LUISS

Department
of Political Science

Ph.D in Politics

Cycle XXXVI

Towards a Europe of Subregions? – Investigating the Drivers of Subregional Actorship in the EU

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Academic Year 2024/25

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Title: Towards a Europe of Subregions? – Investigating the Drivers of Subregional Actorship in the EU

Table of contents

Acknowledgements

The PhD journey was one of the toughest challenges of my life thus far, especially the final year when you need to sit all day, every day in front of a blank paper, just you and your thoughts, hoping you would actually produce something that is scientific, meaningful and original.

Hereby I would like to express my profound gratitude to those, who supported me through and through either professionally or emotionally to tackle this seemingly insurmountable piece of work; and to those who made my experience at LUISS a profound, developmental voyage.

Let me start the long list with thanking my partner, best friend and fortress, Dani. It is no exaggeration that my mental health and my life in general took an unthinkably positive turn when you entered it. Thank you for investing time and effort in visiting me in Rome whenever you could. Thank you for believing in me and showing me that "the best blaze burns brightest when circumstances are at their worst." I cannot be grateful enough to you for helping me overcome my utter nonsense self-limiting beliefs. We're the best team, and that's all I could ask for.

I'm incredibly proud and grateful for my family, my mum and dad who cultivated from a tender age my passion for history, scientific thinking and teaching, most times not deliberately, but through leading by example. One can be a loving parent and still have a professional calling. Thank you for the lengthy phone and Skype conversations, and providing me refuge whenever I needed. Many thanks also to my grandparents, brother Balázs and my cousins Nóri, Ivett, Anna, Dorka and Lilla for all the cheering and wholesome family events that helped me to switch off.

I'm obliged to mention next Giulia Gallinella, without whom my experience at LUISS would not have been the same. On a professional level, thank you for mentoring me and introducing me to the world of TAing. We worked so incredibly well together, us little perfectionist freaks. Besides, our tactic to check upon each other every day in the final few months before finishing the thesis, to see whether we completed our dedicated daily word count helped immensely my progress. Most of all, thank you for getting to know an amazing, compassionate, selfless friend in you. I adore our little sorority with Ale Carraro and Isa Hernandez Pepe.

I'm also grateful for my supervisors, who trusted me with a great variety of tasks, and who were relentlessly supportive of my choice of research topic. Giving lectures was the pinnacle of my academic experience at LUISS, thanks to Thomas Christiansen. Whereas, I'll always be grateful for Sergio Fabbrini for the research activities I had to carry out for him, which promoted the progress of the thesis; and also, for giving me the opportunity to work in tandem with two fantastic young scholars, Andrea Capati and Tiziano Zgaga. I greatly enjoyed my research stay in Brussels too, thanks among others, to Ramona Coman and Pauline Thinus, two truly inspirational academics.

I'd like to also highlight my fantastic, patient and flexible Italian teacher, Eloisa Sicilia who helped me to navigate life in Rome, in an Italian language environment, despite my last-minute cancellations and hectic work schedule. At some point the classes turned into psychology consultations, which I think is a tangible testament to the advance I made in picking up Italian thanks to you. Many thanks also to my neighbours, Claudia Ippolito and Rocco Latessa, who became a point of reference, and a source of stability and safety during my stay in Rome. It really gave me peace of mind that I knew I could count on you if anything went wrong. Finally, I owe a profound shout-out to Sara Predebon for the lovely little ballet community she cajoled in her most supportive, body-positive Testaccio studio. Your classes were the best healing experience in every possible sense.

I’d like to express my utmost gratitude for the unwavering cheering from the side-lines to my Soviet Hut Gals from the London days: Ola Ziemiszewska and Rena Seyidova. We are the masters of long-distance friendship. Thank you for never giving up on me and for making this over a decade long friendship work, despite us living in three different countries for the most time. Your visit to Rome and Brussels were a blast. You are the kindest-hearted girl bosses, and I’m so proud of you.

Sasa Telek and Martin Varga, you are the reason I’m still around, no further explanation needed. Thank you for being awesome.

Last, but definitely not least, I’d like to thank Zsófi Molnár, Zsófi Vona, Bibi Phung and Ádám Petrecz for making me feel loved and important no matter what, and for defying all odds in sustaining our friendship.

1 Subregions, the newfound actors of EU decision-making: concepts and definitions

Subregions have received increased attention both in the media and the academic literature over the past decade due to their increased visibility in EU decision-making processes. Territorially coherent country coalitions emerged to the foreground during past crises. Not only did they succeed in making their voice heard together, but also, they managed to induce multiple negotiation stalemates, even though none of the groups achieved real blocking minority under qualified-majority arrangements. Examples include the New Hanseatic League of Northern European countries with Dutch leadership, which in the aftermath of the Financial Crisis, actively sought to tone down far-reaching European Monetary Union (EMU) reforms (Schulz and Henköl, 2020; Verdun, 2022). A subsequent spinoff of the Hansa, the Frugal Four, yet again with the Netherlands in its helm, was a key actor during the joint negotiations of the Next Generation EU pandemic fund and the 2021 – 27 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (Fabbrini, 2022; Howarth & Schild, 2022; Verdun, 2022). Despite the fact that they did not accomplish eradicating grants altogether, the group was able to secure a lucrative rebate, and had an influence on the proportion of grants and loans distributed to states in need (Fabbrini, 2022; Verdun, 2022). In a similar vein, a group of Central-Eastern European (CEE) countries called the Visegrad Group (also known as Visegrad 4 or V4) became instrumental in opposing redistribution migrant quotas, and blocking the Dublin IV reforms (Zaun and Ripoll Servent, 2023), which were the EU's response to the 2015 Refugee Crisis (Bedea & Kwadwo, 2020; Nič, 2016; Zaun, 2018). Later between 2019-2021 the Visegrad Group also accomplished to leave its mark on the EU Green Deal and the green taxonomy. Lastly, the Polish – Hungarian 'sovereignist' (Fabbrini, 2022) core of the V4 with the tacit support of Slovenia (Euractiv with AFP, 2020) were able to orchestrate a joint decision trap via an issue linkage between the Rule of Law conditionality mechanism and the own resources regulation (Schramm & Wessels 2022; Wahl 2020), which almost put into jeopardy both the MFF and the Next Generation EU agreements. The Frugal, the Solidarity and the Sovereignist coalitions during the pandemic negotiations identified by Fabbrini (2022) largely coincided not only with previous coalition patterns, which emerged in the aftermath of the Financial and the Migration Crises, but also with the North-West, South, Central-Eastern geographical division lines pinpointed by Kriesi (2016). Hence, it can be observed that subregional fragmentation have become more systematic and increasingly apparent; however, with a few notable exceptions (Bátora and Fossum, 2020; Fabbrini, 2022; Kriesi, 2016), little attention has been dedicated to explaining the phenomenon.

