

DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION, INTEGRATION, AND TRUST WITHIN THE VISEGRÁD GROUP: TWENTY YEARS SINCE EUROPEAN UNION INTEGRATION

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December 2024

Καλώς ήλθατε στο
Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινοβούλιο
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**Co-funded by
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Content

Background 3

Survey Results and Implications 7

National Questions..... 8

EU Questions..... 12

Synergies and Insights from National and EU Questions..... 15

Conclusion 18

Bibliography 20

Background

The development of the European Union (EU) in the 21st century has been marked by notably transformative events, increasing at a seemingly exponential rate; the Great Recession of 2008, the Eurozone debt crisis of 2010, the migrant crisis of 2015, Brexit in 2016, rule of law backsliding escalating in 2018, the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Despite the punditry's¹ cyclically² mimetic³ declarations that the European project faces its decisive breaking point and imminent collapse, the political union has consistently endured. Certain pockets of EU Member States have responded to these various crises by operating within distinct social, economic, and historic cohorts. One key manifestation of this "minilateralism"⁴ among EU Member States is the Visegrád Group (V4)—composed of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. There exist other alliances within the EU Member States—Benelux, the EU Three, or the Weimar Triangle. However, the V4 stands out in 2024 as a particularly notable grouping of EU Member States for a host of reasons. Considering this year is the 20th anniversary of EU enlargement to these countries, it is a particularly auspicious time to assess their current state of integration into the EU project.

The V4 as a political platform has been leveraged by its respective Member State governments for EU and NATO accession in the 1990s,⁵ development of living and

¹ Yardley, Jim. "Has Europe Reached the Breaking Point?" *The New York Times*, December 15, 2015, sec. Magazine. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/magazine/has-europe-reached-the-breaking-point.html>.

² Dunin-Wasowicz, Roch. "What Happens If the European Union Falls Apart." *LSE BREXIT* (blog), July 26, 2018. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/07/26/what-happens-if-the-european-union-falls-apart/>.

³ Frost, David. "The EU Isn't about to Collapse. It's Worse than That." <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/02/08/eu-isnt-about-to-collapse-its-worse-than-that/>.

⁴ Minilateralism is defined as a subset of members of a larger group operating and coordinating within that larger group for shared interests or goals.

⁵ Dangerfield, Martin. "The Visegrad Group in the Expanded European Union: From Preaccession to Postaccession Cooperation." *East European Politics and Societies* 22, no. 03 (2008): 630–67.

economic standards on par with Western Europe in the 2000s,⁶ and iterative dissent over tranches of EU policy in the second half of the 2010s.⁷ When considering the current state of EU integration, it is apparent that a soft geographic division—West versus East—has struck a key disjuncture concerning significant EU competencies. Whether in trade, business, politics, or social policy—Western European and post-communist European countries have operated in broadly dissimilar capacities, approaches, and policy positions.⁸ In the post-communist period, Central and Eastern European countries carried a “return to Europe” state of mind that sought the magnetic pull of Western European standards of living, international access, and economic development; upon the collapse of the communist Eastern Bloc, a clear gap in key metrics facilitated a perception of needing to “catch up” by adopting Western political and economic institutions.^{9 10} As such, the V4 formed in the aftermath of the fall of communism for such purposes and under the presumption that there would be power in unifying for EU integration.¹¹

The V4 as a collective presents a particularly interesting case study in minilateralism within the EU because of the numerous iterations and use cases of the venue by various Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak national governments.

⁶ Bieszk-Stolorz, Beata, and Krzysztof Dmytrów. “Influence of Accession of the Visegrad Group Countries to the EU on the Situation in Their Labour Markets.” *Sustainability* 12, no. 16 (January 2020): 6694. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12166694>.

⁷ Stepper, Péter. “The Visegrad Group and the EU Agenda on Migration: A Coalition of the Unwilling?” *Corvinus Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2016): 62–82.

⁸ Epstein, Rachel A., and Wade Jacoby. “Eastern Enlargement Ten Years On: Transcending the East–West Divide?” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 1 (2014): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12089>.

⁹ Brzeski, Andrzej, and Enrico Colombatto. “Can Eastern Europe Catch Up?” *Post-Communist Economies* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 1999): 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631379996020>.

¹⁰ Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. “Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents.” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 117–28.

¹¹ Schmidt, Andrea. “Friends Forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration.” *Politics in Central Europe* 12, no. 3 (December 1, 2016): 113–40. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pce-2016-0019>.

These four Central European states have long been buffeted by a great power to the east—Russia—and a great power to the west—Germany. In managing the process of shedding the shadow of the communist era, the V4's earliest manifestation came through a natural affinity among these states to achieve EU accession, develop market economies, and establish Western-styled institutions. In the move to integrate into the EU, material benefits in economic outputs such as labor productivity and GDP growth were realized.¹² However, despite the measurable advantages of EU integration for the V4—the political saliency of Euroscepticism, distrust in established institutions, and national populist agendas gained traction in the 2010s.¹³ With changing domestic governments and after accession to the EU, the platform has at times been used as a bulwark against that very political body—shirking migration policy, external agricultural in-flows, or deeper EU integration via the euro.

