DOI: 10.24193/OJMNE.2024.45.05

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Ákos HOLÁNYI
Junior Research Fellow, HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences
PhD Student, Ludovika University of Public Service
holanyi.akos@tk.hun-ren.hu

Abstract: *The paper systematically reviews ten years of academic literature published from 2014 to 2023 and indexed in the Scopus database to establish the current state-of-the-art on how Central European regional groups operate. The review includes 52 publications on six regional cooperation formats: the Central European Defence Cooperation, the Slavkov/Austerlitz Triangle, the Salzburg Forum, the Three Seas Initiative, the Visegrád Group and the Bucharest Nine. The paper finds that regional cooperation research is very concentrated on selected aspects of Visegrád cooperation and follows poor methodological reporting practices. The majority of studies analyse the V4 in relation to migration and foreign policy issues, whereas research on cooperation dynamics in other policy areas and within other active regional groups is marginal. After identifying promising future research directions, the paper calls for greater methodological and topical diversity in Central European regional cooperation research.*

Keywords: regional cooperation, minilateralism, Central Europe, Visegrád Group, Three Seas Initiative

1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of regional cooperation groups has increased globally. Amidst a growing number of crises and transnational challenges, states have increasingly turned to minilateral formats that promise to better address issues they cannot properly solve alone. These formations offer flexibility and the pooling of resources without tying states to long-term commitments that come with institutionalised multilateralism (Kirch, 2021). In Europe alone, the past decade has seen several new ad hoc and active regional cooperation groups uniting countries to work together on sectorial policies or solve concrete problems.

In recent years, Europe has faced numerous crises that have called for new solutions and better cooperation between countries. The emergence of a new multipolar world order, the

almost permanent crises of the European Union (EU), and the revisionist politics and warmongering of Russia have been major challenges which have resulted in calls and action for more EU integration and/or flexible minilateral responses. Central Europe, in particular, has turned to regional cooperation to address these challenges by creating new (Bucharest Nine, Slavkov Triangle, Three Seas Initiative) and reinvigorating old regional formats (Visegrád Group).

Against this backdrop, the present paper aims to systematically review a decade's worth of international peer-reviewed academic publications on Central European regional cooperation to take stock of what we know about how regional groups operate. On which policy areas have they been active? How did they achieve results? What role do they play in the individual strategies of Central European states? What impact have the recent crises had on how states approach regional cooperation in Central Europe?

To answer these questions, this paper reviews academic articles, books, and book chapters published between 2014 and 2023 and indexed in the Scopus database. It focuses on six new and established regional groups: the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC), the Slavkov/Austerlitz Triangle (S3), the Salzburg Forum, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), the Visegrád Group (V4), and the Bucharest Nine (B9). Previous work on the topic either only dealt with the V4 in the context of other European regional groups (Kirch, 2021; Molnár, 2021b) or reviewed Central European regional groups without a defined selection criterion (Cabada, 2018). Moreover, since the publication of the latter review, new groups have formed, and old ones have changed course, which calls for new stock-taking. Building on Cabada's (2018) precedent and Cooper and Fabbrini's (2021) analysis of regional groups, this review offers a twofold contribution to the literature. On the one hand, it appraises the methods and types of data used in this field and recommends new methodological approaches to diversify the data and methods employed by regional cooperation scholars. On the other hand, it provides a state-of-the-art summary of the functioning of Central European regional groups and identifies major research gaps for future study.

The paper argues that contemporary regional cooperation research has not been able to comprehensively map and evaluate how established regional groups mediate the interactions of

Central European states and facilitate the emergence of common positions and approaches to amplify participants' voices in international affairs. Although research has identified some key features of the Visegrád Group by analysing their behaviour during the migration crisis and on foreign policy issues, it is yet to examine how different policy fields and levels of cooperation shape countries' relationships and ability to work together. Given the recent abundance of regional cooperation formats that are engaged in a range of policy issues, the nearly singular academic focus on the V4, migration, and foreign policy hinders our ability to understand international political dynamics in Central Europe properly.The article develops as follows. First, I introduce contemporary efforts to understand and categorise European regional groups, followed by a short description of each reviewed group. Second, I present my methodology based on the PRISMA 2020 principles (Page et al., 2021). Third, I evaluate the corpus methodologically, highlighting recurring failures in reporting on data and methods. Then, I establish the state-of-the-art on Central European cooperation, highlighting significant gaps in our knowledge. I conclude by recommending some future areas of research and ways to improve methodological diversity and transparency in the field.

2. Regional cooperation in (Central Europe): the rise of minilateralism

Minilateralism has been on the rise in international politics. Naím (2009, p. 137) defined minilateralism as a more targeted approach to multilateralism in which we '…bring to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem, whether trade or aid.' His remarks were followed by many policy-focused contributions to improving multilateral cooperation and the practicality of global governance (Molnár, 2021a).

In the European context, this new debate has reinvigorated earlier scholarship on regional cooperation conducted under the concept of subregionalism. Most of these contributions are case studies focusing on a single group, while some are comparative studies between two or three groupings. Taking note of the ever-increasing number of European regional groups, some recent papers have attempted to understand this phenomenon more generally (Lang and von Ondarza, 2018; Cooper and Fabbrini, 2021).

Lang and von Ondarza (2018, p. 2) adopt the minilateral perspective, defining minilateral groups in the context of the EU as 'associations of three or more EU countries that either exchange views on European policy issues at government level with a certain degree of continuity and agree on common positions, or implement cooperation project.' They also add that such formats usually have some limited institutional substructure or well-established coordination and consultation mechanisms. In contrast, Cooper and Fabbrini (2021) conceptualise these groups as intra-EU bottom-up regional groups (BUGRs) which have five common characteristics: (1) institutionalisation defined as having some form of regularly reproduced manifestation (e.g., repeated meetings of ministers); (2) being active, although there may be some gaps in their recent activity; (3) having only EU member states as participating countries; (4) institutional separation from the EU; and (5) geographic proximity.

Despite their similar approach, the two different definitions led to alternate counts of the number of regional groups in the EU. Lang and von Ondarza (2018) differentiate between 14 minilateral groups, whereas Cooper and Fabbrini (2021) identify 13 BUGRs. They only agree on six groups: the Baltic Assembly, Benelux, the Nordic-Baltic Eight, the Three Seas Initiative, the V4, and the Weimar Triangle. Although some differences can be attributed to the different definitions (e.g., not including two-country formats such as the Franco-German Cooperation), this also demonstrates the subjectivity of what counts as an active group or cooperating on European policy issues.

In the Central European context, Cooper and Fabbrini (2021) provide a more exhaustive list of cooperation formats than Lang and von Ondarza (2018); thus, this review uses their list as its starting point. The two authors identify five fully or partially Central European BUGRs: the CEDC, the Salzburg Forum, the S3, the 3SI, and the V4. However, recent events warrant a revision of this list. The Bucharest Nine, created by EU member states on NATO's Eastern flank, is not part of Cooper and Fabbrini's (2021) original collection despite formally satisfying all inclusion criteria. This is presumably because the format was created as an intra-NATO regional group rather than an intra-EU one. However, as the Russia–Ukraine War has increased the relevance of defence and the Eastern neighbourhood in EU decision-making, the Bucharest Nine group has also become relevant in the EU.

