

**The Value of Central Europe on Donald Trump's Map:  
Cooperation and Divergence on Regional Issues (2)**

Közép-Európa helye Donald Trump térképén:  
együttműködés és különbségek a regionális kérdésekben (2.)

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**Abstract:** Under the Trump administration relations between the US and Central European countries has significantly improved, while disagreements between the EU in general and Washington have widened. Some of the most significant strategic challenges which Europeans and the US both have to tackle and have emerged on the transatlantic agenda in recent years are regional issues, such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the question of NATO and EU enlargement, and in the Middle East the Iranian nuclear deal and the Israeli Palestinian conflict. While the polices of the V4 countries in these regional issues often support US position, the real positive impact of this support on US strategic objectives is sometimes very limited due to a number of factors.

**Összefoglaló:** *A Trump-kormányzat hivatalba lépése óta jelentősen javultak az Egyesült Államok és a közép- európai országok kapcsolatai, miközben az EU és Washington között erősödtek a viták. Az európai országok és az USA stratégiai kihívásai között Az utóbbi években a transzatlanti kapcsolatok narendjén előtérbe kerültek olyan regionális ügyek, mint az orosz-ukrán konfliktus, a NATO és az EU bővítésének kérdése, a közel-keleti térségben az iráni nukleáris kérdés és az izraeli palesztin konfliktus, amelyek az európaiak és az Egyesült Államok számára egyaránt jelentős kihívást képeznek. Noha az említett regionális kérdésekben képviselt visegrádi álláspontok gyakran támogatják az amerikai külpolitikát, ezek valódi hatása az amerikai stratégiai célokra különböző tényezőknél fogva gyakran meglehetősen korlátozott.*

## INTRODUCTION

In our series on US – Central European relations, we conduct a detailed examination of the US–V4 relations from the perspective of some important US foreign policy objectives and how the V4 countries relate to them. Donald Trump’s presidency is widely perceived to have put significant strain on the transatlantic relationship. From trade disputes through NATO burden sharing to the handling of the “Iranian problem”, tension has significantly increased between the Atlantic allies since Donald Trump took office. In this context, a thorough examination of the relationship reveals that there are significant differences between European countries concerning the transatlantic relationship and how they relate to the Trump administration’s foreign policy. One of the most visible dividing lines among the European allies is the one between Western members and Central Europe, namely the Visegrad Group (V4). On the surface, Central European governments have not been very critical of Washington; on the contrary, strengthening military cooperation, shared views on pressing energy security challenges, and a similar view on migration and national sovereignty appear to dominate the relationship.

The main purpose of our two-part analysis is to conduct an examination of the US–V4 relations from the perspective of certain important US foreign policy objectives. In other words, the analysis seeks to clarify whether the notion that the V4 serves as America’s buttress in Europe, especially vis-a-vis the EU core, is valid. The analysis also identifies and evaluates the commonalities and differences between the V4 concerning their approach to the Trump-administration. The behaviour of the V4 is analysed in three broader regional issues which have been high on the transatlantic agenda in recent years. The three regional issues discussed in this paper are:

- the Ukrainian-Russian conflict;
- the future enlargement of the EU and NATO;
- the Iranian nuclear deal and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The two-part paper first outlines a brief summary of the Trump administration’s foreign policy objectives and decisions on the issues identified. The first part also gave a brief summary of the responses of the EU and the core Western European powers on the specific policies in question. The paper then provides an overview of the related V4 policies and responses, examining Poland and Czechia in the first part, Hungary and Slovakia in the second part. Within this context, it also examines what were the key factors in formulating the policy positions, what role the relationship with the US played in the process. The paper also seeks to predict whether the respective V4 policies are likely to change. In examining the similarities and difference among the V4, the second part of the paper will also seek to evaluate the region’s importance in relation to US foreign policy objectives.