In the years after EU accession of the V4, a visible surge of support for anti-Brussels, populist positioning came to bear in several of the newer Member States in Central Europe via leaders in the 2010s—such as, Prime Ministers Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland—who presented a revisionist and nationalist bent.¹⁴ Disruptive market transitions, foreign direct investment in mostly export-focused sectors, the Great Recession of 2008, and rapid social change precipitated unease in the newer bloc of the EU.¹⁵ Such developments

¹² Campos, Nauro F., Fabrizio Coricelli, and Luigi Moretti. "Economic Growth and Political Integration: Estimating the Benefits from Membership in the European Union Using the Synthetic Counterfactuals Method." SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY, May 3, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2432446>.

¹³ Végh, Zsuzsanna. "From Pro-European Alliance to Eurosceptic Protest Group? The Case of the Visegrad Group," n.d. https://www.sieps.se/globalassets/publikationer/2018/2018_7epa.pdf.

¹⁴ Fabbrini, Sergio, and Tiziano Zgaga. "Right-Wing Sovereignism in the European Union: Definition, Features and Implications." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62, no. 2 (2024): 341–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13497>.

¹⁵ Czech, Sławomir, and Maciej Kassner. "Understanding the Rise of Illiberal Populism in Central and Eastern Europe. Insights from Scholarship Influenced by Karl Polanyi." *Forum for Social Economics* 52, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 223–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07360932.2023.2218584>.

accommodating national parties—Fidesz in Hungary, Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) in Slovakia, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, and Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) in Czechia—who proposed illiberal populism as an alluring corrective against the cosmopolitan and financial services-dominated elite of Western capitals.¹⁶ Naturally, this populist positioning, Euroscepticism, and anti-elitism was leveraged extensively for a domestic audience to win elections at home.¹⁷ ¹⁸ However, despite a rhetorical cooling on European integration from political leaders, the illiberal governments still took advantage of EU membership and maintained full operative capacity contrary to the impulse portrayed in their respective language.¹⁹

As EU coffers opened to Central and Eastern European Member States, EU membership has paid well. In EU spending and revenue from the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014 - 2020, no post-communist Member State was a net contributor to the EU budget.²⁰ Poland and Hungary—under the leadership of illiberal populist PiS and Fidesz respectively²¹—have found a particularly lucrative trajectory in their tenure as EU Member States; since 2014, Poland has been the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Csehi, Robert, and Edit Zgut-Przybylska. "We Won't Let Brussels Dictate Us': Eurosceptic Populism in Hungary and Poland." *European Politics and Society* 22 (January 27, 2020): 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1717064>.

¹⁸ Enyedi, Zsolt. "Populist Polarization and Party System Institutionalization: The Role of Party Politics in De-Democratization." *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 4 (July 3, 2016): 210-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1113883>.

¹⁹ Kazharski, Aliaksei. "The End of 'Central Europe'? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four." *Geopolitics* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 754-80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1389720>.

²⁰ "Spending and Revenue 2014 to 2020 - European Commission." https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2014-2020/spending-and-revenue_en.

²¹ Sata, Robert, and Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski. "Full Article: Illiberal Spectatorship - the Disfigurement of Citizenship in Hungary and Poland." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, November 12, 2023. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14782804.2023.2280977>.

largest recipient of EU funds,²² and Hungary was the largest recipient of funds per capita between 2011 and 2016.²³ It stands to reason that ruling parties premised on generally anti-EU sentiments, yet firmly entrenched and directly benefitting from EU membership, would possibly seek to ameliorate the isolating effects of agitating against EU institutions. Additionally, while leading political parties have opportunistically leveraged anxieties over the social and economic changes of recent decades, it stands to question whether the broader population currently aligns with the rhetorical sentiments of populist parties in the neighborhood.

Utilizing survey results from Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, this paper answers two highly pertinent research questions. First, what are the attitudes of V4 citizens regarding institutional trust, satisfaction with post-communist development, “Europeanness,” and democratic participation twenty years since EU accession? Consequently, how do perspectives on domestic governments and the EU compare? At the very center of these questions rests the future direction of EU integration and a deeper understanding of the sincerity or ephemerality of Euroscepticism.

Survey Results and Implications

In a survey conducted by EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, 125 concrete questions were posed to 4,057 participants across Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia in 2023. The questions were designed to gain insight into individual sentiments regarding rather abstract notions of the rule of law, democracy, and institutional trust. These questions ranged from one’s participation in elections to media consumption patterns, from educational attainment to trust and perceived

²² “Spending and Revenue 2021 to 2027 - European Commission.” https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2021-2027/spending-and-revenue_en.

²³ The Orange Files. “European Union Net Funding to Hungary, 2011–2016.” *The Orange Files* (blog), May 24, 2018. <https://theorangefiles.hu/2018/05/24/new-european-union-net-funding-to-hungary-2011-2016/>.

corruption in local, national, and supranational institutions. These survey results provide apt insight into the current state of integration into and perceptions of the EU twenty years after V4 accession. The following graphs unpack key data-based conclusions from ten salient questions presented to survey participants. These ten questions were selected based on their relation to various national government branches, cultural and societal directions, and supranational bodies. The survey reflects a cross-section of Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak societies, factoring in national metrics of socioeconomic status, age, gender, political ideology, and region.