In general, it has been noted that established regional groups can increase the political weight of states by facilitating building coalitions (Wivel, 2021) or improving status under a more recognisable brand (Szalai and Garai, 2024). This is especially important for small states, which are many in Central Europe. Regional groups may also improve the domestic legitimacy of policies they adopt as a common position, and they can be an important source of policy idea creation and implementation (Lang and von Ondarza, 2018).

Cooper and Fabbrini (2021) distinguish between four ideal-typical functions of BUGRs, which may serve as a useful starting point for the upcoming analysis. First, they argue that BUGRs may act as integration vanguards by promoting further EU integration. A classic example of this function is the Benelux group of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, which often preceded forms of institutional cooperation later adopted by the EU. Second, BUGRs may serve as functional cooperators, that is, as fora whose purpose is to foster internal cooperation among participating countries. This is their most frequent use. Their focus can be on various issues, from foreign policy to energy and tourism. Third, they may also function as policy coordinators, where members of the BUGR coordinate their positions to advance their interests in EU policy-making more successfully. A subcategory of this function is the fourth type, resistance cell. Its purpose is to oppose EU norms and efforts.

2.1. Visegrád Group

The Visegrád Group is the oldest and most institutionalised Central European BUGR, which was created in 1991 as a political cooperation between Czechoslovakia (Czechia and Slovakia since 1993), Hungary, and Poland to facilitate signatories' democratic transition and Euro-Atlantic integration. The founding declaration envisioned cooperation across multiple policy areas (economic, communication, ecology, culture, national minorities, local self-governments) via intergovernmental meetings at various levels (Visegrad Group, 1991). The structure of V4 has been clarified and modified in 1999 and 2004, although its intergovernmental nature has not changed. It currently has three main mechanisms: parliamentary cooperation, meetings of heads of state, and, most importantly, multi-layered government cooperation. The latter consists of a rotating presidency, meetings of prime ministers and ministers, regular

consultations of V4 national coordinators and permanent representations to international organisations (Visegrad Group, 2004). It has also had the International Visegrad Fund since 2000 as the only formally institutionalised aspect of the cooperation.

2.2. Salzburg Forum

The Salzburg Forum was created in 2001 as a home affairs cooperation forum of Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, focusing on five areas: police cooperation, border control, people trafficking, asylum, and consultation on relevant EU matters (Salzburg Forum, 2001). Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania are now also members. Originally chaired by Austria as the initiator of cooperation, the Forum adopted a six-month rotating presidency system in 2004 (Salzburg Forum, 2003), later replaced by an 18-month trio presidency system (Salzburg Forum, 2010). In 2006, the Forum concretised its operational strategy, linking membership to signing the EU Accession Treaty and creating an 'external dimension' that allowed non-member countries to participate in some of its activities (Salzburg Forum, 2006). The Forum's work currently comprises at least two ministerial meetings a year, police chiefs, directors-general for migration, and Salzburg Forum coordinators, as well as expert meetings to exchange information and best practices. The Salzburg Forum Agenda 2030 named stronger cooperation on the EU level as its most important objective (Salzburg Forum, 2021).

2.3. Central European Defence Cooperation

The Central European Defence Cooperation was launched in 2010 by Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia to coordinate security policy amongst the participating countries. Poland also joined as an observer. The first meeting of defence ministers was held in 2012, with the groundwork laid in a series of informal meetings between defence policy directors and experts in the previous year (Kurowska and Németh, 2013). In 2016, it was decided that the cooperation would have three elements: (1) political oversight via annual ministerial meetings, (2) a steering element for which defence policy directors are responsible, meeting twice a year, and (3) national experts meet as needed at the working level. The CEDC

also has an annual rotating presidency system and regular meetings of chiefs of defence (CEDC, 2016).

2.4. Slavkov Triangle

The Slavkov Triangle was created in 2015 by the social democratic governments of Austria, Czechia, and Slovakia to work together on issues where V4 and V4+ political cooperation became difficult due to the radically populist and nationalist policies of Hungary and Poland in some areas (Kałan, 2015). The group has a rotating presidency, regular meetings of ministers and heads of government, and an annual work plan coordinated by state secretaries of the foreign ministries. The S3 works on a range of issues, such as EU affairs, energy, digital transformation, transportation, and development (MZV SR, 2024).

2.5. Bucharest Nine

The Bucharest Nine (B9) or Bucharest Format was also formed in 2015 on the initiative of the presidents of Romania and Poland in response to Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine. Its members are Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. The B9 consists of annual summits of presidents and meetings of foreign and defence ministers, although ministerial meetings do not occur yearly. Similarly to the Slavkov Triangle, it is a very weakly institutionalised BUGR with no organisational structure (e.g., the rotating presidency), strategy or action plan, or website.

2.6. Three Seas Initiative

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) was created in 2016 on the initiative of Croatia and Poland. It was created as an informal platform to facilitate the realisation of strategic cross-border and macro-regional projects in energy, transportation, digital communication and the economy (Three Seas Initiative, 2016). It comprises twelve EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The initiative has begun to develop rapidly by establishing the annual 3 Seas Business Forum in 2017

(Three Seas Initiative, 2017), the 3SI Network of Chambers of Commerce, and the Three Seas Investment Fund (Three Seas Initiative, 2018). The 3SI has annual high-level meetings of heads of state with other high-level officials from the United States, Germany, and the European Commission regularly participating. Although no formal rotating presidency exists, the annual presidential summit and the concurrent business forum are hosted in a different participating state each year. Romania is the only country that has organised two summits, in 2018 and 2023.

3. Methodology

The study follows the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines for writing systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA 2020 is a comprehensive checklist of reporting items created to ensure that reviews are transparent about what and why is included and how it was evaluated. Originally developed in 2009 and updated in 2020, PRISMA has become the industry standard in the medical sciences, and it has also been applied in the natural and social sciences.

This systematic review includes academic publications indexed in the Scopus database published between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2023. The database was searched on two occasions, on 29 September 2023 and on 3 January 2024, for items published between 2014–2022 and 2023, respectively. Table 1 contains all search terms used to scan for relevant publications in the title, abstract or keywords sections. Each search was limited to works in the social sciences, and Scopus was explicitly told not to search content under other subject areas. The appendices contain an example of the search queries used.

Table 1: Applied search terms and their results in Scopus (2014–2023)

Search term	Results
“Central Europe*” W/3 cooperation	12
“Eastern Europe*” W/3 cooperation	23
“Central and Eastern Europe*” W/3 cooperation	22
“East-Central Europe*” W/3 cooperation	1
“Central-Eastern Europe” W/3 cooperation	1

“Central European Defen?e Cooperation”	3
“Salzburg Forum”	2
(“Slavkov”) OR (“Austerlitz”)	9
(“Three Seas Initiative”) OR (“Intermarium”) OR (“3SI”)	28
(“Bucharest Nine”) OR (“Bucharest Format”) OR (“B9”)	5
(“V4”) OR (“Visegr?d”)	282

The initial search yielded 386 results, which were filtered by reading their abstracts or introductions (in the case of book chapters without an abstract). The filtering of initial results was done in the following steps:

1. Removal of duplicates. After filtering duplicates out, 344 papers remained.

2. Removal of edited volumes. In the case of edited volumes, only the separately indexed chapters were retained. After step 2, 334 papers remained.