## **THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE V4 COUNTRIES: SLOVAKIA**

### *THE UKRAINIAN–RUSSIAN CONFLICT*

**W**ith regard to the Ukrainian–Russian conflict, the Slovak foreign policy is generally categorized as *two-dimensional* and *balanced*. Two-dimensional in the sense that there is a national and an EU/NATO level, and balanced as it seeks to maintain pragmatic relations with both countries and to avoid taking extreme positions with regard to the conflict. While bilateral relations with Kiev are dominated by energy security and the easing of tensions in Eastern Ukraine, the EU sanctions regime, and military reassurance measures are the core issues at the EU/NATO level. In January 2019 Slovakia assumed Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and there appeared to be no unexpected changes in Slovakia’s balanced foreign policy. This is partly due to the maintenance of their image as neither pro-American nor anti-Russian.



Among the key priorities and declared foreign policy goals of the Slovak Chairmanship is to actively engage in the [diffusion and reduction of tensions in the ongoing crisis in and around Ukraine](#). Slovakia's reservations with regard to US influence on the country's security policy is also reflected by its refusal to sign a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Washington, although Poland and Hungary already have done so. In light of Russia's assertive behaviour in the wider Eastern European region, a DCA with Slovakia would enable the US to quickly move its forces from the north-eastern European flank of NATO (Poland, the Baltics) to the Black Sea region (Romania).

At the same time, Slovakia continues to maintain its support for the extension of the EU sanctions against Russia until the Minsk Agreements are implemented, and it has [reaffirmed its commitment](#) to support the EU sanctions. However, this support has been rather weak at times, as reflected by past [calls from Slovak leaders](#) to end the sanctions. However, geopolitical proximity and a shared border with Ukraine, as well as the issue of energy security continue to create dependencies in relation to Kiev, leaving little room for manoeuvre in the Slovak foreign policy. Therefore, the balanced foreign policy of Slovakia with regard to the conflict is unlikely to change over the following years, and they will continue to be at the centre of discussion in the Ukraine–Slovak relationship.

## ***EU AND NATO ENLARGEMENT***

In contrast to the Ukrainian–Russian conflict, the Slovak stance on a possible Ukrainian membership in NATO continues to express support for the open-door policy of the organization, but it must be reiterated that it considers the addition of Ukraine premature at this time. Hence, in practice this policy only materializes towards the WB nations and Georgia. In this context, in 2017 Slovak [President Kiska expressed](#) full support for Georgia's ambition for NATO membership. Furthermore, at the EU level, there has been visible interest by Slovakia to secure a visa-free regime agreement with both Ukraine and Georgia, with special emphasis on transportation and energy. Due to the geopolitical and economic importance of the WB region for Slovakia, pertaining to the EU and NATO enlargement plans towards the WB countries, Slovakia maintains its support for both endeavours to [ensure the security and stability](#) of Europe and tries to maintain vocal support together with the other V4 countries.

Slovakia tends to be more proactive in the EU-NATO enlargement debate. However, a certain tension and uncertainty remain in Slovakia towards the US. Since 2017 there has been a great push by the US to conclude DCAs with countries in the Baltic and the Central European region. With Hungary ratifying the DCA in June 2019, Slovakia remains the last piece of the puzzle, having [rejected the US offer in March 2019](#), arguing that such an agreement would violate the sovereignty of the country. The same argument had been used by the Hungarian government to stall the negotiations in the spring.

In recent years there has been an observable [cultural and geopolitical shift](#) towards the West in Slovakia. This was marked by a steady increase in support for NATO and EU membership among the population. Nevertheless, deeply rooted anti-Americanism remains, as 41 percent of the population still regards the US as a bigger threat to the country than Russia.