National Questions

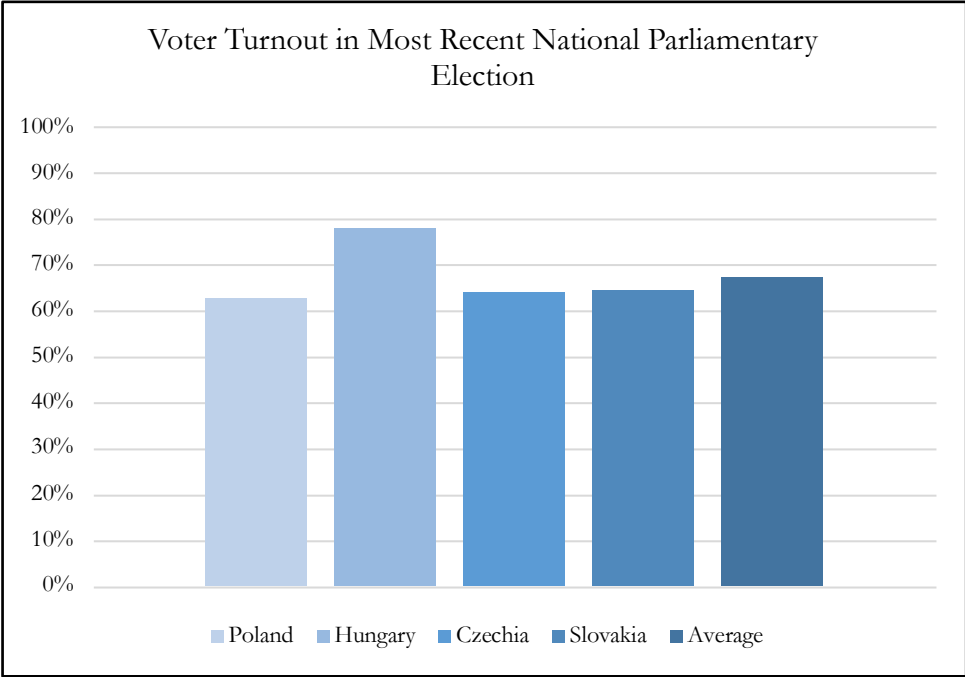


Figure 1: High average voter turnout out spans the V4, balancing out at 67.2%
(Based on Poland's election in 2019, Hungary's election in 2022, Czechia's election in 2021, Slovakia's election in 2023)

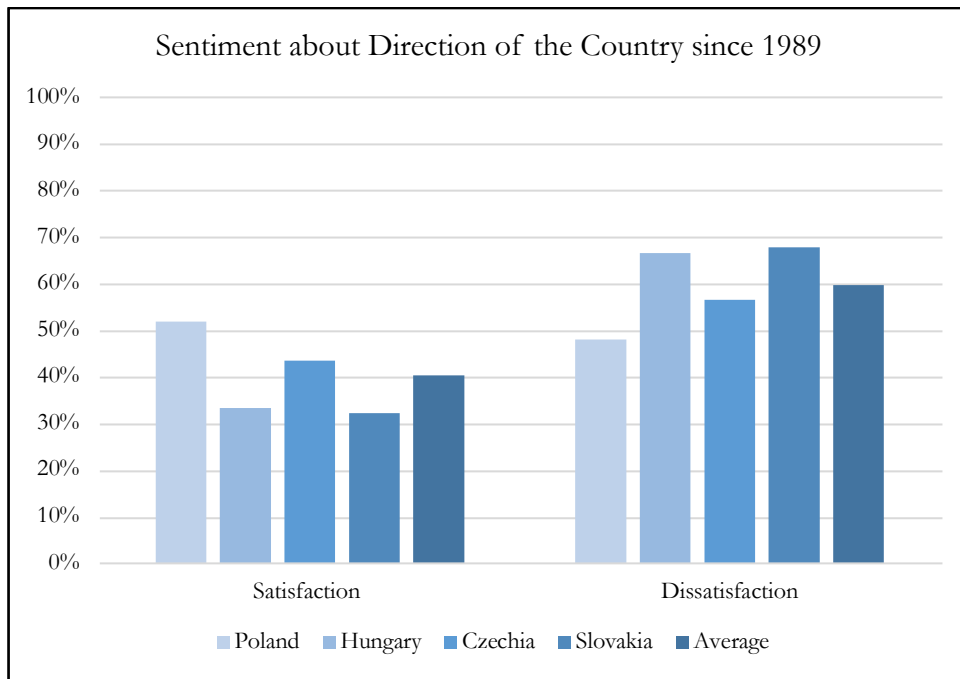


Figure 2: Dissatisfaction with the direction of one’s country since 1989 averages out at 59.8% across the V4 in 2023. A slim majority of Poles are satisfied with the direction of their country