Conversely, it should be noted, that subregional entities are not a novelty within the EU, but a fundamental pillar of EU integration. Preston (1997) highlighted that the EU, even prior to the 2004 big bang enlargement, has always preferred to negotiate with groups of states with already close relations to each other, despite membership negotiations and monitoring being conducted on a one-on-one basis between the EU and candidate states. Furthermore, Dangerfield noted that

regional cooperation as a stepping stone to EU membership became a clearly pronounced feature of the eastward expansion, as "Europe Agreements" were signed with distinct regional units. Among them the first ones were the Visegrad countries, while the Baltics followed suit in 1995 (Dangerfield, 2014:210). In addition, the EU since then has adopted its own macro-regional strategies (the first in 2009 focussing on the Baltic Sea Region). The macro prefix intended to emphasise the distinction between a Europe of regions, where subnational units are mobilized particularly via the cohesion budget (Hooghe & Marks, 2001:84), and a Europe of functional geographies, which intended to tackle in a concerted way, shared, transnational challenges that affect distinct groups of member states (Duhr, 2011:38). The difference between the current flare of subregional activism and older subregional patterns is palpable. The latter served the expansion of the Union, streamlining decision-making processes, and tackling transborder, regional difficulties more efficiently. Whereas, the former trend encompasses tandems of member states, who utilise subregional, meso-level platforms to represent and exert their interests together, even if the result is less integration or stifling far-reaching initiatives. Secondly, this novel meso-level activity also challenged an established norm in EU decision-making, namely that negotiations are inherently consensus-driven. Policies, which enjoy the broad support of all member states are still the ultimate end-goal of EU decision-making (Heisenberg, 2005; Mattila, 2008), however, antagonisms during negotiations are increasingly fought out publicly between highly visible, often politicised coalitions, instead of keeping them behind closed doors. Thus, even if effective compromises are reached before the official voting-stage in intergovernmental institutions, the perception of EU decision-making has altered (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Cooper and Fabbrini (2021) go as far as arguing that the surge of regionalism within the EU is an unexplored from of differentiated governance. Despite their increasing importance, no EU integration theory dedicate attention to subregional actors, and the main focus remains on individual member states and supranational institutions. Lastly, Helen Wallace (1985), a proponent of functionalist theories, pointed out that country preferences tend to differ on a policy by policy basis, and argues that coalitions between EU members emerge on an ad-hoc basis. Yet recently, member states have repeatedly chosen meso-level, geographically coherent platforms, some of which purposefully appeal to centuries old regional alliances and sentiments (Korteweg, 2018; Saringer, 2018; Tulok, 2018), to exert influence on EU decision-making. Hitherto, the subregionalism literature remains under-explored and scattered, and it fails to offer feasible explanations to when subregions rise to prominent actorship.

Do subregions become proactive on an ad-hoc basis when member states in the format share common interests, or are there specific triggers, which increase the likeliness of subregional actorship? The thesis aims at addressing this theoretical gap in the literature via responding to the following research question: "Under what circumstances do subregions become effective actors in EU-level negotiations?" It is important to stress that the question does not carry the underlying presumption that countries, which are members of a subregional unit would ultimately choose the platform to advocate for their interests, even if subregional activism show periodic peaks. In fact,

it is rare to see the delegation of real, binding, supranational powers to meso-level institutions in subregional aggregations, which makes it difficult to implement any standardisation or discipline among members of a subregional unit. As it has clearly manifested in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Hungarian Prime Minister did not have to bear any institutional burdens or material consequences within Visegrad Group settings for representing a sharply different stance on the crisis compared to his counterparts. Nonetheless, his berserk behaviour resulted in harmful normative consequences, provided Orbán was ostracised even by their closest allies (Bartha, 2023). Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the then governing Law and Justice Party in Poland, and the strongest partner of Orbán in the V4 even stated that: "Orbán must be advised to see an eye doctor" if he cannot see what happened in Bucha (Euronews, 2022a). Although with less pronounced hostility, already in 2020, the illiberal Polish-Hungarian core of the Visegrad Group was pitted against the "Eurorealist" Czeck-Slovak tandem, when the novel Rule of Law (RoL) instrument was discussed. Thus, it can be observed that weak institutionalisation at meso-level fails to trigger the logic of consequences, therefore, subregional member states are free to act regardless of the actions of their counterparts. Often, as it has been illustrated with the above examples, the logic of appropriateness could not serve either as substantive deterrence. In other words, EU countries retain full autonomy over when to cooperate in subregional settings. When they do so, as it has been showcased with some examples in the first paragraph, subregions succeed in exerting a considerable impact on EU policies, and become highly visible actors. Bedea & Kwadwo (2020:15) coined this phenomenon as "opportunistic subregionalism, which pursue observable attempts at reviving a level of latent actorship without formal institutionalisation when there is a critical juncture". In other words, subregions even after a prolonged dormant period when they project the picture of "merely loose, informal clubs whose members have a habit of consulting and coordinating with each other" (Kuusik and Raik, 2018:2), can become effective actors if the right circumstances arise.