## ***THE ISRAELI–PALESTINIAN CONFLICT AND IRAN***

In recent years the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic within the Middle East has been more in line with the EU objectives than US policy and interests. This is reflected by the [decrease of voting coincidence between the US and Slovakia](#) in the UN, mainly due to Slovakia's alignment with mainstream EU policies. As an example, among the 22 anti-Israel-related plenary votes in the UNGA in 2017/18, the US and Slovak votes were the same in only one case, in 15 cases Slovakia voted differently than the US, and in six cases it abstained from voting on Israel-related issues that specifically mention the state or territory of Israel. Slovakia was the only V4 country that voted in favour of the UNGA resolution condemning the unilateral declaration of the US to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the rest of the V4 abstained. In line with the EU's position, [Slovakia continues to maintain the official position](#) that the two-state model is the only sustainable solution to the situation.

On Iran, despite the maximum pressure policy of the US, Slovakia continues to strengthen its economic ties with Iran. In line with the related EU policy objectives, Slovakia has been very active both bilaterally and multilaterally, ensuring the success of the EU's planned trade mechanism with Iran and bypassing US sanctions. The Slovak–Iranian bilateral relations, including economic ties and trade volumes, have been strengthening since the conclusion of the JCPOA, despite the US sanctions. Hence, Slovakia appears to heavily invest in its Iranian economic ties and is aiming to pursue a pragmatic, balanced foreign policy towards Tehran, in contrast to the maximum-pressure US strategy.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, Slovakia has never been seen as a buttress of American influence in Europe, nor does it wish to be seen as such. The country's foreign policy is both converging with the US interests and is diverging from them. While Slovakia is committed to contributing to the transatlantic relationship and extending it, and it is supportive of US policies that support Ukraine against Russia or enlarge the EU and NATO in the region, at the same time, it is more willing to take Russia's considerations into account on these matters. In general, Slovakia's balanced approach regarding the issues examined, including the Iranian JCPOA, is more in line with the core EU than the US.



## THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE V4 COUNTRIES: HUNGARY

US–Hungarian relations have improved significantly in recent years, which has been reflected by intensified high-level visits, as well as the conclusion of a DCA between Budapest and Washington. While early on the Trump administration decided to take a pragmatic approach and alter the previous Obama administration’s highly critical and politicized approach towards the Hungarian government, especially in relation to democracy and rule of law issues, Budapest has sought to find areas where it could demonstrate its alignment with the current Republican administration. As the overview will show, in some regional issues Hungary is aligning closely with US policy, while in other cases there is cause for friction between Budapest and Washington.

### *THE UKRAINIAN–RUSSIAN CONFLICT*

The primary concern of the present US administration with regard to Hungarian foreign policy has been its relations with Russia and China. In the case of Russia, the Ukraine-NATO relations are the most important aspect. Hungary has been strongly supportive of NATO’s reassurance and deterrence measures, as well as Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, which the US administration acknowledges. However, after Kiev adopted legislation on education in the fall of 2017 which severely harms the rights of minorities, including 200,000 ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine, [Hungary decided](#) to block the sessions of the NATO-Ukraine Commission at ambassadorial level and above until Ukraine complies with the most critical points of the advice of the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission. This move was criticized not only by Kiev but also by the US administration and other NATO allies, on the grounds that minority rights issues should not be resolved within a NATO framework. Although there are some positive signs that the new Ukrainian President and the new government in Kiev might be open to considering Hungary’s position, it is still uncertain whether the dispute will be resolved anytime soon.

### *EU AND NATO ENLARGEMENT*

The Hungarian government’s policy on NATO and EU enlargement is nuanced. While it is one of the staunchest advocate of EU and NATO enlargement in the WB and Georgia, it is cautious regarding the expansion of NATO to include Ukraine. Hungary has been very active in recent years in keeping the [enlargement issue on the agenda](#) in both NATO and the EU in the cases of

Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Although granting political asylum to Nikola Gruevski, the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia, whose VMRO-DPMNE party was a detractor of the Prespa agreement, was not well received in Washington, Hungary has maintained its support for the North Macedonian accession. Budapest is also a key player in forming [common V4 positions](#) at the EU level on EU enlargement, in order to put greater pressure on reluctant EU members. Budapest also publicly supports Georgia's membership in NATO, as it would consider NATO expansion there a guarantee of increased stability for the region. Until recently, Hungary was also in support of Ukraine's integration process, and it provided humanitarian assistance and aid for Kiev in connection with the war in the Donbass region. However, based on the experience of nationalist-inspired legislation aimed against minorities, the poor state of governance during the Poroshenko presidency, and the dire economic conditions, the Hungarian Prime Minister [openly stated](#) in the summer of 2018 that EU and NATO accession for Ukraine is unrealistic.

### ***THE ISRAELI–PALESTINIAN CONFLICT AND IRAN***

**O**n certain Middle East issues, Hungary has also diverged from the mainstream EU position and articulated a similar approach to that of Washington. This is best reflected by the course of the Hungarian–Israeli relationship and Hungary's policy regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. While previously Budapest pursued a balanced approach between the Israeli and the Palestinian side, in recent years the Hungarian government has taken a firm pro-Israeli line on the subject. This convergence is to a large extent influenced by the ideological alignment and common interests with both the Trump administration and the Netanyahu government on national sovereignty, migration, opposition to liberalism, as well as domestic political considerations. However, the Israeli relationship was an area which Budapest also used to demonstrate its reliability and value to the Trump administration. Within this context, Hungary has been very [supportive of Israel](#) in UN bodies and in the EU and is now considered to be the most energetic country in blocking EU decisions which are harmful for Israel, and the main driver behind rallying the V4 behind the Netanyahu government. Hungary's Israel policy has been well-received in the Trump administration and has helped improve US–Hungarian ties.

However, similarly to the other V4 countries, Hungary has been more in line with the rest of the EU on the JCPOA. Though officials have refrained from criticizing the Trump administration, the Hungarian government did not block any EU statement demonstrating continued support for the nuclear agreement. Furthermore, up until tensions escalated in 2019, Hungary was seeking to build economic ties with Tehran. In 2017, during high-level visits to Iran, Budapest and Tehran signed a letter of intent to cooperate in the area of [peaceful](#)





[nuclear energy](#), with Hungarian companies possibly getting the opportunity to build small-scale nuclear power plants in Iran. In the same year, an EUR 85 million credit line was established to promote bilateral trade and investments. However, no significant further steps have been taken since then to implement these agreements and to strengthen economic ties.

## CONCLUSION

While Hungary aligns itself to a significant degree with the US on security and the military aspects of the geopolitics of Eastern Europe with regard to Russia's assertive behaviour, it is also willing to confront Washington more openly on certain issues related to Russia's regional influence. Its approach towards Ukraine's support and gradual integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions is more conditional than the US approach, with respect to minority rights, although their long-term objectives are similar. At the same time, while strong Hungarian support for Israel is also a vehicle for improved relations with the Trump administration, as in the case of the other V4 countries, Washington does not receive diplomatic support from Budapest on Iran.

## SUMMARY

Although there are important areas where there is considerable alignment within the V4 with respect to the regional issues examined, one cannot speak of a unified V4 approach. Therefore, the level of alignment or divergence with US objectives and policies differs from country to country. While regarding the Ukrainian–Russian conflict Poland tends to have an even more assertive approach than the US administration, Hungary and Slovakia are on the other end of the spectrum, highlighting the importance of engagement with Russia. Between the two, while Hungary seems to be more aligned with the US in the military sphere through the DCA agreement, on the general political and economic dimensions it engages more with Russia, which is viewed with criticism in Washington. Nevertheless, all V4 countries consider Russia's annexation of Crimea and its behaviour in Eastern Ukraine as destabilizing, and they support the NATO and US military reassurance and deterrence efforts in the region.