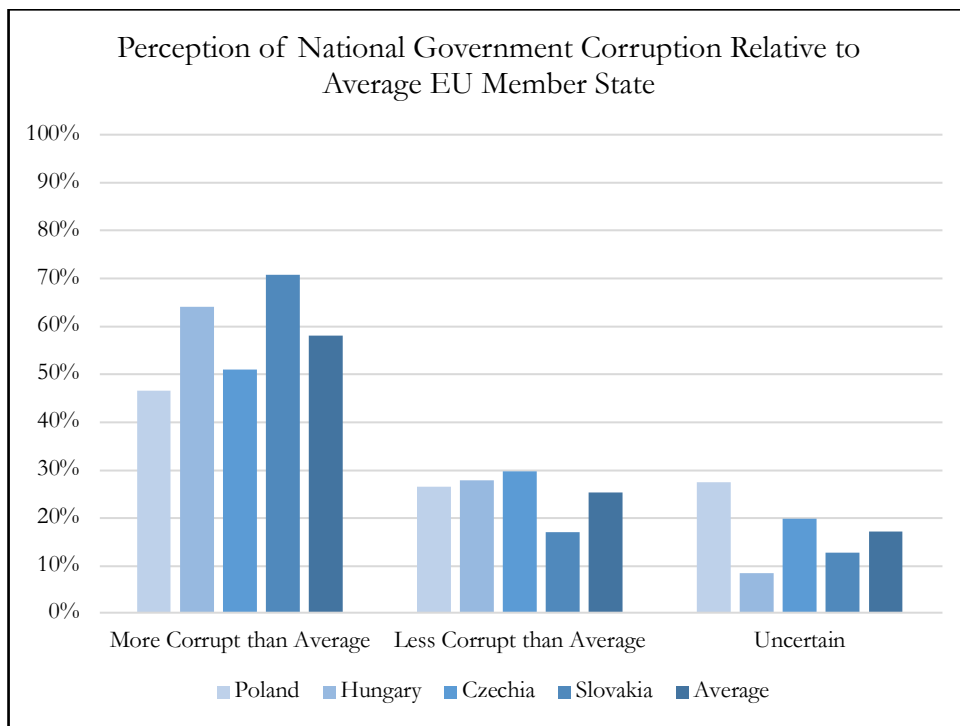


Figure 3: Citizens within the V4 believe their national governments are more corrupt when compared to the average EU Member State in 2023, settling at 58%

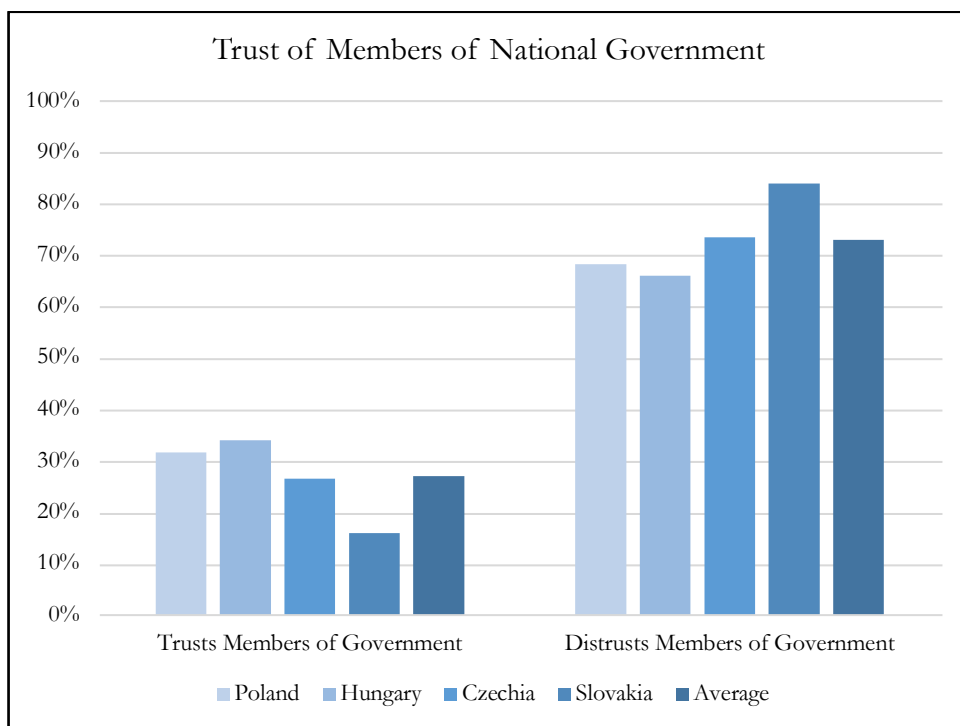


Figure 4: On average, citizens are significantly distrustful of members of government at 73% in 2023

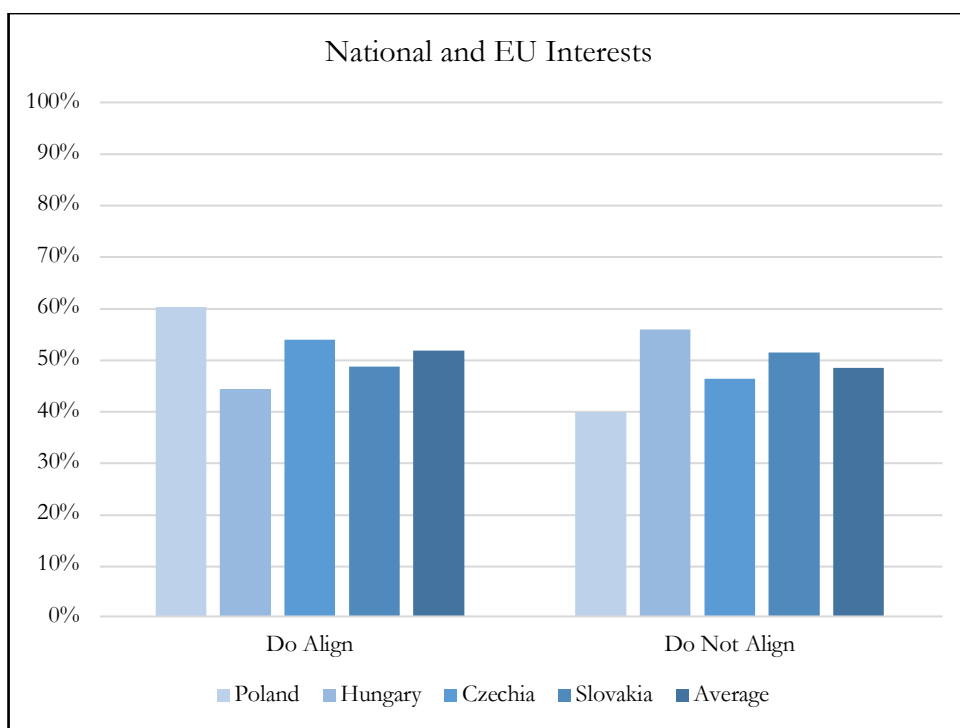


Figure 5: A majority of Poles and Czechs believe their national interests align with the interests of the EU in 2023. A majority of Hungarians and Slovaks do not believe so