3. Removal of papers that only refer to other regional groups. As the search terms included expressions not specific to the six chosen regional groups, the results included papers on non-European BUGRs (e.g., China-CEEC format) and bilateral cooperation. Moreover, some keywords could also refer to things other than one of the chosen regional groups, such as geographical location (e.g., Austerlitz, Visegrad) or software (e.g., V4). After filtering these out, 251 papers remained.

4. Removal of papers that do not discuss any of the six groups in a substantive sense. Several papers only referred to BUGRs as geographical descriptors of the countries that make them up (e.g., Visegrád countries, Intermarium region). These papers are comparative analyses of Central European (and other) countries, not studies on the functioning of BUGRs. Other papers only refer to selected BUGRs in passing and discuss other phenomena. Borderline cases were kept.

After the four-step filtering process, 54 papers remained out of the 386. Two papers could not be obtained, which reduced the final number to 52 items. It is 13% of the original corpus, which aligns with general practice (e.g., Xiao and Watson, 2019). Forty-eight papers were written in English, two in French and one in Polish and Russian. The Polish and Russian papers were translated into English using the free version of DeepL.

4. How has Central European cooperation been studied?

This section overviews the research design and reporting features of the corpus (Table 2.) The vast majority of papers contain concrete statements about the document. Most papers formulated a research objective or posed one or more research question(s) to orient readers about the publication's content. Sixteen publications did both, whereas 11 did none of them. The use of hypotheses and the identification of research gaps were less common, with only eight and six papers using either of the two, respectively. I also found that only one paper uses all four methods of defining purpose (Kirch, 2021), and three others contain a definition of the research objective, question(s), and hypotheses (Wieclawski, 2016; Bauerová, 2018b; Krzymowski, 2021). In contrast, there were 11 publications without explicit indication of what they were trying to achieve or why they exist (Grodzki, 2016; Gura and Rouet, 2017; Natanek, 2017; Strážay, 2017; Cabada and Waisová, 2018; Klemeshev and Vorozheina, 2018; Calheiros, 2019; Ušiak, 2020; Glied and Zamęcki, 2021; Kugiel, 2021; Bartoszewicz, 2023). One of these papers is a special issue introduction (Cabada and Waisová, 2018), so it has a purpose unlike the other three items.

Moreover, although half of the reviewed papers disclose information about their data and/or methods, only nine publications adhere to the strictest standards of methodological rigour and transparency by providing sufficient details about their methodology (Duszczyk, Podgórska and Pszczółkowska, 2020; Koß and Séville, 2020; Bedea and Osei Kwadwo, 2021; Braun, 2021; Glied and Zamęcki, 2021; Kirch, 2021; Osička et al., 2021; Kaniok, Havlík and Zapletalová, 2022; Lehoczki, 2022). These are transparent about their data sources, provide details about the time and method of data collection (if they use their own data), and name and justify their choice of analytical method. On the other end of the spectrum are half of the reviewed publications, which provide no details about their methodology, and five additional items, where authors

declare that they followed a qualitative or mixed methods research design without actually disclosing what they did to reach their conclusions. Thus, 31 papers (60%) have insufficient methodological details to ascertain the validity of their content, which casts doubt on the soundness of our collective knowledge about the workings of Central European regional groups.

Table 2: A research design overview of the reviewed corpus

Characteristic	No. of docs	% of docs
Indicator of purpose		
research gap	6	12%
objective	28	54%
research question	28	54%
hypothesis	8	15%
Methodology type		
quantitative	2	4%
qualitative	24	46%
mixed	5	10%
unknown	21	40%
Description of methodology	26	50%

As Table 2 shows, the qualitative approach is the most popular methodological design in regional cooperation research. The analysis of documents is the most popular method in the field, as ten publications employ qualitative content analysis (Klemenčič, 2016; Schmidt, 2016, 2020; Griessler, 2018; Hlaváčková, 2020; Koß and Séville, 2020; Polegkyi, 2020; Orzelska-Staczek and Bajda, 2021; Osička et al., 2021; Kaniok, Havlík and Zapletalová, 2022), three use discourse analysis (Merheim-Eyre, 2017; Bedea and Osei Kwadwo, 2021; Glied and Zamęcki, 2021), and one-one paper chose historical document analysis (Duszczyk, Podgórska and Pszczółkowska,

2020) and narrative analysis (Braun, 2021). A further three papers use an undisclosed type of document analysis (Neuman, 2017; Kirch, 2021; Radovici and Danko, 2023). They analysed political statements and policy documents produced by governments and regional groups, with a one-on-one study using parliamentary speeches, court rulings, voting records and media reports to complement other data sources. The comparative method was also used by multiple papers, either to compare the functioning of regional groups to another (Klemenčič, 2016; Kirch, 2021; Lehoczki, 2022) or to highlight how members of a regional group use cooperation to further their foreign policy agenda (Ušiak 2018; Ušiak et al. 2020). Interviews were used five times as a method and source of data, but always in conjunction with other methods (Onderco, 2014; Neuman, 2017; Kirch, 2021; Orzelska-Staczek and Bajda, 2021; Kaniok, Havlík and Zapletalová, 2022). Participant observation was used once (Krzymowski, 2021).

Quantitative methods were disclosed in six studies. Five papers employed basic statistical analysis using either trade (Schmidt, 2016, 2020; Döring, 2019), migration (Koß and Séville, 2020), and demographic indicators (Duszczyk, Podgórska and Pszczółkowska, 2020). Finally, two papers ran a quantitative content analysis on political statements (Döring, 2019; Koß and Séville, 2020).

5. What do we know about Central European cooperation?

5.1. Visegrád Group

Most research has been conducted on the Visegrád Group, with 42 papers (81%) dealing fully or partially with it. The earliest paper in the corpus deals with the V4's voting behaviour in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (Onderco, 2014). It shows that V4 countries do not formally coordinate their positions in the UNGA and are more likely to agree with Russia than the United States. However, the gap significantly narrowed after 1990.

Two papers analyse the group's position within the EU on the group's 25th anniversary (Schmidt, 2016; Wieclawski, 2016). On the one hand, Schmidt (2016) argued that the Visegrád Group had been important in the European Union. She noted that despite some challenges in accepting and efficiently using the established institutional framework of the EU, the V4 had given its four participating countries a better geopolitical position and benefits than other post-

socialist countries in the region had enjoyed. In contrast, Wieclawski (2016) posited that the East-Central European region was advancing towards disintegration. He based his arguments on the weak coordination of policy positions between V4 countries, which impeded the group from acting as an efficient unified platform in EU negotiations. Although the group successfully defended its economic interests in EU budget negotiations, it failed to act in unison on other key issues, such as EU institutional reforms in the 2000s and the Ukraine crisis in the 2010s. In sum, research suggests that until the 2015-2016 migration crisis, the Visegrád Group made its members more successful than the regional average. Still, they did not reach the efficiency of other European regional groups.