With regard to NATO and EU enlargement, it is again Poland which seems to be the most aligned with the US goals. Considering NATO enlargement and cooperation with Ukraine, Hungary is seen as the country most opposed to US policy in light of having taken its dispute on minority rights with Kiev to the NATO level. However, given how far Ukraine is from fulfilling the NATO membership criteria and that there are many other NATO members who oppose Ukraine's membership in the alliance, in reality, Hungary's approach has more symbolic and political consequences than strategic ones.

Concerning some important Middle East questions, Central European support for the Trump administration is mixed. The V4 are strongly aligned with the Trump administration on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in opposition to the mainstream Western European approach. However, even in this portfolio, there are noticeable differences, especially with regard to Poland, which is otherwise considered to be the most pro-US country among the V4. With regard to the JCPOA, the Visegrad countries are very much supportive of the EU position seeking to keep the agreement alive. This approach is partially based on economic considerations, as well as interest in keeping stability in the Middle East.

The policies of the V4 examined have different implications for US interests and foreign policy options. Implicitly due to their limited size and international weight, the V4 have more opportunities to influence geopolitical developments in their own Eastern European region than in the Middle East. This makes them more important for US policy regarding Europe than for other regions. As allies in the vicinity of Russia able to provide space for US military power projection and as members of NATO, the behaviour of these countries influences US policy towards the region and Europe as a whole. The voice of the V4 on NATO enlargement through their membership rights is also to be considered by Washington. Hence, the value of the V4 is not only valorised because their policies on EU and NATO enlargement and deterring Russia in response to Moscow's behaviour largely coincides with US policy, but because Central Europeans have an influence on these developments, even if not a decisive one.

On the other hand, when it comes to political dialogue with Russia and the economic approach to the Ukrainian conflict, the V4 are more dependent on the core EU powers than in the security-military sphere; hence, US leverage is more limited in V4 decision-making. This is reflected especially in the differentiated approach towards Russia on sanctions, economic relations, or political dialogue by Slovakia and Hungary. Therefore, the US is less able to lean on Central Europeans on economic and political matters because the policies diverge more among the V4 as well as in relation to the US, and the overall V4 influence on these topics is more limited.

Concerning the Middle East, a similar pattern is visible to the one on the Eastern European issues, taking into consideration that on the economic dimension the Central Europeans tend to distance themselves more from Washington, as highlighted by their approach to the JCPOA and their economic relations with Iran. Here, although their diverging views are not emphasized, the V4 is quite unified in its opposition to US policy. At the same time, a similar unified V4 could be experienced in supporting the US policy on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. However, in both cases the Central Europeans are marginal actors, and their potential to significantly influence either geopolitical developments in the Middle East or US–European cooperation on these matters is extremely limited. This circumstance significantly reduces the value of the V4 for Washington.



## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the V4 are considered to be a valuable partner for the United States on certain regional issues in and around Europe, especially concerning defence and deterrence against Russia, and NATO and EU enlargement. However, when it comes to the broader political and economic containment of Russia, the V4 are more divided, and the US cannot count on a unified V4 support. Concerning the Middle East, in the case of Iran and the JCPOA, the V4 are more defensive of their economic interests and seem to align more with the core EU countries. At the same time, they are much more supportive of Israel compared to most EU countries. However, their position has more of a symbolic value than actual influence on the future development of the conflict and on the US ability to further pursue its interests in the region.

This diagnosis is important for both Washington and the V4 to consider as they formulate their respective policies. For the United States, it cannot take Central European support for granted. Thus, continuing consultations and at times incentives are necessary to secure their cooperation with the US, while applying pressure might be counterproductive. On the Central European side, a concerted approach and more cooperation among the V4 in Washington, might bring more benefits in the long term than unilateral engagements. The individual weight of these countries is quite limited, but it multiplies the impact when they visibly act together. Some of the regional issues examined, especially with regard to Russia and enlargement, are even more important strategic concerns for Central Europe than for Washington. The priority should be moving the common agenda and shared interests forward rather than short-term individual political benefits in Washington, D.C.