These first five figures indicate an interesting state of affairs across the V4 regarding domestic considerations. Citizens in Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia are engaged in the project of democracy, turning out to vote at an average of 67.2% (Figure 1). While democratic participation is robust, one sees a generally distrustful and pessimistic stance vis-à-vis national direction and national leaders. Participants from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia are dissatisfied with the direction of their countries since the fall of communism; a slim majority of Poles are satisfied with the direction of their country (Figure 2). Additionally, participants mostly believe their countries are more corrupt than the average EU Member State (Figure 3). They predominantly distrust their members of government (Figure 4). A majority of Hungarians and Slovaks believe their national interests do not align with the EU, but a majority of Czechs and Poles believe they do (Figure 5).

With the survey results indicating a general lack of faith in the national institutions among the V4 countries, one might consequently wonder whether similar sentiments surround the EU institutions. The juxtaposition of perceptions around these two public bodies could provide insight into the trajectory of EU integration. In the eventuality of more robust trust in EU institutions, one might posit that the EU project has achieved success in incorporating the 2004 enlargement cohort—particularly given the relative distance, both political and literal, between Brussels and these Central European states. However, if citizens are more distrustful of the EU or carry more negative sentiments about the European project, some subsequent measure of self-analysis and policy-specific study might be in order. To explore this consideration, one ought to turn to the EU-related survey results.

EU Questions

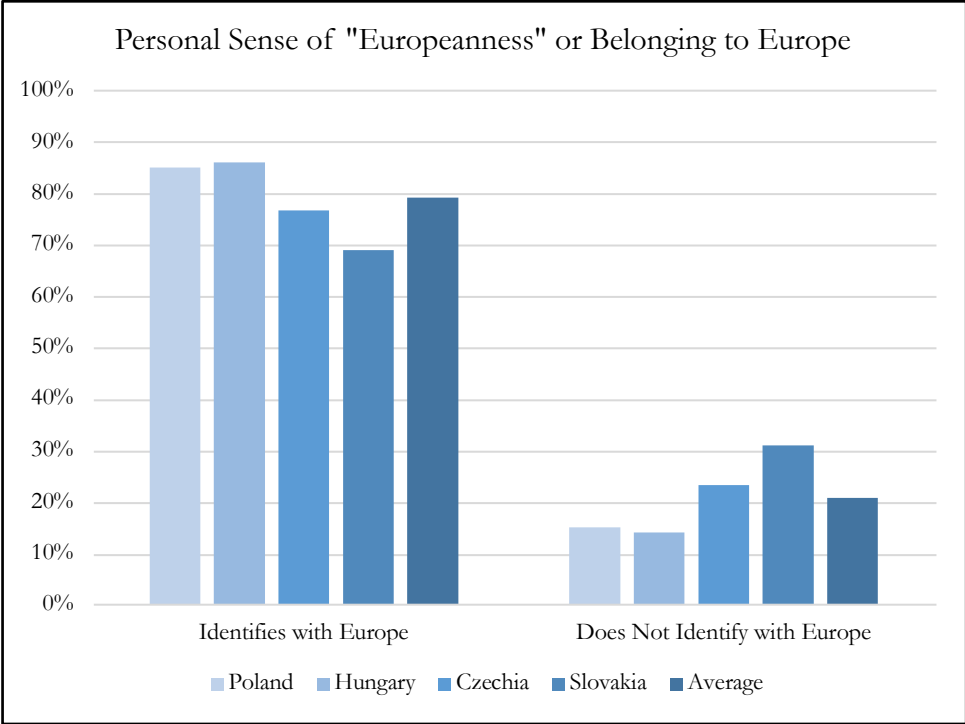


Figure 6: V4 countries highly identify with Europe and Europeanness, averaging at 79.2% in 2023