However, despite some sceptical voices (Wieclawski, 2016), the migration crisis seemed to have been a turning point for the group. Authors have noted that the V4 emerged as a collective actor on migration policy, pushing for stronger controls of the EU's external borders, defending the internal freedom of movement of the Schengen zone and warning against religious and cultural troubles should a large number of refugees be permitted to stay (Glied and Zamęcki, 2021). Unified on migration, the Visegrád Group successfully opposed the mandatory migrant relocation quotas, changing European public opinion and forcing the European Commission to abandon the mandatory scheme in favour of a voluntary one (Duszczyk, Podgórska and Pszczółkowska, 2020). Their success served as a catalyst that transformed the V4 from passively complying with Western European ideas into a proper regional actor with their own ideas (Bedea and Osei Kwadwo, 2021).

How did this unity come about, and how does it function? Koß and Séville (2020) argue that the emergence of the unified position of Visegrád countries on migration could not be fully explained by either intergovernmentalism or post-functionalism. Intergovernmentalism did not apply fully because the politicised identity was a key factor of cooperation. In contrast, post-functionalism did not apply fully either, as the main actors of politicisation were governments who focused primarily on economic issues instead of identarian ones. As such, the Visegrád Group after 2015 can be viewed as an example of politicised transnationalism where politicisation is used to achieve transnational objectives (e.g., maintenance of freedom of movement).

On the level of political practice, the Visegrád Group functions as a 'political tool.' Cooperation occurs mostly at the highest political level via consultations and joint statements in which they reactively discuss proposals already presented by the European Commission (Kirch, 2021). Bauerová (2018a) argued that when it forms a common position, the Visegrád Group functions on two levels. On the one hand, V4 countries identify their shared interests and objectives as a group. Agreed on the prime ministerial level, they generally maintain their unity during European negotiations, as was shown by most European Council meetings during the migration crisis. On the other hand, they implement their joint position individually on the state level. According to her, although V4 states employed similar discursive strategies to communicate their opposition to refugee acceptance, they introduced different national policies to combat migration. They favoured different alternatives at the EU level. These alternatives concurred with the joint ideological position but represented different degrees of divergence from the mainstream European position.

However, Kaniok et al. (2022) argued that because they execute policies individually at the state level, V4 countries fall short of devising and executing any constructive plan that could be harmonised, even in the foreseeable future. In this context, the V4 is a protective barrier, legitimising and safeguarding individualistic national aspirations and stances. The inadequate presence of efficient internal frameworks, limited standardisation, and substantial divergence among its constituents hinder and will continue to impede the V4 from assuming a significant role in the EU.

Kirch (2021) argues in a similar wane. Although the joint opposition to EU relocation quotas was the first time when the group properly coordinated a position, which then also had an impact on the broader EU, it only managed to act as a unified' resistance cell' according to the terminology of Cooper and Fabbrini (2021). Even though the intensity and regularity of consultations significantly increased during the crisis, the V4 failed to develop joint alternatives to the relocation mechanism to tackle the internal dimension of the EU migration crisis. During Council negotiations, they presented separate, albeit similar, national positions and comments on European Council conclusions. Instead, they focused on its external dimension, such as border control and addressing root causes in third countries (Kirch, 2021).

The V4 success on migration revitalised the group's foreign policy ambitions. Following their successful EU integration, the V4 countries had already been marketing themselves as successful models of post-socialist transition that should be models for Eastern European and Balkan countries. This manifested in strong support for the EU's Eastern Partnership programme and European Neighbourhood Policy (Cabada and Waisová, 2018; Ušiak, 2018), as well as advocating for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans for whom they see themselves as role models (Griessler, 2018).

The V4 deepened ties with non-EU countries in Central and Eastern Europe through visa liberalisation. To achieve this objective, they adopted a normative agenda that departed from their exclusionist Fortress Europe approach, which they had taken during the migration crisis. Instead, they approached the issue more inclusively and normatively, acknowledging the transformative influence of cross-border mobility in various domains, such as the protection of minority rights, the advancement of democratic governance, and the promotion of economic cooperation (Merheim-Eyre, 2017). They also increased economic support towards the Western Balkans and spearheaded several initiatives to increase their interconnectedness with Central Europe. Although the intensity of collective action regarding the Western Balkans showed a high degree of volatility in the 2019-2023 V4 presidency cycle, the development of the region was a constant priority (Radovici and Danko, 2023).

Beyond strengthening ties with existing partners outside the EU, the V4 also opened up towards regions outside of Europe. For example, the V4 grew more interested in engaging with countries on Europe-bound international migration routes, such as the countries of the Mashriq region. However, development cooperation is difficult because Visegrád countries lack specialised knowledge about these regions. The group also needs a clear strategy for its external relations (Döring, 2019).

Nevertheless, the most significant of the V4's external action was its alternative vision for the West and the EU (Cabada and Waisová, 2018), which has been conceptualised as illiberal revisionism (Kazharski, 2020). This notion denotes an internal challenge to Western liberal internationalism that is enabled by the economic and military security provided by institutions of the criticised liberal order, the EU and NATO, respectively. Visegrád's post-liberalism

emerges not as ‘a new order, but rather [as] disorder that arises from the crises of the previous liberal one. The crises include both exogenous shocks (e.g., the rise of the so-called rest, a generic international relations term for non-Western great powers such as China, Russia, or India and their alternative developmental models that may not necessarily be built around liberal democracy or market capitalism) and endogenous erosion, such as the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and, among other things, the rise of illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe’ (Kazharski, 2020, p. 251).

Comparative research showed that the Visegrád Group is not the only regional group critical to the established liberal order. Lehoczki’s (2022) research on the Mercosur and the V4 highlighted how second-wave regional groups on the semi-periphery of the Western core have attempted to improve their positions by improving ties with emerging great powers such as China, as well as by forming a unified front when opposing liberal initiatives from the core.

However, the findings on the V4’s disruptiveness in the EU are all rooted at least partially in their handling of the migration crisis, which can be considered an exception rather than the rule. As Kaniok et al. (2022) demonstrated with the examples of the Brexit negotiations and the debate on the future of the EU, the migration crisis has been the only high-profile case when the Visegrád Group acted together in opposition to the Western mainstream. During the Brexit process, they fell in line with the rest of the Union, whereas they only voiced alternative conceptions of the future of the EU as individual countries; their positions were not harmonised.

After the migration crisis, the V4 group achieved few successes within the EU. Environmental policy is one policy area where cooperation proved to be difficult. Central European countries’ divergent physical and political geography hinders effective V4 cooperation because many of their shared concerns go beyond the region and require broader collaboration to address (Waisová, 2018).

Another field where cooperation achieved limited success was energy policy because the V4 remained largely reactive and uncoordinated. Although all four countries have a strong interest in energy security and favour technological neutrality and nuclear energy, they have been unable to find concrete issues to formulate joint policy proposals (Osička et al., 2021). Bauerová and Vošta (2020) identified two factors hindering common policy position formation. First, the

Polish coastline and the Czech and Polish coal reserves mean that Czechia and Poland have quite different options to secure their energy needs than Hungary and Slovakia. Second, V4 countries are divided on how to relate to Russia, the region's traditional chief energy provider. While Hungary developed a strong working relationship with Russia, the other Visegrád countries, mostly Poland, had a more reserved and critical attitude towards it. Thus, V4 energy cooperation has been rather unsuccessful for geographical and political reasons.