While research is available on the factors, which prompt the formation of subregions, and scholars have also presented a variety of systematic classifications to capture the nature of subregional institutionalisation and activities (Dangerfield, 2004; Inotai, 1998; Egelstrom, 2001; Cottey, 1999; Cooper and Fabbrini, 2021), the literature remains silent on pinpointing what leads to their increased visibility and effective actorship in EU policy-making. To respond to the proposed research question, this thesis aims at identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions, which prompt the escalation of subregions to effective actorship via implementing a mixed method research design. The first, crisp set qualitative comparative analysis (csQCA) section will identify and analyse instances of effective actorship (outcome), in order to examine the "constellations, configurations and conjunctures" of conditions, which may lead to this specific outcome (Rihoux, 2006:684). QCA does not apply the language of variables, instead it is a case-oriented approach, which treats each case as a complex and specific combination of features (Ragin, Berg-Schlosser & Meur 1996), or in other words conditions, which were picked for analysis based on robust theoretical underpinnings. Positive cases in this study are defined in the QCA study as an instance

when a subregional unit rose to effective actorship in a specific year and negotiation process. Whereas, negative cases are instances when members of a subregion express open hostility against one another. More details regarding definitions, the case selection criteria and methodological choices will be shared later in this chapter and in Chapter 3 and 4. Then, once necessary and sufficient conditions, which lead to effective actorship have been identified using a set-theoretic perspective, it was possible to categorise cases as typical, deviant or irrelevant (Kahwati & Kane, 2020b). Performing the case categorisation based on the set membership of cases in the outcome and the solution set allows the researcher to select those ones for deeper, case study analysis, which can contribute to the more nuanced understanding of the previously identified sufficiency pathway(s), or can shed light on some possible omitted conditions.

Cases in the QCA part of the analysis encompass three subregional units, namely, the New Hanseatic League, the Frugal Four and the Visegrad Group. However, for the second, case study element of the mixed method research design, cases related solely to the Visegrad Group (also referred to as Visegrd 4 or V4) have been chosen. There are several reasons behind this methodological choice. Firstly, New Hansa and Frugal Four related cases were all categorised as typical after the QCA was performed, whereas Visegrad related cases fell into a wider range of categories (typical, deviant, irrelevant), and hence were deemed to provide more scope for comparison and specification. Furthermore, owing to its volatile recent past, characterised by striking instances of effective cooperation and sudden fallouts between its members, only the Visegrad Group showcased positive as well as negative based on the selection criteria discussed below. Lastly, the Visegrad is an established subregion with a profound history, which predates its accession to the EU, and similarly to the New Hansa, the Visegrad name appeals to the medieval origins of the group. It should be noted that cases in the QCA part of the research design were tied to the particular year when the group under investigation became an effective actor during a specific policy negotiation. Whereas, the second, case study part will extend the analysis to a broader temporal frame, with the purpose of mapping out the dynamics of the cooperation between subregional member states not only at the time when the group became an effective actor, but also throughout the entire selected negotiation process. Accordingly, the first empirical chapter will present the results of the QCA, whereas the second and third empirical chapters will examine in minuscule detail the role of the Visegrad cooperation in stalemating the Dublin reforms (Chapter 5), and its imprint on the Green Deal, as well as the green taxonomy (Chapter 6). Lastly, regarding the case selection process, a few words should be dedicated to the time frame that this thesis embraces. Cases have been picked form the following time frame 2015 – 2023. By 2015, a decade has passed after the last major EU enlargement round, hence all existing EU member states (perhaps except Croatia) had a profound understanding of how EU negations function. Past research has concluded that CEE countries failed to cooperate when the EU's initial response to the Financial Crisis was negotiated due to their inexperienced status (Copeland, 2013). To minimise the impact of inexperience and being unfamiliar with how the EU works, a decade after

the last accession round, which also extended to member states of the Visegrad 4 could be an ideal starting point.

As a final caveat, it should be noted that disagreement between members of a subregion, even on substantial issues does not entail the complete halt of their activities. Subregional platforms or loose institutional settings might become less frequented in case of a fallout or a phase of stagnation. Nevertheless, established instruments such as ministerial meetings, the rotating presidency and the practice of producing common shared policy papers remain available for revitalisation when circumstances are more favourable. The below paragraphs in this introductory chapter will be structured as it follows. First, the definition of subregions, or in other words the main ontological focus of this thesis will be discussed. Subsequently, the analysis will turn to the outcome (effective actorship). This section will be followed by a brief description of the methodology. The theoretical underpinnings of the QCA analysis regarding the conditions under investigation will be discussed later in the analytical framework chapter (Chapter 3). Finally, the end of the chapter will outline the structure of the thesis and the exact chapter plan. This thesis hypothesises that subregions are opportunistic platforms for EU member states to pursue their policy stance, however, their cooperation is not entirely ad-hoc as some scholars have suggested (Eihmanis, 2024; Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024; Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019), rather, subregional fragmentation follows regional patterns of politicisation of specific issues (Kriesi, 2016).

This thesis builds on Robert Putnam's account of two-level games, which on the one hand examines the formation of national positions, and on the other hand, analyses bargaining among international partners (Putnam, 1988). Political leaders are present at both imaginary "game boards" or negotiation tables – at the national level they sit together with the leading party or coalition, parliamentary figures, domestic agencies, interest groups and advisors; while at the international level they are present together with their foreign counterparts (Putnam, 1988:434). Furthermore, they are the ones to communicate, represent and even sell both the national and if applicable the subregional standpoint at various platforms. Hence, the research will have a fundamental political elite-focussed approach, provided national and concerted subregionsl policy stances culminate in their speeches, communiques, interviews and press releases. To be more specific, and to tailor Putnam's two-level games to this concrete research project, first, at the domestic level policy stances of national governments and their justification will be scrutinised and compared together with circumstantial economic, public opinion and political factors during the initial phases of the negotiations. Then, moving on to the international stage, it will be investigated if and why a concerted subregional position was formulated, and how subregional member states' stance was presented at EU negotiations.