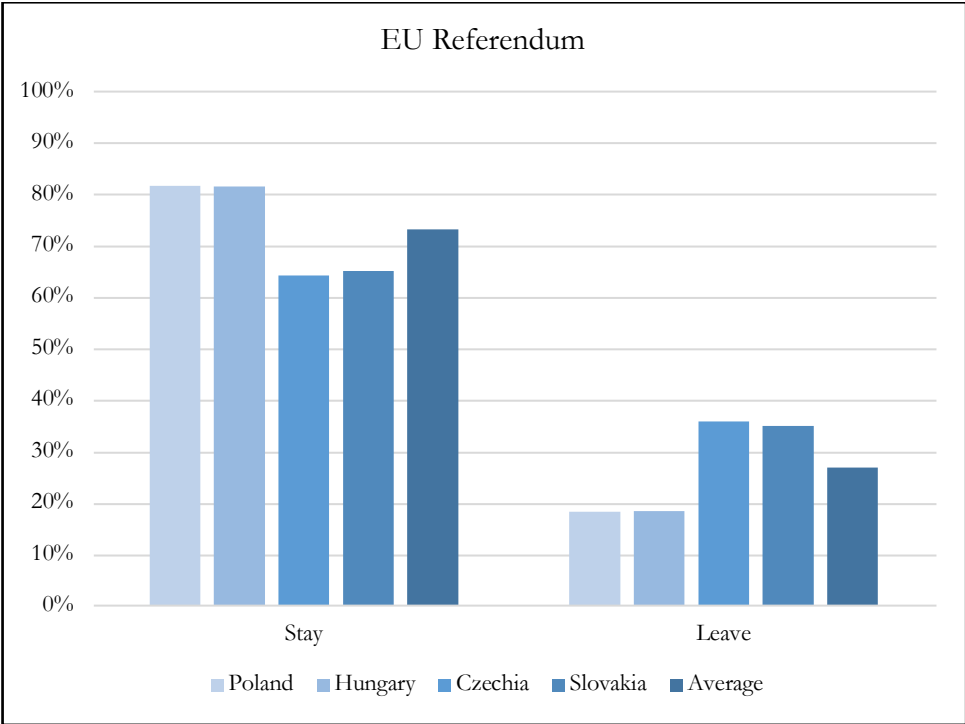


Figure 7: V4 countries squarely support staying in the EU, averaging at 73.2% in 2023

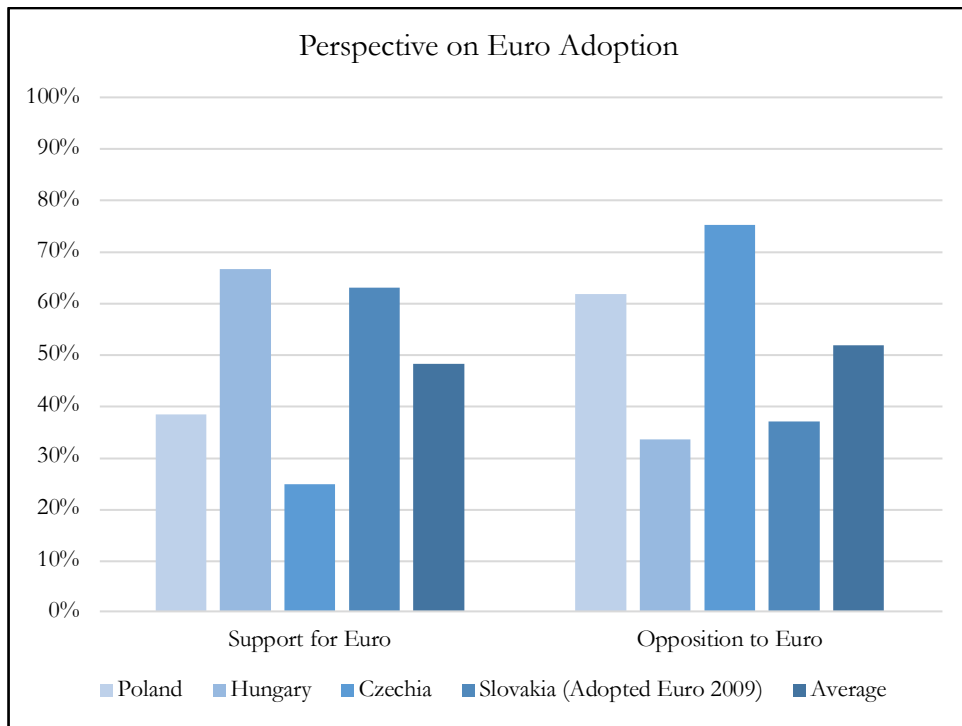


Figure 8: Hungarians and Slovaks carry vigorous support for the euro in 2023. Poles and Czechs oppose adopting the euro

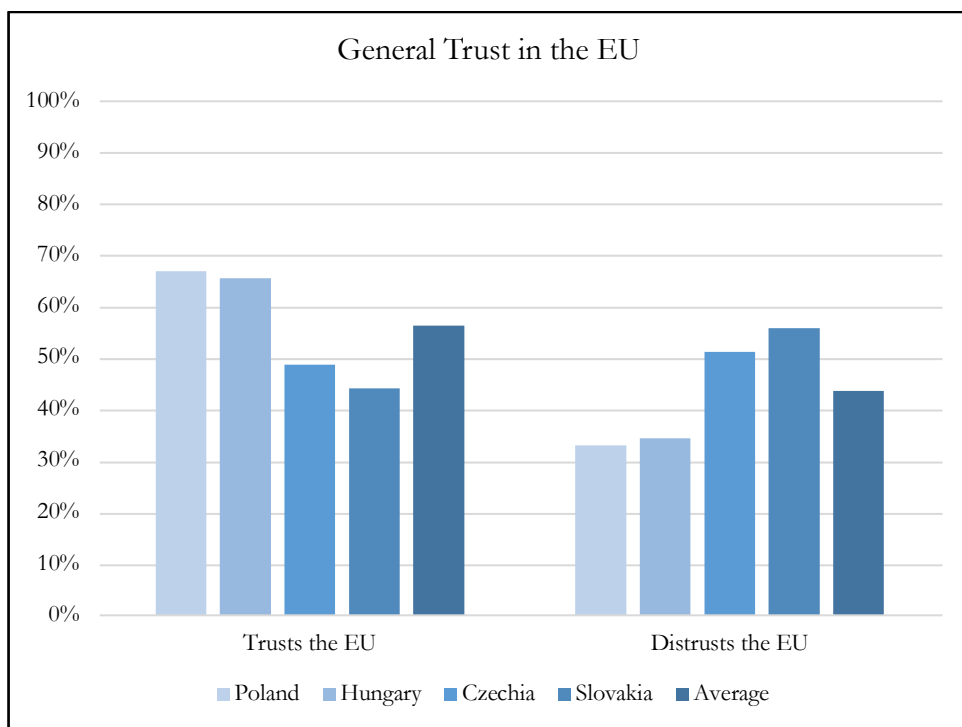


Figure 9: On average, trust in the EU across the four countries balances at 56.4% in 2023. A strong majority of Poles and Hungarians trust the EU. A majority of Czechs and Slovaks do not