Their different political relationships with Russia also hindered the defence cooperation of Visegrád countries. Even though V4 countries were united in symbolic support for Ukraine after the illegal occupation of Crimea by Russia, they were not united on the severity of desired sanctions to punish Russia for its transgression. Moreover, although the creation of the V4 EU Battlegroup opened up the possibility of joint deployments (Ušiak, 2018), this is yet to be realised in practice. In fact, V4 countries stopped using the 'show-the-flag' strategy in the 2010s and participated in fewer international missions than before (Hlaváčková, 2020).

However, EU commercial policy negotiations show that when V4 countries act proactively and talk with one voice, they can achieve a positive result. For instance, the 'Visegrad soft power' amplified the national concerns of Visegrad governments at the EU level of international investment negotiations (Cristani, 2021).

Despite the mixed picture of V4's success, the regional group has been important in advancing the national interests of its member states. Studies from the Czech perspective highlight that the Visegrád Group is a core platform for national interest advocacy where cooperation is based on equality, mutuality, flexibility, and informal structures (Strnad, 2019). As such, the V4 is the first group sought out by its members to form a coalition at the EU level, playing a key role in advancing national interests even during the EU Council Presidency (Neuman, 2017).

5.2. Three Seas Initiative

In contrast to the Visegrád Group, research on the 3SI makes up only a quarter of reviewed papers. It also differs from the V4 in that it defines itself as a functional regional group focusing on infrastructure development instead of coordination within the EU. Research has shown how

the development of the initiative was driven by Russian revisionism in Europe, motivating several CEE countries to seek alternative energy supplies (Górka, 2018; Pricopiuc, 2023). Its activities mostly focus on completing large cross-regional projects (Lehoczki, 2022), although there are plans to use the group as a political instrument as well (Zięba, 2023).

The 3SI is rooted in the Polish geopolitical concept of 'Intermarium.' It denotes the idea of a Polish-led Central and Eastern Europe as an allied block or a federation, first made popular in the interwar years (Ištok, Kozárová and Polačková, 2021). In its modern form, the initiative represents a local heterarchical partnership that makes a bid for a polycentric Europe (Bartoszewicz, 2023) while also being a tool for safeguarding US interests on the continent (Ištok, Kozárová and Polačková, 2021).

Indeed, as the first group to bring together all post-socialist EU member states, it also has the potential to advocate for Central and Eastern European interests in the EU, thus challenging the balance of power in the Union (Grgić, 2023). Common interests, such as opposition to multi-speed EU integration and accelerated development to reach the level of Western EU states, were identified as issues on which participating countries could act jointly in EU negotiations (Zięba, 2023). However, political and economic differences hinder the formation of common 3SI positions (Calheiros, 2019). First, as the sole non-post-socialist country in the group, Austria has a higher level of development. It is a net contributor to the EU budget, leading to having different interests in EU development policy (Zięba, 2023). Second, as a European middle power, Poland has different political priorities and opportunities than the small states that comprise the rest of the group. Under the PiS government, it also pursued a nationalist agenda shared by only a few fellow 3SI states (Grgić, 2023). Third, even though Russian revisionism was a key driver behind the formation of the initiative, member states have had different perceptions of Russia as a threat. For example, Austria and Hungary were less afraid of Russia than Poland and the Baltic states (Calheiros, 2019). Fourth, the strong US support behind the group may cause a rift between states which would prioritise EU relations over trans-Atlantic ones, as American engagement with the 3SI raised scepticism about the compatibility of the group's goals with EU objectives (Lewkowicz, 2020; Grgić, 2023).

5.3. Other Central European BUGRs

The literature on other Central European BUGRs is scarce. We know the least about the Slavkov Triangle because existing studies only speculate that it could rival the Visegrád Group but are yet to test this hypothesis with empirical analysis (Wieclawski, 2016; Cabada, 2018). Our knowledge about the Bucharest Group is similarly limited. The sole study on the subject depicts the B9 as the security arm of the 3SI (Pricopiuc, 2023). Still, the different geographical scope and the lack of empirical analysis supporting this claim cast doubt on its veracity.

In contrast, we have some knowledge about the Salzburg Forum and the CEDC. Drawing on the vast literature on Europeanisation, Müller (2016) identified these schemes as a platform for sharing national preferences (vertical Europeanisation) and promoting the exchange of experiences and lessons learned (horizontal Europeanisation). He showed how these groups developed a collaborative network structure to support horizontal coordination. Such a network includes joint operation centres, joint programmes and operations, and exchanging personnel, ideas, and experiences. As Nemeth's (2018) research demonstrates, this network was used when migration and border control were militarised during the migration crisis. This reshaped the original mission of the CEDC, which, together with the SF, became focused on controlling mass migration from the Balkans. Although the CEDC defence ministries were not enthusiastic about their new role, their involvement in addressing the crisis allowed them to flesh out procedures, frameworks, and cooperation mechanisms to be better prepared to work with the interior ministries during the next crisis.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The paper systematically reviewed 52 peer-reviewed publications on how various regional cooperation formats operate in Central Europe, using the Scopus database and the PRISMA 2020 principles. The analysis highlighted that our knowledge about the region's cooperation formats is very uneven. Forty-two reviewed papers (81%) focus fully or partly on the Visegrád Group and 13 papers (25%) on the Three Seas Initiative. In contrast, only two papers dealt with the Central European Defence Cooperation and the Bucharest Nine, whereas only one dealt with the Salzburg Forum and the Slavkov Triangle. Given newfound speculation about the potential

marginalisation of the Visegrád Group in the 2020s due to Hungary's reluctance to cut ties with Russia after its open invasion of Ukraine, future research should focus more on what other BUGRs have achieved and what role they play in Central European diplomacy.

Analytical attention is perhaps most needed regarding the Slavkov Triangle. Despite having been founded in 2015, detailed research is yet to be conducted about how this forum functions and under what conditions it is used as a vehicle for promoting national interests. As the format has been gaining importance in some EU and foreign policy matters since 2022 (Holányi, 2024), in-depth case studies ought to analyse the causes and consequences of the relative rise of the S3 compared to other BUGRs.

The paper identified a similarly high level of disparity in the quality of knowledge on how BUGRs operate. The rich literature on the V4 demonstrated that policy coordination between the four countries does not go beyond an agreement on key rhetoric and objectives; the states tend to develop policy recommendations and implement national policies independently. Scholarship has also shown that the Visegrád Group is less successful than its reputation suggests, with the 2015-2016 migration crisis having been the only case in recent years when they maintained a common front. In contrast, the emerging literature on the 3SI is yet to analyse the intricacies of cooperation and evaluate its outcomes. Instead, it examined its origins, founding rationale, and its potential as a political and economic cooperation forum. These studies suggest that the 3SI was borne out of and developed mainly due to geopolitical considerations linked to Russian revisionism and re-emerging great power rivalry. Despite the shallow literature on the subject, research showed that the CEDC and the Salzburg Forum comprise collaborative network structures that enable horizontal cooperation. Prior work also demonstrated that crises impact the functioning regional groups, as the CEDC was given new tasks related to border protection during the migration crisis.