1.1 What constitutes a 'subregion'?

The key ontological focus of this thesis is subregionalism, a fuzzy, multi-layered term in academia, which requires specification. First, one must take a step back and reflect on regionalism without

the sub prefix from a broader academic angle, to address the key debates in the field. Then, after establishing a broad definition of subregion, it will be scrutinised what it means specifically in the EU and V4 context. 'Region' stems from two Latin words, firstly from the noun regio, which means 'direction' (Jönsson et al., 2000: 15), and the verb regere, which is translated as 'to rule' or 'to command' (Söderbaum, 2004:15). The meaning of the concept modified over time and region transformed to denote also 'border' or a clearly delineated space, a province (Söderbaum, 2004:15). Hence, the morphology of the word allows us to associate the term, 'region' with spatial confines, and some sort of leadership or organisational coherence that covers such territory. In line with this broad definition, the academic literature has applied region to characterise a vast array of geographical units, including subnational micro-scale regions (Hooghe & Marks, 2001); as well as conglomerates of states, below the global level (Cottey, 1999:5). The thesis speaks to the latter one, and the below discussion will apply 'region' solely to describe inter-state aggregates. In this field of literature, a theoretical and empirical divide has been coined between those scholars, who belong to the school of old regionalism, and those who represent new regionalism. Although, it must be emphasised that the divide is rather complementary instead of competing in nature (Hettne, 1999). Old regionalism is dominated by states and intergovernmental arrangements, and places the policy-focus sharply on trade and security. Moreover, old regionalism often considers regions as an antidote to or protection against globalisation (Söderbaum, 2007). Whereas, new regionalism extends its ontological focus to a wider plethora of actors, including the private sector and civil society; it acknowledges the malleable nature of regions and points at regional initiatives, which are linked to globalisation more positively (Söderbaum, 2007). Scholars also make a distinction between the processes of regionalism and regionalisation. The former means a state-led process of building and sustaining formal regional institutions and organisations among at least three states. Meanwhile, the latter refers to the process of increasing economic, political, social, or cultural interactions among geographically and culturally contiguous states and societies (Börzel & Risse, 2016:7-8). Lastly, institutionalisation is another key element of regional units, which signify the gradual deepening of mutual trust and responsiveness between states (Hettne & Söderbaum,). In fact, some scholars associate the building of institutions with integration, whereas regions with weak institutionalisation remain at the level of enhanced cooperation (Best & Christiansen, 2019; Pedersen, 2002). In conclusion, the study of regions and regionalism is a rich, and multi-faceted branch of literature, provided academics have showcased diverse findings about the key actors, drivers, policy coverage (scope), and organisational features (institutionalisation) of regional units. These complexities must be taken into consideration also when analysing subregions.

When adding the sub- prefix to region or regionalism, the term still refers to inter-state relations, however, at the middle or meso-level. The concept is an under-researched notion in the academic literature, therefore, it is difficult to find nuanced definitions or a layered application of the term. The shared starting point that encompasses all formulations is that a subregion is part of a larger, macroregional unit (Hettne, 2005). The literature, which focuses on Asia and Africa tends to utilise

the term as sub-part of an entire continent, without assuming any sort of institutionalisation at macro level (Acharya, 2001; Closa, 2016; Ochieng'-Springer, 2016). Acharya defines ASEAN as an inward-looking subregional entity (of South-East Asia), that was faced with the challenge of developing a wider regional security community (Acharya, 2001:221). While Morada (2011) examines the group's role in strengthening the responsibility to protect in the context of Asia. Scholars, who study African subregionalism (Ating & Atuobi, 2011; Closa, 2016; Ochieng'-Springer, 2016) draw attention to well-institutionalised Sub-Saharan formations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), which might be overlapping in membership, but they all have their own treaties, exclusive boundaries and formal organs. Unsurprisingly, provided the regionalism literature has its roots in Europe, and early comparative regionalism tended to treat the EU as a basic standard of comparison across regions (Börzel & Risse, 2019; Hurrell, 1995; de Lombarde et al., 2010), subregionalism is also largely influenced by Eurocentrism. In fact, the few classifications that exist to systematically categorise meso-level multilateralism (Dangerfield, 2004; Inotai, 1998) are all exclusively based on the subregion – EU integration nexus, and they also purport a fundamentally positive relation between subregions and EU-level integration. This observation allows one to draw three conclusions. First, it is apparent that the term subregion can be applied to a wide plethora of multilateral aggregations, however, it must be underlined that without specifying the macro context – i.e.: a continent, a larger intergovernmental organization, the EU – subregions lose meaning. Therefore, subregionalism is an ultimately relational and contextual expression. Secondly, when institutionalisation occurs at macro level, it is imperative to address the relation and interaction between the meso and macro units. Lastly, it is also clear that the classifications established by Dangerfield (2004) and Inotai (1998) have lost relevance, provided EU subregions have a dynamic, dialectic relation with EU integration, which can equally entail Eurosceptic connotations, or a foot-dragging tactic to stick to the status quo and counter further integration (Börzel, 2002; Maes & Verdun, 2005).

