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The Visegrád Group – a united front against a common European narrative?

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ABSTRACT

The perception of the Visegrád Group has changed since the beginning of the migrant crisis in 2015. For some the group now represents a sort of "united front against a common European narrative". This paper challenges the superficiality of such a notion by identifying the ideological components of a "united V4" narrative and examining the extent to which both the ruling parties and the citizens of member countries agree with them. The main finding is that ruling political parties cluster into distinct two groups, the Czech and Slovak bloc being more moderate than the Polish and Hungarian group. The citizens of these countries can neither be clustered in a similar way, nor are they homogenous in their views, except to some extent on immigration matters. Also, citizens do not on average hold the same positions as their current governments.

KEYWORDS: The Visegrád Group, Euroscepticism, sovereignism, conservatism, anti-immigration, religion in politics

Introduction[1]

In 1335, the kings of Bohemia, Hungary and Poland gathered for a summit in the castle town called Visegrád, which resulted in an anti-Habsburg alliance. Some considerable time later – in 1991, to be precise – a different kind of alliance was formed. Taking the Visegrád name, a regional force comprising Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary emerged as the Visegŕad Group (also referred to as the Visegrád Four or V4). Originally envisioned as a facilitator of European integration, the group and its members continued their subregional cooperation even after they accomplished the goal of EU accession. Yet since 2015, the group has started taking on new meaning(s). The migrant crisis which affected the European Union proved to be a highly salient topic that triggered a specific and unified response of the V4 countries – the rejection of the European Union's (EU) proposed migrant allocation scheme. Consequently, public narrative concerning the group took a new turn, often accompanied by labels such as "anti-EU", "rebels", and "troublemakers". All of this has led to the group sometimes being perceived as a sort of "united front against a common European narrative". Such characterizations may, however, be superficial and lacking in nuance. Often these views result from the cases of Hungary and Poland being weighed too heavily in the overall understanding of not just the Visegrád group, but of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as a whole.[2]

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[1] This paper was written as part of the "Integration and Disintegration of the European Union: Dynamics of Europeanism and Euroscepticism" project supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under Grant UIP-2019-04-2979.

[2] The problem can mostly be identified in public discussions, but to a lesser degree even in academic work. The Czech Deputy Minister of Europe Aleš Chmelař, for instance, pointed out the problem, "The issues that Brussels has or has had with Visegrád are with Poland and Hungary, but they put us all in the same basket". Source: Celia Pérez Carrascosa, "Eurosceptic? Czechs Are Happy Within the EU," *Visegrad Insight*, November 10, 2020, https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-central-europe-europes-future/.

In this paper I explore whether the Visegrád Group is really the homogenous, anti-EU actor it is sometimes portrayed as. I do so by approaching analysis from the so-called supply and demand perspective. The supply side entails political parties and their leaders, while the demand side represents the attitudes of citizens. By looking at these two sides of the issue, the paper attempts to answer three related questions: (1) What exactly does the narrative of a "united front" consist of, (2) To what extent do the Visegrád Group's ruling political parties differ from each other, and (3) How homogeneous are the group's citizens? A qualitative analysis of relevant texts serves to address the first point, while the other two questions are answered primarily with the help of quantitative data and methods that facilitate the understanding and comparison of multiple cases across multiple topics. The paper argues that while the narrative of a "united front" indeed exists, stemming from within the group itself, there is no unanimous agreement on all of the components of this narrative – neither between the ruling political parties, nor amongst the citizens of the member states.

The Visegrád Group: from rejoining the West to becoming a united front against Brussels?

The history of the Visegrád Group spanning the period between its inception and the migrant crisis is not filled with a continuous stream of lively moments. In fact, prior to 2015, the group had been pronounced dead several times.[3] The V4's creation was accompanied by the strong motif of "a return to Europe", a rejoining with "the West"

[3] Rick Fawn, "Visegrad: Fit for Purpose?," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 340, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2013.06.004.

after having been "kidnapped by the East".[4] Historical conflicts[5] existing between some of the members were cast aside in favor of cooperation towards a Western future. Due to varying levels of interest among politicians in participating in the group, cooperation was on shaky ground until 1999.[6] Only then, the group ultimately intensified its cooperation as the countries neared EU accession and witnessed some changes in leadership.[7] In 2004 all of the Visegrád countries joined the EU and as that chapter came to a close, a new one was started with the Kroměříž Declaration. The next 11 years were marked by joining the Schengen Area and by the group continuing to act as a vector for dealing with European matters at a regional level.