Nonetheless, there are considerable gaps in the reviewed literature compared to the stated objectives of BUGRs. For example, most groups aim to be a cooperation platform at the EU level. Still, the realisation of this goal was only empirically analysed in the case of the Visegrád Group. Even in the latter case, research is skewed towards the migration crisis and foreign and security policy matters. Existing analyses of how regional groups operate have focused primarily

on identity formation and brand-building and less on how joint positions and common initiatives emerge. We also know little about these groups' achievements and failed joint initiatives, with the V4's stance on migration during 2015-2016 being the exception. Thus, future research should explore these groups' role in sectoral policy development at the national and EU levels.

Scholarship could also benefit from analyses which examine the operative aspects of regional cooperation. What happens between high-level summits? How and by whom are the agenda of regional groups formed? How do cooperating governments coordinate on issues of common concern? How do national organisational processes shape countries' engagement with cooperation formats? Research on the more practical, day-to-day aspects of regional cooperation may yield better insights into how political will is transformed into concrete results and what factors facilitate and hinder the realisation of common objectives.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed some areas of concern regarding the quality of the research on Central European groups. First, it was found that only a minority of papers refer to theory, and even fewer make it an integral part of their argument. Causal explanations for the creation and continued operation of regional groups privilege historical and geopolitical explanations, with functionalist and other theoretical explanations rarely discussed in conclusions. Moreover, although some excellent in-depth analyses exist, many articles are rather descriptive. Recounting historical and current events often takes up significant portions of texts, while the explanations of causes and mechanisms are regularly marginalised. Thus, future research should consider integrating their empirical results with theoretical contributions to make their findings more generalisable.

Second, the quality of research shows significant variance in relevance, methodological rigour, and analytical depth. Near half of the reviewed publications failed to meet the most basic methodological reporting criteria, remaining silent about their methodological approach, chosen method(s), and data source(s). This forces readers to trust authors that their conclusions are not based on hearsay and anecdotal evidence alone. Even though academia is ultimately based on trust, this should be earned by transparent research and disclosure practices, not taken for granted. In contrast, only eight papers provided sufficient details and justification about their data and methods that allow readers to make informed judgements about how well-grounded the

authors' arguments are. Therefore, future research ought to be more methodologically rigorous and transparent.

A promising avenue for further research work on regional cooperation is the adaptation and utilisation of computational social science approaches. The automated analysis of large amounts of textual data has the potential to massively expand content analytical work and reinvigorate process tracing research to test hypotheses about when regional cooperation is mobilised effectively to realise national interests (Grossman and Pedahzur, 2020). Available large language models are now capable of identifying named entities, policy agendas, topics, sentiments, and emotions in large textual corpora, offering new insights into how certain people, organisations, and events are talked about. The combination of open-source annotated data (Sylvester et al., 2024) with a validated no-code classification application (Sebők et al., 2024) enables researchers to explore new connections across social and traditional media, parliamentary documents, and executive speeches between the intensity and efficiency of regional cooperation and a range of economic, social, and political phenomena.

In conclusion, our knowledge of Central European regional cooperation is uneven, with most active groups being seriously understudied. Future research should engage more with these ignored regional groups, pay attention to the operative dimension of cooperation, and explore the applicability of computational social science methods to deepen our understanding of regional cooperation platforms while also adopting the best methodological standards presented in the paper. Striving for methodological rigour, transparency, and theoretical engagement would also extend the global reach of scholarship in the region.

Funding

The research presented in this paper was supported by the Hungarian New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund (grant number: ÚNKP-23-3-I-NKE-46).

Appendix

Sample search query:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Central Europe*” W/3 cooperation) AND SUBJAREA ((soci) AND NOT (medi OR nurs OR vete OR dent OR heal OR mult OR agri OR bioc OR immu OR neur OR phar OR ceng OR chem OR comp OR eart OR ener OR engi OR envi OR mate OR math OR phys OR arts OR busi OR deci OR econ OR psyc)) AND PUBYEAR > 2013 AND PUBYEAR < 2023

Resources:

1. Bartoszewicz, M.G. (2023) ‘Intermarium: A Bid for Polycentric Europe’, Geopolitics, 28(2), pp. 795–819. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1973439.
2. Bauerová, H. (2018a) ‘Migration Policy of the V4 in the Context of Migration Crisis’, Politics in Central Europe, 14(2), pp. 99–120. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0011.
3. Bauerová, H. (2018b) ‘The V4 and European Integration’, Politics in Central Europe, 14(2), pp. 121–139. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0012.
4. Bauerová, H. and Vošta, M. (2020) ‘Multi-level Governance and Energy Specifics of the V4 Countries within the Context of European Integration’, Politics in Central Europe, 16(2), pp. 525–546. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2020-0022.
5. Bedea, C.M. and Osei Kwadwo, V. (2021) ‘Opportunistic sub-regionalism: the dialectics of EU- Central-Eastern European relations’, Journal of European Integration, 43(4), pp. 385–402. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1776271.
6. Braun, M. (2021) ‘The Politics of Regional Cooperation and the Impact on the European Union: A Study of Nordic Cooperation and the Visegrad Group’, in The Politics of Regional Cooperation and the Impact on the European Union. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing (New Horizons in European Politics). Available at: https://www.elgaronline.com/monobook/9781789906455.xml (Accessed: 6 January 2024).

7. Cabada, L. (2018) ‘The Visegrad Cooperation in the Context of Other Central European Cooperation Formats’, Politics in Central Europe, 14(2), pp. 165–179. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0014.
8. Cabada, L. and Waisová, Š. (2018) ‘The Visegrad Group as an Ambitious Actor of (Central-)European Foreign and Security Policy’, Politics in Central Europe, 14(2), pp. 9–20. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0006.
9. Calheiros, B. (2019) ‘The 3 Seas Initiative: geopolitics and infrastructure’, JANUS NET e-journal of International Relation, 2(10), pp. 110–123. Available at: https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.10.2.8.
10. CEDC (2016) ‘Joint Declaration concerning the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC)’. Available at: https://mors.kolaborator.si/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/1-Joint_Declaration_mit_Unterschrift_der_CEDC-VM_2016.pdf.
11. Cooper, I. and Fabbrini, F. (2021) ‘Regional Groups in the European Union: Mapping an Unexplored Form of Differentiation’, in. Rochester, NY (BRIDGE Network Working Paper No. 17). Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3951827 (Accessed: 4 January 2024).
12. Cristani, F. (2021) ‘The Role of Sub-Regional Systems in Shaping International Investment Law-Making: The Case of the Visegrád Group’, in C. Titi (ed.) Public Actors in International Investment Law. Cham: Springer International Publishing (European Yearbook of International Economic Law), pp. 135–153. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-58916-5_8.
13. Döring, F. (2019) ‘Visegrad Group and its Presence in the Mashriq Region’, Politics in Central Europe, 15(3), pp. 479–495. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2019-0026.
14. Duszczyk, M., Podgórska, K. and Pszczółkowska, D. (2020) ‘From mandatory to voluntary. Impact of V4 on the EU relocation scheme’, European Politics and Society, 21(4), pp. 470–487. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1672367.