Since this thesis concentrates its focus on subregions whose members are also all part of the European Union (EU), subregionalism will be defined here as a unit of the European Union, which is the macro-regional level in this scenario. Therefore, it is quintessential to review the specific EU-related literature on subregionalism before coming up with a more nuanced definition of what 'subregion' entails. Regional patterns within the EU and regional fragmentation has started attracting increased attention following the big-bang enlargement in 2004. Some quantitative studies, which examined Council voting data have identified a geographical North-East-South, or a net-contributor vs net-benefactor divide in the voting behaviour of states (Hageman, 2008; Keading & Sleck, 2005; Zimmer, Schneider and Dobbins, 2005). The second wave of increased focus on regional division within Europe came with the onset of the Financial Crisis, which was followed by a chain of multiple other crisis situations. Kriesi, in his work also speaks of the intensification of geographically coherent division lines between North-Western, Southern, and

Central-Eastern Europe. His explanation suggests that the politicisation of EU integration is "embedded in national political conflict structures, that vary systematically between the three regions" (Kriesi, 2016:32). While these studies spell out important explanations to pinpoint regional congruences and coalition patterns in the EU, it must be emphasised that none speaks specifically of subregions per se. To qualify as a subregion, the platform should have its own establishing treaty, agreement or communique; it must have its own agency via a self-imposed name, and it should also have some degree – even if weak – institutionalisation. Without these elements, one can speak only of malleable geographies or imagined communities (Murphy, 1991). Examples regarding the institutionalisation indicator might run as wide as the densely and elaborately interwoven BeNeLux formation, with a Parliament and Court of Justice (Belkahla, 2019; Verdoes, 2020), or a more recent establishment, the Frugal Four, which creation was announced in a Financial Times op-ed by the Austrian then Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz (Kurz, 2020a). The organisation operates via regular pre-EUCO and Council meetings (Verdun, 2022), which is a weak, but regular type of institutionalisation. In addition, subregions might have a wide or narrow policy-scope. To stick to the examples mentioned previously, the BeNeLux group falls within the former category, as their website lists ten policy fields of cooperation, starting from education, energy to security (Benelux.int, 2023); while the Frugal Four belongs to the latter category, provided it has a sharp policy focus on economic and fiscal coordination (Schoeller & Falkner, 2022). If a geographically incoherent group of states cooperate on a single policy or publish a one-off, stand-alone joint policy paper, such as the Dutch-Spanish joint statement on the EU's economic and financial policy agenda (Government of the Netherlands, 2022), it cannot be considered a subregion.

A significant proportion of academic pieces that analyse EU subregions focus on single subregional units, such as the Frugal Four, the BeNeLux formation, the Nordic-Baltic 6 or the Visegrad Group (Bedea & Kwadwo, 2020; Bossaert and Vanhoonacker, 2000; Braun, 2020; Elgström et al, 2001; Howarth & Schild, 2022; Nič, 2016; Rūse, 2014; Schoeller & Falkner, 2022; Schulz and Henköl, 2020; Scott, 2022; Verdun, 2022). Whereas, studies with a comparative element stay within the confines of scrutinising the relation of subregions with EU integration (Dangerfield, 2004; Inotai, 1998; Kirch, 2021; Cooper & Fabbrini, 2021). Some individual research papers address the motivations of member states to aggregate into subregional units with the aim of making their voice heard in a concerted way (Cottey, 1999; Fabbrini, 2022); however, due to their limited temporal and policy scope, it is hard to produce generalisable causal inferences based on them. The aim of this thesis is to go beyond existing studies and formulate causal inferences that can travel across different subregions within the empirical reality of the EU. Hence, the core target is arriving at conclusions with a high degree of transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) within specific situational scope conditions, or in other words the realm of EU subregions.

In light of the above discussion of empirical examples and the literature, subregion in this research will be defined as a multilateral formation, established as a result of cooperation between states,

(1) whose members all belong to a macroregional setting – namely the EU; (2) its members are geographically coherent; (3) the group has an establishing treaty, communique or document that sets out exclusive membership; (4) has its own intergovernmental institutionalisation, which might communicate with, but works separately from the EU; and finally (5) cooperation exceeds a single policy-paper and a singular point in time. Based on this definition, the chosen case study focus, the Visegrad Four qualifies as an EU subregion, provided all its members (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) are also member states of the EU; they are all Eastern-Central European neighbours; the group has its own self-imposed name, and exclusive membership is defined in the 1991 Visegrad Declaration; the group has a rotating presidency, meets regularly in ministerial and other high-ranking settings before Council and European Council meetings, and has its own Visegrad Fund. Lastly, the group has a wide policy scope, and showcases longevity of cooperation, even if at times its intensity is fluctuating. The definition also fits neatly the New Hanseatic League and the Frugal Four. Both groups, especially the former have made use of the long-standing institutionalisation of the Nordic Baltic 6 (NB6) grouping (Schulz & Helnköl, 2020), both groups have exclusive membership and an establishing communique, which were published as op-eds in lead quality newspapers, and both groups have cooperated in various policy negotiations, even though their policy scope is much narrower compared to the Visegrad Group.

Before moving on to define the dependent variable, it should be noted that subregional formations are not intergovernmental organisations that want to "replace or undermine any EU institution, but rather they wish to foster their interest-representation in bilateral or multilateral formats" (Milewski, 2017:90). The Benelux formation has an outstanding, dense institutional structure, since the group has its own Benelux Court of Justice, as well as Parliament. Furthermore, in the treaty that established the Court, it is explicitly stated that national member state courts shall be bound by the decisions of the Benelux Court of Justice. Thus, as it follows, the institution functions as the highest court in the Benelux region, in its field of competence. Still, the Court has never challenged the primacy of EU law, in fact, it is part of the EU's legal order and can request preliminary rulings from the CJEU (Belkahla, 2016). Meanwhile, the Benelux Parliament is a mere consultative body, lacking formal legislative powers (Verdoes, 2020:386). Consequently, subregional formations, even if they are densely institutionalised, will most likely never achieve full supranational integration at meso-level, due to their embeddedness in the EU, and legal constraints on challenging the primacy of EU law. Nevertheless, even if proper integration at meso-level is an unattainable perspective, the EU's institutional framework offers not only burdens, but also opportunities to enhance greater connectivity and coordination in subregional settings. Members of various subregional formations consult each other and establish common policy agendas before European Council, and even Council gatherings - some more frequently and routinely (e.g. the Benelux or the Visegrad 4), while others more sporadically and informally (Nordic-Baltic NB6). If approached strategically and consistently, subregions have the potential to exploit these traditional EU policy channels, especially in the pre-negotiation stage (Bossaert & Vanhoonacker, 2000; Rūse, 2014).