2015 was, as already stated, the tipping point. Since the beginning of the migrant crisis that year, Kazharski argues, the group's identification with the West has narrowed significantly.[8] According to Kazharski, a "normative rupture" between the "East" and the "West" of the European Union is observable[9] and the Visegrád group is exhibiting signs of "post-liberal regionalism" despite still being vitally plugged into the Western

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[4] Maria Rošteková and Gilles Roulet, "The Visegrád Group – a Model to Follow?," *Politeja* 11, no. 2(28): 183, https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.11.2014.28.08.

[5] Primarily related to the altered borders after the 1920 Treaty of Trianon and the status of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Post-WWI divides also triggered border disputes between Poland and the then Czechoslovakia.

[6] Andrea Schmidt, "Friends Forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration," *Politics in Central Europe* 12, no. 3 (December 1, 2016): 125–28. https://doi.org/10.1515/pce-2016-0019.

[7] Helena Bauerová, "The V4 and European Integration," *Politics in Central Europe* 14, no. 2 (September 1, 2018): 123, https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0012.

[8] Aliaksei Kazharski, "The End of 'Central Europe'? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four," *Geopolitics* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 755, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1389720.

[9] Ibid.

liberal order.[10] Group members have continued to pursue different individual interests within the EU, but have also increased their efforts to bolster shared interests at the EU level. [11] Moreover, the migration crisis increased the group's visibility, enhanced general intra-group cooperation, and led to increased politicization of the integration process.[12]

The united front narrative: united in what and against whom?

What sort of an identity does the Visegrád Four (wish to) foster today? There is certainly not only one answer to this question. This paper focuses solely on the "united front" vision on the grounds that it is heard the loudest and contains strong points on V4 exceptionality and unity. Qualitative analysis of relevant texts highlights broader recurring themes within this vision which describe where the region is now and where it aims to go. Regarding the V4's relation with the EU, it should be emphasized that empirically there is no such thing as a "common European narrative", as this paper's title suggests. EU member states, at least to some degree, hold very different views pertaining to various aspects of European integration. Rather, the question at stake with regard to the V4 is the very prospect of agreement on common democratic standards and certain values. Some proponents of the united front narrative speaking on behalf of Visegrád have instead pushed the idea of a "Europe of differences", a place where nations preserve their own values, however different they may be, and, above all,

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[10] Aliaksei Kazharski, "An Ad Hoc Regionalism? The Visegrád Four in the 'Post-Liberal' Age," *Polity* 52, no. 2 (April 2020): 251, https://doi.org/10.1086/708182.

[11] Bauerová, "The V4 and European Integration", p.134.

[12] Mats Braun, "Postfunctionalism, Identity and the Visegrad Group," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 58, no. 4 (July 2020): 925–40, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12994.

political sovereignty. In the words of Viktor Orbán, "We want to decide our own destiny" and less subtly, "We want to live as a free nation, not as an imperial colony or subordinate". [13] The West that was once yearned for has now "lost its attractiveness" and a prominent divide between the West and Central Europe (V4) is perceived. [14] Meanwhile, the Visegŕad Group is said to be going its own way: while the West is on a post-nation and post-Christian path that tarnishes traditional values [15], V4 vows to protect and preserve those very values. [16] Moreover, according to Orbán, Christian Europe is not only threatened by liberal values, but also by (Muslim) outsider attacks.[17] What makes the Visegrád group so special and called upon to defend against this danger is the claim that they share a "unique, shared cultural quality, an outlook on life, a way of thinking and a unique posture" vis-à-vis other member states. [18] These shared qualities are not only a fact of the present, but are understood to stem from common historical developments in the region, their shared negative experience of communism being one of the most valuable lessons. Today, the countries and the group's accomplishments and trajectories are assessed positively. The Visegrád Four is said to be doing very well in various aspects, ranging from the economy to their handling of

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[13] MTI-Hungary Today, "Orbán: Central Europe 'Europe's Future,'" *Hungary Today* (blog), November 18, 2019, https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-central-europe-europes-future/.