15. Glied, V. and Zamęcki, Ł. (2021) 'Together, but Still Separated? Migration Policy in the V4 countries', Politics in Central Europe, 17(s1), pp. 647–673. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2021-0027.
16. Górka, M. (2018) 'The Three Seas Initiative as a Political Challenge for the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe', Politics in Central Europe, 14(3), pp. 55–73. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0018.
17. Grgić, G. (2023) 'The Changing Dynamics of Regionalism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of the Three Seas Initiative', Geopolitics, 28(1), pp. 216–238. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1881489.
18. Griessler, C. (2018) 'The V4 Countries' Foreign Policy concerning the Western Balkans', Politics in Central Europe, 14(2), pp. 141–164. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0013.
19. Grodzki, R. (2016) 'Strategiczne porozumienia ponad podziałami – Grupa Wyszehradzka jako przykład integracji i emancypacji w ramach Unii Europejskiej', Przegląd Strategiczny, (9), pp. 375–392. Available at: https://doi.org/10.14746/ps.2016.1.26.
20. Grossman, Jonathan and Pedahzur, Ami (2020) 'Political Science and Big Data: Structured Data, Unstructured Data, and How to Use Them', Political Science Quarterly, 135(2), pp. 225-257. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.13032.
21. Gura, R. and Rouet, G. (2017) 'Intégration régionale, désintégration européenne. Le groupe de Visegrád (V4) et l'Union européenne', Hermès, n° 77(1), pp. 126–131. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3917/herm.077.0126.
22. Hauser, G. (2017) 'The Future of Military Cooperation in Central Europe', Vojenské rozhledy, 26(5), pp. 93–100.
23. Holányi, Á. (2024) 'Közép-európai regionális együttműködések és kisállami érdekérvényesítés az Európai Unióban', Pólusok, 5(2).

24. Hlaváčková, H.N. (2020) ‘Is the “show-the-flag” strategy relevant for Visegrad countries in securing the EU?’, UNISCI Journal, 18(54), pp. 223–246. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-103.
25. Ištok, R., Kozárová, I. and Polačková, A. (2021) ‘The Intermarium as a Polish Geopolitical Concept in History and in the Present’, Geopolitics, 26(1), pp. 314–341. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1551206.
26. Kałan, D. (2015) ‘The Slavkov Triangle: A Rival to the Visegrad Group?’, PISM Bulletin, 19(751), pp. 1–2.
27. Kaniok, P., Havlík, V. and Zapletalová, V. (2022) ‘Visegrád Four and EU differentiated integration’, in B. Leruth, S. Gänzle, and J. Trondal (eds) The Routledge Handbook of Differentiation in the European Union. 1st edn. London: Routledge, pp. 519–536. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429054136-35.
28. Kazharski, A. (2020) ‘An ad hoc Regionalism? The Visegrád Four in the “Post-Liberal” Age’, Polity, 52(2), pp. 250–272. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1086/708182.
29. Kirch, A.-L. (2021) Sub-regionalisms in the European Union: bridge-builders or spoilers?: a comparison of the Baltic, Benelux and Visegrád cases between 2009 and 2018. Berlin: Logos Verlag Berlin.
30. Klemenčič, M. (2016) ‘Intergovernmental Regional Cooperation in European Higher Education’, Higher Education Forum, 16, pp. 75–90. Available at: https://doi.org/10.15027/39941.
31. Klemeshev, A.P. and Vorozheina, Y.A. (2018) ‘Национал-консервативный “поворот” Польши в геополитическом контексте’, Полис. Политические исследования, (5), pp. 17–28. Available at: https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2018.05.03.
32. Koß, M. and Séville, A. (2020) ‘Politicized Transnationalism: The Visegrád Countries in the Refugee Crisis’, Politics and Governance, 8(1), pp. 95–106. Available at: https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i1.2419.

33. Krzymowski, A. (2021) 'The Visegrad Group countries: The United Arab Emirates Perspective', Politics in Central Europe, 17(1), pp. 107–126. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2021-0005.
34. Kugiel, P. (2021) 'India and Central Europe: A Road More Travelled?', in R.K. Jain (ed.) India and Central Europe: Perceptions, Perspectives, Prospects. Singapore: Springer, pp. 333–341. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2850-4_11.
35. Kurowska, X. and Németh, B. (2013) 'The Central European playground':, European Geostrategy. Available at: https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/11764213/Kurowska_and_Nemeth_The_Central_European_Playground_Who_plays_what.pdf.
36. Lang, K.-O. and von Ondarza, N. (2018) 'Minilateralismen in der EU - Chancen und Risiken der innereuropäischen Diplomatie', SWP-Aktuell, 7, pp. 1–8.
37. Lehoczki, B. (2022) 'Semi-periphery regionalisms in a changing world order: the case of Mercosur and Visegrad Group', Third World Quarterly, 43(4), pp. 779–796. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.2024757.
38. Lewkowicz, Ł. (2020) 'The Three Seas Initiative as a new model of regional cooperation in Central Europe: A Polish perspective', UNISCI Journal, 18(54), pp. 177–194. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-101.
39. Merheim-Eyre, I. (2017) 'The Visegrad Countries and Visa Liberalisation in the Eastern Neighbourhood: A Pan Tadeusz Syndrome?', East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures, 31(1), pp. 93–114. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325416673140.
40. Molnár, T.L. (2021a) 'Literature review', in T.L. Molnár (ed.) Minilateral Cooperation in the EU: Internal Cohesion, Group Dynamics, and Voting Behaviour of Selected State Blocks. Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, pp. 3–14. Available at: https://kki.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/minilateral_online_v1.pdf.
41. Molnár, T.L. (ed.) (2021b) Minilateral Cooperation in the EU: Internal Cohesion, Group Dynamics, and Voting Behaviour of Selected State Blocks. Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Available at: https://kki.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/minilateral_online_v1.pdf.

42. Müller, P. (2016) 'Europeanization and regional cooperation initiatives: Austria's participation in the Salzburg Forum and in Central European Defence Cooperation', Austrian Journal of Political Science, 45(2), pp. 23–34. Available at: https://doi.org/10.15203/OZP.1102.VOL45ISS2.
43. MZV SR (2024) Slavkov format, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. Available at: https://mzv.sk/web/en/diplomacy/slavkov-format (Accessed: 5 January 2024).
44. Naím, M. (2009) 'Minilateralism', Foreign Policy, (173), pp. 136–135.
45. Natanek, M. (2017) 'Le groupe de Visegrád, entre unité des intérêts et mythe de la coopération', Hermès, 77(1), pp. 132–140. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3917/herm.077.0132.
46. Nemeth, B. (2018) 'Militarisation of cooperation against mass migration – the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC)', Defense & Security Analysis, 34(1), pp. 16–34. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2018.1421401.
47. Neuman, M. (2017) 'The Visegrád Group as a Vehicle for Promoting National Interests in the European Union: The Case of the Czech Republic', Politics in Central Europe, 13(1), pp. 55–67. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/pce-2016-0022.
48. Onderco, M. (2014) '"Tell Me What You Want": Analyzing the Visegrád Countries' Votes in the UN General Assembly', East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures, 28(1), pp. 63–83. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325413484757.
49. Orzelska-Staczek, A. and Bajda, P. (2021) 'Security aspects of cooperation in Central Europe: Visegrád Group, Bucharest Nine, and the Three Seas Initiative', On-line Journal Modelling the New Europe, (37), pp. 4–23. Available at: https://doi.org/10.24193/OJMNE.2021.37.01.
50. Osička, J. et al. (2021) 'Ready to React: Contextualizing the Visegrad Group's Energy Cooperation', Politologický časopis - Czech Journal of Political Science, 28(1), pp. 59–84. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5817/PC2021-1-59.