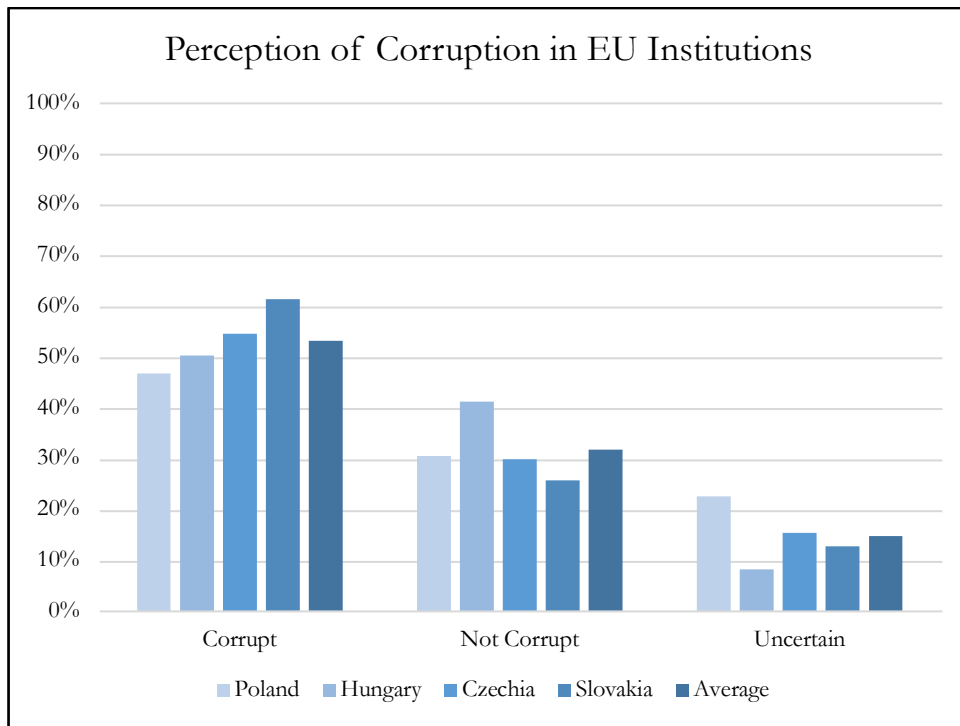


Figure 10: 53.3% of citizens across Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia believe the EU institutions are corrupt in 2023

In these five figures, one finds a distinct set of perspectives on the EU project since accession in 2004. What stands out most pointedly is the level of identification with Europe or “Europeanness” from Figure 6. Nearly 80% of respondents say they identify with Europe. This carries major implications for correlated political decisions on, say, whether to stay in or leave the EU. As one finds in Figure 7 with the question of a referendum on EU membership, 73.2% of Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and Slovaks indicate a desire to stay in the EU. Despite strong personal identification with the European project and wish to stay in the EU community, there exists less robust alignment on more diffusive questions—such as euro adoption, general trust, and perceived corruption. Regarding euro adoption, the group average is evenly split in terms of support and opposition to the euro—48.2% support and 51.8% oppose—with a majority of Hungarians and Slovaks supporting and a majority of Czechs and Poles opposing (Figure 8). Such tepid results perhaps track with the debate over currency adoption trade-offs—

a temporary rise²⁴ in prices and loss of monetary policy²⁵ for more streamlined transaction processes²⁶ and no exchange rates. Notably, Slovakia maintains strong support for the euro at 63%, and the country already adopted the currency back in 2009. Trust in the EU averages at 56.4% (Figure 9) with Poles and Hungarians carrying higher trust levels than Czechs and Slovaks. Finally, most Hungarians, Czechs, and Slovaks are prone to believing that the EU institutions are corrupt.

Synergies and Insights from National and EU Questions

Perhaps the most impactful results of this article are found in comparing survey responses between the national and EU questions. In essence, one ought to consider where trust plays out in relation to EU and national governments. Such survey findings could lend credence to the notion that EU integration has comparatively coalesced since 2004 accession.

There exist a mix of relevant synergies between the national and EU questions from the survey. One most substantial conclusion is that while some political leaders might clamber against the EU, affinity for the political community stands very strong, indicating durable EU membership. A second key conclusion is that as one compares confidence in national governments and the EU, citizens across Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia trust the EU far more than their domestic governments by a net 29.3%. One possible explanation for these findings is that the given distance—both physically and politically—between the Brussels institutions and these four countries insulates the EU from negative reactions or

²⁴ Pufnik, Andreja. "Effects of the Adoption of the Euro on Consumer Prices and Inflation Perceptions: An Overview of Experiences and Assessment of the Possible Impact in Croatia," n.d. <https://www.hnb.hr/repec/hnb/survey/pdf/s-027.pdf>

²⁵ Novák, Vítězslav, Andrea Vargová, András Csehes, and Sylwia Orszulik. "Euro as a Common Currency in the Visegrad Group," n.d. <https://real.mtak.hu/148959/1/Policy-paper-4-Novak-et-al.pdf>