[14] Ábel Bede, "Between the Lines - A Guide to Viktor Orban's Opinion Piece," Kafkadesk, September 24, 2020, https://kafkadesk.org/2020/09/24/between-the-lines-a-guide-to-viktor-orban-opinion-piece/.

[15] Reuters Staff, "Hungarian PM sees shift to illiberal Christian democracy in 2019 European vote," Reuters, July 28, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-idUSKBN1KI0BK.

[16] MTI-Hungary Today, "Orbán: Visegrad Group Responsible for Shaping Europe's Future," *Hungary Today* (blog), February 17, 2021, https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-visegrad-group-responsibility-europe-v4-mission/.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

the COVID-19 pandemic.[19] Based on these excellent outcomes and its unique value alignment, the region should be considered a "model for Europe" according to Orbán.[20]

When distinguishing themes in the described "united V4" narrative that are related to political ideologies, four stand out:

1. Sovereignism (as a barrier towards deeper political integration of the EU)
2. Conservatism
3. Opposition to immigration
4. Religious principles in politics

Ruling political party positions: two sides, but not of the same coin

In this section, the ruling parties of the Visegrád Group are analyzed for possible agreements or discrepancies on core elements of the "united V4" narrative presented above. Parties in power are selected as a unit of analysis by virtue of being the most important political actors in their respective countries. As of writing this article[21], the ruling parties and the leaders are as follows:

[19] As stated during the Bled Summit 2020 by the V4 prime ministers (sans the absent Slovak minister). Source: Slovenska Tiskovna Agencija, "Bled Strategic Forum 2020 - Leader's Panel", Bled Summit 2020, August 31, 2020, YouTube video, https://youtu.be/fChQaUmJnsg.

[20] MTI-Hungary Today, "Future."

[21] February 2021.

Table 1. Ruling political parties of the V4 and their leaders

	Party	**Leader**
Czech Republic (CZ)	ANO (*Akce nespokojených občanů* – Action of Dissatisfied Citizens)	Andrej Babiš
Hungary (HU)	Fidesz–KDNP	Viktor Orbán
Poland (PL)	PiS (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – Law and Order Party)	Jarosław Kaczyński
Slovakia (SK)	OL'aNO (*Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti* – Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)	Igor Matovič

Before delving into analyzing their positions, a few remarks should be made on the characteristics of these parties that strongly shape how they approach politics. First, scholars stress one major commonality among them, namely, the classification of these parties as populist parties.[22] The entire V4 region has witnessed a rise in populist political actors in the 2010s, but it is important to note that not all of them share similar geneses, positions or even structural characteristics. Fidesz and PiS are established and conventionally structured parties that have most commonly been analyzed within frameworks that stress their pronounced right-wing orientation.[23] Their ideological profiles are rather strong, and their leaders come from dissident backgrounds which

[22] As can be seen in the PopuList database. Source: Matthijs Rooduijn et al., "The PopuList: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe," The PopuList, 2019, https://popu-list.org/.

[23] Categories can range from "populist radical right party (PRRP)" to newer concepts such as "paternalist populism". Source: Zsolt Enyedi, "Right-Wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe," *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 363–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787162.

generate significant symbolic capital. Only a decade old, OL'aNO and ANO are less conventionally structured and younger protest parties founded by businessmen. Both have been analyzed within the framework of "entrepreneurial parties"[24], but ANO has additionally been discussed within the prism of "technocratic populism".[25] Unlike Fidesz and PiS, both of these parties' ideological profiles are perceived as blurry. ANO in particular has remained dominantly centrist throughout the years, while a shift towards a center-right, more conservative orientation has been noted in the case of OL'aNO.[26]

To summarize, initial expectations were that ANO would have the least pronounced support for the "united V4" narrative, closely followed by OL'aNO. PiS and Fidesz were expected to be positioned close to each other, but with an observable distance from the Czech and Slovak parties.

In order to provide a concise overview of party positions, data was obtained from the latest (2019) edition of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), a database of (quantitative) scores generated by expert judges.[27] The database contains all the relevant party ideology elements needed to investigate (dis)agreement with the "united V4" narrative. Scores are presented in tables and complemented with additional sources and explanations where necessary.