51. Page, M.J. et al. (2021) 'The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews', Systematic Reviews, 10(89), pp. 1–11. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-021-01626-4.
52. Polegkyi, O. (2020) 'Regional Cooperation in Ukrainian and Polish Security Discourse', in O. Bogdanova and A. Makarychev (eds) Baltic-Black Sea Regionalisms: Patchworks and Networks at Europe's Eastern Margins. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 169–186. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24878-9_11.
53. Pricopiuc, S. (2023) 'The Russo-Ukrainian War as a factor in reviving joint projects between the states of the intermarium region', On-line Journal Modelling the New Europe, 2023(42), pp. 41–56. Available at: https://doi.org/10.24193/OJMNE.2023.42.03.
54. Radovici, M.C.M. and Danko, L. (2023) 'Regional Dynamics of Two European Clusters: Cooperative Financial Tools and Collective Support as Part of V4 Presidencies' Foreign Approach towards WB6 Partners', Romanian Journal of European Affairs, 23(1), pp. 93–112.
55. Salzburg Forum (2001) 'Joint Declaration by the Ministers of the Interior of the Republic of Austria, the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland, the Republic of Slovakia and the Republic of Slovenia'. Available at: http://www.salzburgforum.org/files/20010726-28_Joint%20Declaration.pdf.
56. Salzburg Forum (2003) 'Joint Declaration of the Ministers of the Interior on Regional Cooperation in the Framework of the Enlarged European Union'. Available at: http://www.salzburgforum.org/files/20030719_Joint%20Declaration.pdf.
57. Salzburg Forum (2006) 'The Future of the Salzburg Forum: A revised proposal of an operational strategy presented at Brdo'. Available at: http://www.salzburgforum.org/files/20061025-26_External%20Dimension.pdf.
58. Salzburg Forum (2007) 'Declaration on the establishment of the Group of the Friends of the Salzburg Forum from the Western Balkans'. Available at: http://www.salzburgforum.org/files/Declaration%20on%20the%20Establishment%20of%20the%20Group%20of%20Friends.pdf.

59. Salzburg Forum (2010) ‘Salzburg Forum Vision 2020’.

60. Salzburg Forum (2017) ‘Joint Action Plan’. Available at: https://mors.kolaborator.si/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/5-Joint_Action_Plan_FINAL_JUNE_2017.pdf.

61. Salzburg Forum (2021) ‘Salzburg Forum Agenda 2030’. Available at: http://www.salzburgforum.org/files/Salzburg_Forum_Agenda_2030_final.pdf.

62. Schmidt, A. (2016) ‘Friends forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration’, Politics in Central Europe, 12(3), pp. 113–140. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/pce-2016-0019.

63. Schmidt, A. (2020) ‘From Intermarium to the Three Seas Initiative—The Implications of the Polish Orientation Over the Central and Eastern European Region on Hungarian Foreign Policy’, in O. Bogdanova and A. Makarychev (eds) Baltic-Black Sea Regionalisms. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 149–168. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24878-9_10.

64. Sebők, M. et al. (2024) ‘Leveraging Open Large Language Models for Multilingual Policy Topic Classification: The Babel Machine Approach’, Social Science Computer Review, 0(0). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393241259434.

65. Strážay, T. (2017) ‘Towards a sustainable Visegrad: Some reflections on the future role of Central Europe in the EU’, in M. Moskalewicz and W. Przybylski (eds) Understanding Central Europe. London: Routledge, pp. 115–118.

66. Strnad, V. (2019) ‘The Visegrad Cooperation as the Czech National Interest. A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis’, Czech Journal of Political Science, (1), pp. 22–49. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5817/PC2019-1-22.

67. Sylvester, C. et al. (2024) ‘ParlEE plenary speeches V4 data set: Annotated full-text of 18 million sentence-level plenary speeches of eight European legislative chambers’, Harvard Dataverse, V1. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TLKVWY.

68. Szalai, M. and Garai, N. (2024) ‘Status-seeking with a negative image – The changing position of Visegrád countries in the international community between 2004 and 2020’,

New Perspectives, 32(1), pp. 30–51. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X231221999.

69. Three Seas Initiative (2016) 'The Joint Statement on the Three Seas Initiative (The Dubrovnik Statement)'. Available at: https://media.voog.com/0000/0046/4166/files/DUBROVNIK_deklaratsioon_2016.pdf.
70. Three Seas Initiative (2017) 'The Second Summit of the 3 Seas Initiative Joint Declaration'. Available at: https://media.voog.com/0000/0046/4166/files/WARSAW-joint-declaration-2017.pdf.
71. Three Seas Initiative (2018) 'Joint Declaration of the Third Summit of the Three Seas Initiative'. Available at: https://media.voog.com/0000/0046/4166/files/BUCHAREST-SUMMIT-JOINT-DECLARATION_2018.pdf.
72. Ušiak, J. (2018) 'Security-related Cooperation among the V4 States', Politics in Central Europe, 14(2), pp. 39–56. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0008.
73. Ušiak, J. (2020) 'Visegrad Group as institution for Central European cooperation: Ups and downs of small international organizations', UNISCI Journal, 18(54), pp. 9–28. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-95.
74. Visegrad Group (1991) Visegrad Declaration 1991. Available at: https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2 (Accessed: 5 January 2024).
75. Visegrad Group (2004) Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation. Available at: https://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412 (Accessed: 5 January 2024).
76. Waisová, Š. (2018) 'The Environmental Situation in the Visegrad Region: Neglect and Insufficient Cooperation in the Face of Serious Environmental Threats', Politics in Central Europe, 14(2), pp. 57–73. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0009.
77. Wieclawski, J. (2016) 'Considering the Sub-Regional Cooperation in East-Central Europe – Some Conclusions on Integrating and Disintegrating Tendencies in the Sub-

Regional Dialogue', Review of European and Russian Affairs, 10(1), pp. 1–24. Available at: https://doi.org/10.22215/rera.v10i1.251.

78. Wivel, A. (2021) 'The Grand Strategies of Small States', in T. Balzacq and R.R. Krebs (eds) The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy. Oxford University Press, pp. 489–505. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198840299.013.32.
79. Xiao, Y. and Watson, M. (2019) 'Guidance on Conducting a Systematic Literature Review', Journal of Planning Education and Research, 39(1), pp. 93–112. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X17723971.
80. Zięba, R. (2023) 'Three Seas Initiative', in R. Zięba (ed.) Politics and Security of Central and Eastern Europe: Contemporary Challenges. Cham: Springer International Publishing (Contributions to Political Science), pp. 261–275. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16419-4_13.