided involvement in the war in the Balkans in 1999, referring to the desire not to harm its national diaspora in Yugoslav Vojvodina. Now it has taken a similar position on the Russian–Ukrainian armed conflict in view of the Hungarian diaspora in Carpatho-Ukraine, formulating its position with the phrase “this is not our war, Hungary should remain out of it.” At the same time, over the past year, confidence in NATO as a potential defender in the event of an expansion of the threat westward of Ukraine, as well as in the United States, has significantly strengthened in the region.

None of the countries in the region supports Russia’s actions in Ukraine, and everyone wants them to be completed as soon as possible, but everyone sees the only way to influence Russia in the tightening of sanctions, even though, according to the experience of 2014, they are not always effective. This process of “sanctioning” was bound to be led by the Czech Republic as EU Council President, although its relations with Russia had been practically cut a year before the start of the current conflict.

Unfortunately, Russia’s relations with the countries of the region have been going downhill for several years now, dominated by illusory ideas and subjectivist assessments, which only further confuse the situation. The current situation can therefore be viewed as an unfortunate but logical outcome of this approach.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest.

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Translated by B. Alekseev