



Report

# REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE AFTERMATH OF RUSSIA'S WAR: CHANGES AND PROSPECTS

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## About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.



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## Report

On April 18<sup>th</sup>, EUROPEUM's Brussels Office in partnership with PISM Brussels Office under the Think Visegrad platform hosted a discussion titled "Regional Cooperation in Central Europe in the Aftermath of Russia's War: Changes and Prospects". This event was attended by 15 experts from think tanks and representatives of EU institutions.

The discussion started with the introduction of the topic of the discussion and the presentation of [a report](#) authored by a group of policy experts from PISM. Co-authors of the study, Tomasz Zornaczuk and Lukasz Ogrodnik presented the main outcomes of their study and highlighted several trends which are currently occurring within the region of Central Europe. Among these points, they argue that the changes and mutations occurring within the regional cooperation don't directly stem from different positions of countries of Central Europe regarding the Russian war in Ukraine but were already emerging before it. The study focuses on 8 cooperation formats that were analysed and compared.

**Cooperation in Central Europe matters and has plenty of space for further development.**

The follow-up discussion held under the Chatham house rules provided space for further discussion and reflection on the outcomes of the report. Among these, the notion of different prospects for the future of those platforms of cooperation and their possible convergence was highlighted. Speakers also saw the results of the paper as a confirmation that cooperation in Central Europe matters and has plenty of space for further development. It is a tool used and to be used by all the states in the region and the variety of platforms and their focuses provide sufficient space to maintain close cooperation even in the times of political differences among the countries.

During the discussion, the effects of political changes across the region were highlighted as the reasons for the changing political dynamics. Three tendencies were observed in this context, namely a decrease in activity, stability, and an intensification of cooperation. A decrease can be currently mostly visible in the case of Visegrad Group (V4), where political divisions over the Russian war in Ukraine are the most visible, and where we are witnessing lesser frequency of meetings and smaller amount of outcomes of the high-level meetings.

One of the tangible shortcomings of the current situation is also the lack of meetings on the V4+ formats, which were highly successful in the past and managed to strengthen cooperation with other regions of Europe. While these reasons bring obvious limits to common approaches on the political level, Visegrad countries should put more focus on the practical dimension of cooperation, most importantly on the dimensions of citizens, culture, and sharing of best practices among the V4 countries in various fields of state or local administration, or the focus on youth. A crucial role in this regard is put on the activities of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) which remains the only institutionalized body of the V4.

Later on, the experts discussed other platforms of cooperation in which stability was observed, namely the Central Five (C5) and Three Seas Initiative (3SI), as both of these formats recently hosted meetings in Ljubljana and Vilnius respectively. While the ambitions of the Central Five remain focused on providing a broader format of coordination between Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia, 3SI still has the potential to fulfil its ambitions in terms of regional development and interconnectivity. This will depend on the involvement, or more precisely investments made, from the side of the participating countries. Another boost

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to this initiative could be provided by a potential closer intertwinement with security aspects of building stronger connections within the region in line with the cooperation of the Bucharest Nine, another format that is focused specifically on security and defence and strengthening of infrastructures in participating countries. This format became significantly more vivid from the start of the Russian war in Ukraine. Another important finding shared by the experts is the fact that global distancing from China was observed across the different formats of cooperation in Central Europe.

As argued by a couple of discussants, the current level of cooperation in Central Europe also revolves around the debate about the future of the EU and the nexus between enlargement towards the Western Balkans

and Eastern Europe and the EU reforms, which some EU Member States see as necessary for the future functioning of the Union. This can be seen within the EU across different groupings and formats, from rather proactive (e.g. support from the “Friends of Western Balkans”) to protectionist (blockage of grain imports from Ukraine by Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria) approaches. While many of the countries are supportive of enlarging the EU, they are still quite reluctant to the adjustments the EU functioning.

Among the political changes within the region, certain bilateral partnerships also became more visible in the past months, most notably the Czech-Polish cooperation, as the two countries have similar strategic views and threat perceptions toward Russia. The same can be stated about closer cooperation between Poland and the Baltic states. After the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia, closer collaboration between Slovakia and Hungary can also be observed.

To conclude, the plethora of regional platforms in Central Europe has positive impacts on the cooperation among the countries and should be further exploited and supported, even at times when political and other challenges can cause stagnation on a certain front.