1.2 What defines 'effective actorship'?

Actorship has an established literature in the discipline of IR, however, traditionally it has been attributed to states, especially in the realms of realism and rationalism. The standard, bottom-line definition of the phrase derives from Sjöstedt's account, which claims that actorship is the "capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system" (Sjöstedt, 1977:16). This broad interpretation, which underlines the importance of autonomous behaviour has different connotations, sources and contextual constraints depending on what type of actors are in question. If states are the ultimate players of the international arena, according to the Hobbesian, realist interpretation, their actorship springs from their ability to act as sovereign entities, which guarantee security for its citizens. In addition, states are considered to be unitary actors, which interact with other sovereign entities (Twardzisz, 2013). Van Langenhove expands this definition with three elements, encompassing the "economic policy tissue" – every state is a single market with its own economic policy; "the institutional framework" – which guarantees the delivery of public goods; and lastly, "sovereignty" – which not only allows a state to exert authority over its own citizens, but also allows it to act internationally (Van Langenhove, 2016). This rather Westphalian notion though fails to account for the role of multilateral arrangements, which according to pluralist and liberal thinkers help states to navigate in permanent uncertainty in the international arena. Keohane defines such multilateral organisations as "institutions with persistent and connected sets of formal and informal rules that prescribe behavioural roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations" (Keonahe, 1988:383, Ruggie, 1993). In other words, in an interconnected world, multilateral organisations might considerably shape states' actorship with a variety of positive and negative constraints. Furthermore, interstate arrangements, like the EU might also exhibit state-like features via the pooling of sovereignty (Keohane and Hoffman, 1991:13), which manifests in the EU's own single market and projecting a common, European identity based on shared understandings, expectations and social knowledge (Wendt, 1995). In fact, actorship: "the capacity to act purposively in international affairs" (Hettne, 2011:28), from a social constructivist angle may be influenced not only by a state's coercive power, or the international rules of the game in an interconnected world, but also by common cultural, political narratives and identities shared in a society (Fawcett, 2012:681-2), or between policy-makers at international level (Checkel, 1999).

The above paragraph has detailed the factors, which may influence a state's actorship at international level. Unsurprisingly, the literature on EU integration and EU studies tends to emulate the above criteria, provided the EU demonstrates a range of state-like characteristics, starting from the single market, to a robust, shared EU identity. As an illustrative anecdote, in 1994 at a conference of Ambassadors, the then French Prime Minister Alain Juppé signalled that the French ambassadors' role is to "assert the identity of the European Union" besides explaining the French point of view within EU institutions (Bretherton & Vogler, 2005). However, regional organisations at other parts of the world, as well as subregions within the EU are far from having the same level of institutionalisation and identity awareness. Some scholars define a region's

capacity to become a significant actor in light of how strongly a region performs on the regionness scale (Hettne, 2014; Bedea & Kwadwo, 2020). Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) came up with a five-element definition of regionness to illustrate that the word "region" encapsulates a continuum or a scale, and some interstate organisations may be considered "more or less of a region". On this scale naturally, the EU hits the highest score. For instance, the final, fifth criteria: "regional institutionalised polity or region-state" (Bretherton & Vogler, 2005) – which constitutes the evolution of a new form of quasi-sovereign political entity, with a densely institutionalised inter-state polity – is fulfilled best and solely by the EU (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000:468). Provided subregions inside the EU cannot overcome the EU's institutional shadow, as their polity cannot challenge the supremacy of EU law, it is unadvisable to include the full expression of regionness when defining EU subregion's tendency to become effective actors. Furthermore, past experience has proven that subregions may act autonomously via a number of policy tools at their disposal (pre-Council meetings, rotating presidency), without the presence of deep, densely interwoven institutionalisation, or a shared identity. In a publication of Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov (2021), which analyses public opinion in the V4, the authors state that "Visegrad solidarity seems to have a broader social dimension", and it is worth "examining the V4's identity in the context of European identity" as a whole (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2021:13). However, there are obvious differences between Visegrad member states in terms of public awareness of the cooperation's existence - Hungary (69%), followed by Slovakia (65%), Czechia (52%) and Poland (49%) (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2021:7). Thus, it can be concluded that in order to become effective actors, subregions do not necessarily have to fulfil the highest degree of regionness. Therefore, the definition of actorship in this thesis will not mirror the full expression of regionness.