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[24] Vít Hloušek, Lubomír Kopeček, and Petra Vodová, *The Rise of Entrepreneurial Parties in European Politics* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41916-5.

[25] Vlastimil Havlík, "Technocratic Populism and Political Illiberalism in Central Europe," *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 6 (November 2, 2019): 369–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2019.1580590.

[26] Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová, The Rise of Entrepreneurial Parties in European Politics, 107–108.

[27] Ryan Bakker et al., "2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey," Version 2019.1(2020). https://www.chesdata.eu/. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Positions towards the EU

Table 2. General orientation towards European integration, salience of the topic, and affinity towards nationalism

	EU_POSITION (1 – 7)	EU_SALIENCE (0 – 10)	NATIONALISM (0 – 10)
OL'aNO	4.75	4.60	6.53
ANO	4.48	4.93	6.59
Fidesz-KNDP	3.07	8.13	9.80
PiS	2.95	6.14	9.10

The variable 'EU_POSITION' represents the assessment of the party leadership's overall orientation towards European integration. Both ANO and OL'aNO hover above the neutral mark (4), meaning that the judges deemed them, all things considered, to be pro-EU. From a comparative perspective, however, they can hardly be seen as Euroenthusiastic, nor do they score similarly to many ruling parties in the EU, which tend to be much closer to the maximum score (7). This assessment is fairly in line with information gleaned from their manifestos, as both declare a general pro-EU orientation, albeit one that does not preclude criticism. Regarding sovereignty, the Czech and Slovak parties have emphasized its importance with regard to the EU, although not as some profound barrier towards European integration.[28] Overall, OL'aNO and ANO are currently the most supportive of the Union among the V4 ruling parties, and while they do not shy away from criticizing it, they do not do so by

[28] For instance, in an interview with Spiegel, Babiš explicitly rejected the idea of a return to greater sovereignty. Source: Maximilian Popp and Walter Mayr, "Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš: 'We Should Be Talking about European Security,'" Spiegel, September 8, 2020, https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/czech-prime-minister-andrej-babis-we-should-be-talking-about-european-security-a-1f1f377c-3907-4afa-9ad6-cc87c845cb66.

fundamentally questioning it. The CHES scores also show that European issues are not such a salient topic for them as they are for Fidesz-KNDP and PiS, which can be grouped together as being more critical of European integration. Qualitative accounts show that what sharply separates these two parties from their Czech and Slovak counterparts is that they both utilize national history when criticizing "Brussels", which leads to a powerful and grand narrative style of criticism. Various examples can be found of unfavorable linkages between "Brussels" and negatively perceived elements of national histories, such as comparisons with Soviet occupation, the threat of Western imperialism[29] or the stirring of anti-German sentiment.[30]

Table 3. Support for various aspects of European integration (scale: 1 – 7)

	EU_COHESION	EU_FOREIGN	EU_INTMARK	EU_BUDGETS	EU_ASYLUM	TOTAL
OL'aNO	5.07	3.67	5.08	3.67	2.46	19.95
ANO	5.91	3.04	5.79	2.78	1.89	19.41
Fidesz-KNDP	6.93	2.07	5.33	1.67	1.08	17.08
PiS	6.00	1.75	4.84	2.11	1.19	15.89

[29] Zosia Wanat and Jan Cienski, "Polexit: 3 Reasons Why Poland Will Quit the EU and 3 Why It Won't," POLITICO, November 30, 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/polexit-poland-veto-kaczynski-morawiecki-polexit-brexit-eu/.

[30] Tomasz Bielecki, "Kaczynski's PiS Pulls Poland to Periphery of European Union | DW | 16.11.2017," DW.COM, accessed February 27, 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/kaczynskis-pis-pulls-poland-to-periphery-of-european-union/a-41394415.

Further insights provided by party positions on other dimensions [31] of European integration paint a similar picture as the previous table. When all of the scores are summed up, OL'aNO and ANO emerge as most supportive of the integration processes on the whole, followed by Fidesz-KNDP, and lastly, PiS. The scores do not, however, indicate entirely opposite views between the four on any of the mentioned topics.