²⁶ Polyák, Mgr Oliver. "The Impact of Euro Adoption on Competitiveness: The Comparison of Czech Republic and Slovakia," 2013. <https://dSPACE.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/56579/150019361.pdf?sequence=1>

blame when problems arise that negatively affect citizen's lives.²⁷ Among EU Member States, many major political decisions that are most prone to controversy—taxation, healthcare, education, and military—are driven at the national level.²⁸ Another explanation might come from a historical lens; the EU could still symbolize a “return to the West” for the broader populace from a lingering post-socialist mindset.²⁹ A third possible explanation is a purely transactional one: the funds from the European Union have materially improved citizens' quality of life.³⁰ While these survey results have charted levels of democratic participation, integration, and trust across the V4, it is vital to note that these four countries do not form some monolithic bloc. In fact, the group can often maintain significant internal tensions as is currently clear with the divide over Russia's aggression against Ukraine.³¹

The survey results affirm that there exists a diversity of viewpoints across the V4. Poles and Czechs are more likely to feel that corruption is prevalent in EU institutions than in their national governments vis-à-vis other EU Member States. Hungarians and Slovaks support the euro currency while Poles and Czechs do not. This could be explained by the relative instability of the Hungarian forint and general stability of the euro, Czech koruna, and Polish złoty. Poles are satisfied

²⁷ Szigeti, András. “The Problem of Institutional Responsibility and the European Union.” In *A Responsible Europe? Ethical Foundations of EU External Affairs*, edited by Hartmut Mayer and Henri Vogt, 17–35. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230625617_2.

²⁸ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - TITLE I: COMMON PROVISIONS - Article 5 (ex Article 5 TEC.) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2008/art_5/oj/eng.

²⁹ Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. “Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents.” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 117–28

³⁰ Natili, Marcello, Stefano Ronchi, and Francesco Visconti. “Invisible Social Europe? Linking Citizens' Awareness of European Cohesion Funds, Individual Power Resources, and Support for the EU.” *Journal of European Social Policy* 33, no. 5 (December 1, 2023): 570–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287231210727>.

³¹ Zichová, Kateřina. “Visegrad Four Group Lives on despite Opinion Split over Russia's War on Ukraine - Euractiv,” n.d. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/visegrad-four-group-lives-on-despite-opinion-split-over-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

with the direction of their country by a slim majority. Perhaps this correlates to changing headwinds against the Euroskeptic and illiberal PiS Party during the 2023 parliamentary elections. Czechs and Slovaks are more distrustful than trustful of the EU, while the reverse is true for Poles and Hungarians. Poles and Czechs believe their national interests align with the EU's interests, while Hungarians and Slovaks do not. Needless to say, the heterogenous perspectives in this survey demonstrate the breadth of opinions regarding major political and social questions in these four countries. Further research possibilities can be explored as to why these particular divergences occur. The survey results are only a snapshot into one moment in political time, so the possibility of future variance is surely present.

From these key results, one can conclude that survey respondents across Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia align on the major questions of democratic participation and perceptions of EU membership. There is high voter turnout, strong identification with Europe, and vigorous support for staying in the EU. Further areas of research might delve into exactly why these points of alignment with the EU are so robust. This paper has proposed some possible explanations—EU funds, the “return to the West” mindset, or distance from controversial political decisions. Further exploring these explanations will materially benefit EU and national policymakers in their work on behalf of citizens. When it comes down to more specific questions, participants from the four countries diverge in opinions on points such as euro adoption, perceived corruption, and relative trust. The causes of these divergences within the V4 could additionally be studied. Where some priorities diverge, the underlying premise endures—that these four Central European states squarely belong within the project of the EU.

Conclusion

Given these Central European countries similar path and timeline in EU accession, aggregate survey results across Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia provide important insights into the general progress of EU integration since 2004. While there exist clear distinctions across these four countries, one finds solid support for EU participation. While some faction-specific political posturing certainly requires due consideration, the concern over major social retractions from the EU should be rendered moot—at least for these four countries. Given these survey results, EU institutions would be well advised to develop a more thoughtful messaging strategy for communicating efforts to align EU and national priorities as well as address perceptions of corruption on the EU level. Several major corruption scandals have plagued the EU institutions of late.³² The new EU Commission might make resolving such scandals a priority. Domestic governments face a significant task of ameliorating discontent in the national direction and lack of confidence in public institutions.

The pertinence of this research paper situates in the twentieth anniversary of the EU's eastern enlargement of 2004. This year also marks major political changes across Europe; the European Parliament elections, a new EU Commission, and numerous domestic elections in Member States will now chart the future course of the EU. EU competencies have undeniably shifted eastward. Two of the most important issues facing the integrity of the EU sit squarely within the Central and Eastern European region—the Ukraine War and rule of law derogations in Hungary and Poland. With Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the focus of European capitals will be pointed eastward for much of the near future. The largest land war on the European continent since World War II has

³² euronews. "All News about European Parliament Corruption Scandal." <https://www.euronews.com/tag/european-parliament-corruption-scandal>.

upended political norms, security, diplomatic relations, and more. The measurable decline in rule of law protections in Hungary and Poland splices cracks in the structural cornerstone of EU cohesion—democratic values as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on EU. As the EU grapples with questions of shared political values, a common market, and free movement in 2024 and for those who seek to understand the prospect of EU integrity and solidarity today, one must understand the current state of trust, participation, and integration of the four V4 countries into the EU.

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