Two renditions, on the one hand by Bretherton & Vogler's (2005) and on the other hand by Jupille and Caporaso (1998) do not enlist all elements of regionness as necessary to become an efficient regional actor. Therefore, their take will be the breeding ground for identifying the components of "actorship" in this thesis. Both of the formulations have their empirical roots in examples related to the EU, which will be amended with references to the broader regionalism literature. In this way the definition of effective actorship here will not only fit the empirical reality of EU subregions, but at the same time, will also speak to the broader, behavioural, core definition of subregionalism presented above. Bretherton & Vogler's (2005) identify three key elements of actorship: "opportunity, presence and capability". The first is an exogenous factor – "the external environment of ideas and events, which constrain or enable actorship" (Bretherton & Vogler, 2005), while the latter two are endogenous to the region. Presence, recognition and capability all depend on the active agency of actors internal or external to the subregion, meanwhile, opportunity appears as a structural component or attribute of actorship (Bretherton & Vogler, 2005). Yet opportunity should not be viewed simply as an "inert background" condition (Jacobsen, 2003), since opportunity often depend on the discursive interpretation of an event, and "the process of construction cannot be divorced from material conditions" (Hill, 1993). Positive cases in the QCA chapter will concentrate on opportunities, which were successfully exploited by subregions via

their presence and autonomous actions. Whereas, negative cases are opportunities, that resulted in the denial of cooperation, even open hostility between subregional members. Specific instances of opportunities in this research are the fiscal reform project of the EU in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the reform of the Dublin system in consequence of the refugee crisis, the negotiation of the Green Deal to avert a climate catastrophe, the fiscal and Rule of Law implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, and lastly the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Though the literature labelled some of these momentums as critical junctures (Capoccia, 2016; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007), this vocabulary will be avoided in this project, provided the aim here is not to explain institutional change that produces new path-dependent policy solutions, but to analyse why and in what ways some windows of opportunity, or moments of fluidity and uncertainty are exploited by subregional actors, while others divide the members of the group.

The second notion, *'presence'* refers to the "consequences of being" (Bretherton & Vogler, 2005), or in other words forming a united front, in a "subjectively conscious" manner (Hettne, 2014:4). In empirical terms presence may manifest as sharing common ideas, values and policy goals, and communicating concerted policy papers at subregional level. Furthermore, *'presence'* may be also detected when a representative of a member state expresses the government's interests in intergovernmental EU settings both as a matter of national and subregional quest. *'Presence'* does not come up as a separate component in Jupille's and Caporaso's definition, but it is accounted for under the banner of *'cohesion'* and *'recognition'* (Jupille & Caporaso, 1998). Indeed Bretherton & Vogler fail to mention the latter, even though *'recognition by other actors'* is an inherent counterpart of *'presence'*. "Regional actors have to be recognised as such by other regions or by other actors too" (van Langenhove, 2016). If a region is not accounted for by others as a relevant player in the negotiation games, the region's actorship is futile, in spite of actions and common sympathies, which may rectify their *'presence'*. The third component in Bretherton & Vogler's definition is *'capability'* or the "availability of policy instruments" to be utilized effectively. As it has been mentioned above, subregions might not be densely institutionalised, but they do have a range of policy instruments at their disposal (e.g. rotating presidency, pre-Council meetings, shared parliamentary assembly…etc.). These tools might be capitalised in a number of different ways: subregions might become "integration vanguards" or "resistance cells" vis-à-vis the EU (Cooper & Fabbrini, 2021:10-12). The nature of exploiting capabilities does not matter, as long as they are at a subregion's disposal and can be utilised concertedly, freely and autonomously. At the same time, it should be noted, that the existence of *'capabilities'* in itself may not elevate a subregion to become an effective actor, a degree of autonomy from the greater macro-regional or in this specific case EU context must be strongly concurrent. Thus, the final indicator of effective actorship is *'autonomy'*. It may be defined as the "independent decision-making capacity of regional institutions" (Behr & Jokela, 2011:15), which can be capitalised most effectively in possession of institutional distinctiveness (Doidge, 2008). Thus, it is evident, that *'capability'* and *'autonomy'* go so much hand in hand, that they will be considered together as a single feature of actorship. Table 1 below lists the theoretical components of effective actorship and their empirical

Table 1 – The elements and manifestations of "actorship"

Elements of actorship	Possible empirical manifestations of components
Presence	• sharing common ideas, values and policy goals • communicating concerted policy papers at subregional level • communicating in the name of the subregion
Recognition	Recognition by external actors, including: • Supranational institutions (Commission, EP) • EU member states • In the media • By actors external to the EU
Autonomy (and capability)	• The active utilisation of institutionalisation, which is independent of the EU framework (pre-Council meetings also count, as they are not a requirement by EU standards) • Independent decision-making capacity with the aim of influencing EU policies • The ability to exploit institutions and policy instruments to express the region's opinion, which can deviate from the Commission proposal and other member states' proposals

Source: the author's own rendition

manifestations, which is one of the main pillars of this thesis. As a final remark on actorship, before embarking on a brief discussion about the structural, technical details of the research design and the chapter plan, it should be noted that the thesis does not seek to investigate whether and with what success rate subregions manage to alter EU policies. The above, strictly behavioural definition of actorship implies that effectiveness manifests as concerted action, coordination, making use of policy instruments and the ability to establish the region as a relevant player. These factors might eventually lead to a policy change at macro-regional, EU level, but it is not necessarily an expected outcome. Hence, it falls outside the scope of the analysis. The ultimate goal here is to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions, which propel EU member states to choose subregional platforms to advocate for their policy goals in a concerted, visible and effective manner.

1.3 Research design summary, chapter plan

As it has been mentioned above, this thesis aims at responding to the following research question: "Under what circumstances do subregions become effective actors in EU-level negotiations?" via examining cases of effective actorship at meso, subregional level within the EU. The relevant examples which have been identified based on the 'subregion' and 'actorship' criteria presented above relate to the New Hanseatic League (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania,

the Netherlands and Sweden), the Frugal Four (Austria, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden), and the Visegrad Four (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia). This research project relies on a mixed method design. In part 1 a QCA analysis was performed to identify the relevant sufficiency pathways which trigger effective actorship at meso-level. Based on the results of the QCA analysis, to study in more detail how necessary and sufficient conditions unfold in specific cases, a second case study part was formulated, in which greater emphasis was placed on the Visegrad Group. Provided the second, case-study phase of the mixed method research design concentrates solely on the V4, for the better understanding of the Group's actions, Chapter 2 will present an extended descriptive account of its long-durée history.