Support for conservatism

Table 4. Support for conservatism (scale: 0 – 10)

	GALTAN	GALTAN_SALIENCE	SOCIALLIFESTYLE
Fidesz-KNDP	9.20	9.57	9.27
PiS	9.14	8.67	8.70
OL'aNO	6.79	6.38	7.06
ANO	5.73	4.04	4.88

The so-called "GALTAN" variable depicts social and cultural values on a spectrum ranging from libertarian/postmaterialist on one end, to traditional/authoritarian values on the other end. Fidesz-KNDP and PiS cluster together as parties very near the latter extreme, both having a high relative salience of traditional topics in their public stance. OL'aNO's conservatism is not of the same

[31] EU_COHESION: position of the party leadership in 2019 on EU cohesion or regional policy.

EU_FOREIGN: position of the party leadership in 2019 on EU foreign and security policy.

EU_INTMARK: position of the party leadership in 2019 on the internal market.

EU_BUDGETS: position of the party leadership in 2019 on EU authority over economic and budgetary policy.

EU_ASYLUM: position of the party leadership in 2019 on EU authority over asylum policy.

magnitude, while ANO is only somewhat more to the right than the left. Scores on the "SOCIALLIFESTYLE" variable indicate opposition towards liberal policies [32] and demonstrate that the centrist ANO is more removed from the other three parties in these matters.

Anti-immigration views

Table 5. Positions on immigration and use of anti-Islam rhetoric (scale: 0 – 10)

	IMMIGRATE_POLICY	IMMIGRATE_SALIENCE	ANTI_ISLAM_RHETORIC
Fidesz-KNDP	9.93	10.00	8.93
PiS	9.05	7.67	6.84
ANO	8.59	6.92	5.46
OL'aNO	7.50	5.73	5.15

Whereas the analysis tended to detect two clusters of parties up to now, positions on immigration indicate moderate overall agreement between all parties. Rogers Brubaker describes the Central and Eastern European populist answer to the migrant crisis as having a unique nationalist style that contrasts with the Western civilizationist

[32] Concerning questions such as LGBT rights or gender equality, support for liberal values is greater in the Czech Republic than in other countries as shown in the next section.

type of response.[33] Brubaker argues that what distinguishes Western from Eastern populist actors is that, unlike the West, the East refers to Christianity as a sole marker of civilizational belonging and calls for a defense against liberal values. Some research, however, shows that his conclusions may be overly biased toward the situation in Hungary because the Czech populist responses to migration shared the very aforementioned Western qualities.[34] In general, we can see that Fidesz champions the immigration topic and has the strongest anti-Islam rhetoric, while OL'aNO was judged to be the farthest from such positions.

Religious principles in politics

Table 6. Position on the role of religious principles in politics (scale: 0 – 10)

	RELIGIOUS_PRINCIPLES
Fidesz-KNDP	9.43
PiS	9.24
OL'aNO	6.63
ANO	2.84

The parties differ most on whether religious principles should have a place in politics or not. As a country with low levels of religious belief and belonging[35], this issue is not in great demand in the Czech Republic. Even though ANO has been shown to be

[33] Rogers Brubaker, "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (June 21, 2017): 1191–1226, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700.

[34] Clarissa Tabosa, "Constructing Foreign Policy Vis-à-Vis the Migration Crisis: The Czech and Slovak Cases," *Czech Journal of International Relations* 55, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 5–23, https://doi.org/10.32422/mv.1687.

[35] This point is elaborated on in the next section.

oriented slightly more to the right than to the left, its program does not contain a Christian component. The party's most notable action related to religion during its current mandate was supporting a tax on church property restitutions in 2019, which was criticized for discriminating against churches.[36] OL'aNO, on the other hand, not only links Christianity with its program, the movement itself also consists of a Christian party, among others[37]. The Polish and Hungarian cases are more obvious and well-known, being the most vocal on the topics of a Christian Europe, re-Christianization, and Christian democracy.

Based on data on all four variables, it appears that the ruling parties of Hungary and Poland form a cluster that significantly differs from the constellation of Czech and Slovak parties.[38] ANO and OL'aNO are neither Euroenthusiast parties, nor are they pro-immigration or highly socially liberal. Yet their positions are milder and the force with which they advocate policies is less than that of PiS and Fidesz-KNDP. In matters concerning the role of religion in politics, the nonreligious Czech ANO proves to be vastly different from the other three ruling parties.

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[36] The Constitutional Court ultimately rejected the law. Source: Novinky, "Ústavní Soud Zrušil Zdanění Církevních Restitucí [The Constitutional Court rejects the taxation of church restitutions]," Novinky.cz, October 15, 2019, https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/zivak-us-restituce-40299925.

[37] Křesťan Dnes, "OĽaNO a KU se spojují. Matovič vyzval k obraně křesťanských hodnot, před 'fašistickými čižmami [OĽaNO and KU are merging. Matovic called for the defense of Christian values against fascist boots],'" *Křesťan dnes* (blog), October 22, 2019, https://www.krestandnes.cz/olano-a-ku-se-spojuji-matovic-vyzval-k-obrane-krestanskych-hodnot-pred-fasistickymi-cizmami/.

[38] Is it worthy to remark that the conclusion does not only apply to the currently ruling parties. The previous Czech and Slovak governments were center-left and based on current polling trends it is not foreseeable that a radical right-wing party will take power in either of the countries in the next parliamentary elections.

Citizens' attitudes: heterogeneity prevails

Surveying citizen's attitudes reveals the demand side of politics. Even though voter demand can be shaped top-down, the results shown in this section contextualize the endurance of current political options and consequently the ideas they represent. For this purpose, the most recent European Social Survey (ESS) data from 2018 is used.[39,40] Variables that can be best matched with those from the expert survey on political parties were selected. Although not ideal in every case, the use of ESS variables avoids mixing different samples and different survey periods. For the sake of brevity, only two variables are used for each of the "united V4" narrative components. The data displayed in tables shows quantitative scales with means as well as standard deviations in brackets below the means. For variables with quantitative scores, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) test is performed.[41] The test is suited to provide insights into statistical differences between groups, in this case, the four countries examined herein. To test the hypothesis of the division between the V4 and "the West" most directly, country means are aggregated into two groups.[42] The West is represented by the EU12 group which consists of all of the countries[43] that had acceded prior to the fifth enlargement wave, minus the UK (due to Brexit), as well as Greece and Luxemburg

[39] European Social Survey ERIC (ESS ERIC, "European Social Survey (ESS), Round 9 - 2018," 2019, https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018.

[40] Sampling bias is corrected by using the recommended and supplied *anweight* (analysis weight) variable.

[41] The Levene test is used to first test the homogeneity of variances. Since in all of the tests the variances were heterogeneous, the Welch test is used to determine the F value if there is a statistically significant difference between *all* of the groups. The conservative Tamhane T2 test is used to ascertain statistically significant differences between specific groups. The risk level was set at 5%.

[42] Normally this would be a questionable action because there is a heterogeneous set of actors in both cases, but the hypothesis being tested warrants it.

[43] Namely: AT, BE, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, IE, IT, NL, POR, SE.

which were not present in this round of ESS. The EU12 and V4 scores are calculated as simple means of country means [44] and as such are compared without inferential statistics.

Attitudes towards the European Union

Table 7. Attitudes towards European integration and the prospect of leaving the EU

	CZ	HU	PL	SK	EU12	V4
European unification gone too far or should go further **(0 -10; 0 = too far, 10 = go further)**	4.49 (2.60)	4.68 (2.61)	6.13 (2.62)	4.72 (2.96)	5.50	5.01
Would vote for country to remain member of the EU	66.0%	80.9%	86.6%	76.3%	81.5%	77.5%

Two relevant variables which survey attitudes towards the EU clearly reveal that citizens' viewpoints do not entirely reflect the positions taken by their ruling political parties. Czechs stand out as the biggest Eurosceptics. This finding holds true not only for the V4, but also in the context of the whole EU.[45] On the other hand, it is evident that Poles are the most supportive of the EU, which stands in contrast with their current government. Regarding attitudes towards further integration, only Polish citizens on average leaned more towards further integration, as opposed to the views that the

[44] Calculations based on raw data i.e., on all of the respondents, would mean that countries with bigger samples would skew the final average.

[45] As can be seen in various Eurobarometer surveys.

integration has gone too far or is currently at a satisfactory level.[46] They also stood out as most in favor of remaining in the EU, with a boisterous support of almost 87%.[47] Despite the strong similarity between the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary on attitudes towards integration, the population percentages that would vote to remain in the EU hint at different outlooks between these countries. The comparison between the EU12 and V4 groups points to a somewhat greater average Western enthusiasm towards further integration and remaining in the EU.

Conservatism

Table 8. General orientation towards European integration

	CZ	HU	PL	SK	EU12	V4
Gays and lesbians free to live life as they wish (1 – 5; 1 = agree strongly, 5 = disagree strongly)	2.37 (1.06)	3.10 (1.22)	2.64 (1.23)	2.88 (1.22)	1.71	2.75
Important to follow customs and traditions (1 – 6; 1 = very much like me, 6 = not like me at all)	2.62 (1.27)	2.82 (1.20)	2.31 (1.13)	2.58 (1.24)	2.82	2.58

[46] Tests indeed confirm this: a statistically significant difference is found only between Poles and the three other countries. Welch F= 133.51, $p < 0.05$.

[47] It should be noted that these ESS results show considerably greater optimism than a Spring 2019 Eurobarometer survey in which only 47% of Czechs supported staying in the EU, compared to 64% of Hungarians, 69% of Slovaks, and 76% of Poles. Source: European Commission, Brussels, "Eurobarometer 92.1 (2019)Eurobarometer 92.1 (2019): Expectations and Concerns of Connected and Automated Driving, Attitudes of Europeans towards Air Quality, and Undeclared Work in the European Union: Expectations and Concerns of Connected and Automated Driving, Attitudes of Europeans towards Air Quality, and Undeclared Work in the European Union" (GESIS Data Archive, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13541.

Concerning liberal vs. conservative values, Czechs tend to present themselves as the most liberal of the V4 group in multiple studies on various topics and are the closest to Western countries in that regard. ESS data confirms this, at least in their support for gays and lesbians being free to live their life as they wish.[48] Not even the Czechs are, however, very close to the EU12 average. Also, Czech inclinations towards liberal values diminish when surveyed on customs and traditions; interestingly, the Hungarians are the least likely to consider following traditions as important in life.[49] On the whole, the citizens of the V4 appear more conservative and somewhat more traditionalist than in the EU12. Two recent reports published by the Pew Research Center provide deeper insights by investigating additional indices of conservatism and traditionalism.[50]

Attitudes towards immigration

Table 9. Attitudes towards immigrants

	CZ	HU	PL	SK	EU12	V4
Allow many/few immigrants of different race (1 – 4; 1 = allow many to come and live here, 2 = allow some, 3 = allow a few, 4 = allow none)	3.20 (0.81)	3.23 (0.77)	2.85 (0.85)	3.01 (0.88)	2.24	3.07

[48] Welch F=61.02, p < 0.05. Statistically significant difference: between all of the countries.

[49] Welch F=48.83, p < 0.05. Statistically significant difference: between all of the countries except CZ and SK.

[50] Wike, Richard, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, Alexandra Castillo, and Christine Huang. "European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism," *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog), October 15, 2019. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/ ; Alan Cooperman et al., "Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), October 29, 2018, https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/.

Country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants (0 – 10; 0 = undermined, 10 = enriched)	3.65 (2.23)	3.92 (2.39)	5.69 (2.43)	3.91 (2.52)	6.04	4.29

On questions of migration respondents from the V4 area, on average, provide sharply different answers than the citizens of EU12 countries. All of the countries, with the exception of Poland, view the idea of allowing immigrants of a different race as unfavorable.[51] Responses are similar when asked to what extent immigrants endanger the citizens' respective country's cultural life.[52] Curiously, the Poles differ significantly from the other V4 citizens in that they have more lax views on immigration, especially concerning a potential cultural threat.

Religiosity

Table 10. Religiosity and church attendance

	CZ	HU	PL	SK	EU12	V4
How religious are you (0 – 10; 0 = not at all, 10 – very)	2.40 (2.81)	3.69 (2.93)	6.09 (2.67)	5.66 (3.17)	4.47	4.46
How often attend religious services apart from special occasions (1 – 7; 1 = often, 7 = never)	6.19 (1.25)	5.75 (1.36)	4.02 (1.29)	4.66 (1.73)	5.62	5.16

[51] Welch F=76.80, $p < 0.05$. Statistically significant difference: between all of the countries except HU and CZ.

[52] Welch F=258.99, $p < 0.05$. Statistically significant difference: only between Poland compared with all of the other three countries.

Religiosity is yet another strong point of divergence.[53] The Czech Republic again stands out. The share of self-identified Christians among Czech citizens has been declining after a short-lived post-1990 resurgence, dropping to 12.6% in the 2011 census.[54] Czech irreligiosity is a long-evolving product of national history and national identity.[55] Because these strong factors have made not-belonging to any denomination almost a norm, the prospect of re-Christianization in the country is not likely. Likewise, Hungarians do not demonstrate strong religiosity. In contrast, Poland and Slovakia both lean towards the upper end of the scale, i.e., their citizens are the most religious in the V4 group. Unfortunately, the ESS dataset does not contain questions about the role of religion in politics, however, a variable that examines church attendance is used as a proxy of secularization. This variable further distinguishes the Slovaks and Poles, showing them to be more religious in total.[56] Even though the average religiosity of the V4 is comparable to that of the EU12, church-going is more frequent in the V4.

In sum, citizens' attitudes on features comprising a "united V4" are not homogenous between countries. The more simplistic binary conclusion reached at the level of political parties cannot be replicated here and the views of citizens within the V4 on selected issues do not entirely match the positions of their ruling parties.

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[53] Welch F=475.19, $p < 0.05$. Statistically significant difference: between all of the countries

[54] Czech Statistical Office, "*Czech Demographic Handbook - 2016*," Prague: Czech Statistical Office, 2017, Accessed 26 February 2021, https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/czech-demographic-handbook-2016.

[55] Dana Hamplová and Zdeněk R. Nešpor, "Invisible Religion in a 'Non-Believing' Country: The Case of the Czech Republic," *Social Compass* 56, no. 4 (December 2009): 581–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768609345975.

[56] Welch F=863.82, $p < 0.05$. Statistically significant difference: between all of the countries.

Conclusion

The identity of the Visegrád Group still appears to be in flux insofar as there is a project of creating an ideologically united front that has not yet been fully accomplished. The idea of a united front revolves around four commonalities: sovereignism opposed to deeper political European integration, conservatism, anti-immigrant attitudes, and the importance of religion in politics. Empirical data estimating the positions and attitudes of the ruling political parties and citizens in the V4 countries shows that postulating unity in the group does have some merit. Certain contextual differences in interpretations notwithstanding, both the parties and the citizens of V4 are united in their rejection of immigrants they see as culturally incompatible. It is also true that the region is on average still less culturally liberal and more traditionalist when compared to Western countries. Moreover, all of the ruling parties except the Czech ANO have a conservative profile. The issues of attitudes towards the EU and the role of religion in politics, however, demonstrate more contention and heterogeneity between the countries. If we are simply looking to challenge the idea of a common V4 ideology, the Czech Republic alone serves as a so-called deviant case that upends the impression of cohesion. This divergence is most obvious considering Czech irreligiosity, a phenomenon not likely to be reversed. Ultimately, the V4 group can be delineated politically into two blocs: the more conservative and Eurosceptic Hungary and Poland, and the more moderate and less Eurosceptic Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Recent conflicts related to the Next Generation EU recovery plan and the rule of law nicely confirm this chasm. Nonetheless, the trend discovered at the level of political parties does not hold true for public attitudes. Specifically, Czechs are the most Eurosceptic, while Polish citizens are the biggest Eurooptimists and have more moderate views on immigration.

This paper has sought to show that simplistic depictions of the Visegrád Group that ignore individual member perspectives and national contexts are unwise. It also addresses the common omission of the citizens' perspective when discussing how

particular countries are oriented towards certain issues. Future multifaceted research would do well to include the perspectives and actions of various types of social actors and to analyze change over time. Lastly, this paper begs the question why more objections to the "united V4" narrative have not been uttered. Will the differences demonstrated in this paper result in disagreement and perhaps disintegration within the group? Future outcomes will definitely depend to a great extent on the series of events within member countries and changes in power that occur (or do not occur) in them. The hitherto observed lack of objection to the "united V4 narrative" points towards the conclusion that the questions of identity and ideology explored in this paper are but one facet of the existence of entities such as the Visegrád Group. Mutual interests of the countries and the path-dependence resulting from choices already made at the group level might be just as important.

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