Subsequently, Chapter 3 will outline the analytical framework of the thesis, via presenting competing hypotheses as a first step towards identifying those conditions, which prompt subregions to become effective, visible actors in EU level policy negotiations. This section will shift the emphasis towards forming theoretical assumptions around the possible impact of the conditions. Since the literature on subregionalism is sparse and does not formulate hypotheses directly related to subregional actorship, this thesis borrows theoretical assumptions from the EU and regionalism literatures. More specifically, those theoretical trends have been selected for analysis, which hypothesise coalition building among states or regional fragmentation. The selected theories have been categorised under four banners: power politics, functional coalitions, ideological alignment and post-functional politicisation. In line with the methodological requirements, and case-oriented inclination of QCA, Chapter 3 avoids using the language of variables, and will focus more so on 'conditions' and 'outcome'. This thesis does not have a separate methodological chapter. Questions related to methodology – such as the standards of conducting a robust csQCA in a mixed method arrangement – will be discussed in Chapter 3, and Chapter 4. The first empirical chapter (Chapter 4) will function as a bridge between the analytical framework and the empirical part of the thesis. Using the theoretical framework and operationalisation outlined in Chapter 1 (outcome) and Chapter 3 (conditions), Chapter 4 will perform the calibration and compilation of the QCA table, which will be the first step towards identifying the sufficiency pathway, that triggers subregions to become effective actors. Then, based on the results of the QCA analysis, two typical cases and a deviant case were selected for in-depth case study analysis. Typical cases are the Visegrad Group's actions during the Dublin reform negotiations (Chapter 5), and the compilation of Fit-for-55, whereas their actions to influence the content of the green taxonomy signify a deviant case (Chapter 6). Since the fit-for 55 package and the green taxonomy both relate to the same policy process, the EU Green Deal, they will be discussed in the same chapter. Lastly, the concluding chapter before discussing the future implications of the thesis, will briefly address two negative cases, when the Visegrad Group fell apart and hostility arose between its members. Although it falls outside the scope of this thesis to establish the sufficiency pathway that may lead to subregions falling apart, at the level of descriptive inferences, Chapter 7 addresses the actions of Visegrad member states during the

negotiation of the Rule of Law conditionality mechanism, EU's response to the invasion of Ukraine.

2 Central Europe, a permanent buffer zone – the long-durée history of the V4 and its member states

Academics, whose research interests extend to European subregions often describe these state conglomerates as "natural allies" (Bossaert & Vanhoonacker, 2000:157) or "natural partners" of one another (Törő & Grúber, 2014:369). Subregional platforms are constituted of geographically adjacent states with intertwining historical and cultural ties. As a consequence, shared characteristics, countries of a subregional organisation tend to hold a variety of common interests, and hence appear to be the most natural partners of each other (Rûse, 2015). It should be underlined, however, that subregional entities are not "a priori spatial givens" (Murphy, 1991:24), and a closer look at members of a subregional entity can often reveal that their partnership is less evident than it may seem at first grasp. As Bossaert & Vanhoonacker (2000) showcased, even within the tightknit, densely institutionalised Benelux formation, disagreements are not in scarcity. Whereas, Nordic countries tend to apply the 'neighbours first' logic quite often (Elgström et al., 2001), as they align in a variety of policy fields, even though Finland is an outlier in the club in linguistic terms. Furthermore, ever since the group was renamed as the Nordic-Baltic 6, following the incorporation of Baltic states, differences between subregional members as regards their economy, size, culture and histories became even more palpable.

The case study of this thesis, the Visegrad Group is also a coherent geographical unit, provided its member states: Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are bordering countries in Central Eastern Europe – which is a pre-requisite for a group of states to qualify as a subregion (see Chapter 1). Yet, despite their adjacent location, differences between Visegrad members are tangible. Throughout history, these countries were part of different empires, Hungary is a linguistic odd one out, Czechia's economy has always been more industry-based, Poland is a giant both territorially and population-wise compared to the other members, while Slovakia is the only country, which is part of the Eurozone. This chapter aims at revisiting the history of the V4, starting from its very origins in medieval times to its re-invigoration in the early 1990s. In order to understand the contemporary factors, which induce members of a subregion to become formidable allies, it is also necessary to review how the partnership between the four countries fluctuated in longue-durée historical terms. Thus, this chapter will narrate the most important stages in the long-term past of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia with the aim of highlighting divergences and similarities in their historical development. The chapter will start with the establishment of the Visegrad Group and the relative peaceful, proliferous era, which followed afterwards. Then, the hinterland experience of Central European peoples at the edges of empires will be analysed. The third section on the world war years will shed light on some fundamental conflicts between neighbours. Lastly, the impact of all Visegrad states being exposed to Soviet domination will be investigated, which later on also cemented the foundations of the renaissance of the Visegrad Group.

2.1 The medieval origins of a Central European friendship: the Visegrad Congress

The Visegrad Group looks back on an astonishingly long and deep-rooted history. In 1335 a series of meetings were hosted by the Hungarian King, Charles I of the Anjou dynasty at the Castle of Visegrad, with the participation of the Bohemian King, John of Luxemburg, his son and heir Charles, Count of Moravia (later King or Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor), and Casimir III of Poland (Rácz, 2013:262). Today's Visegrad is a small, picturesque, hilly Hungarian town by the Danube, adjacetn to the Slovak border, which back then hosted the Hungarian King's official headquarters. The word itself, Visegrad is of Slavic origins and unsurprisingly means "high or upper castle" (Rácz, 2013:262). As a result of the Congress, which ran over a series of preparatory meetings around Central Eastern Europe and culminated at Visegrad, in an atmosphere of fanfare and pomp, the three kings established long-lasting peace with one another, and settled a number of border and accession disputes (Davies, 2005; Rácz, 2013). While these pivotal results had a substantial impact on the three kingdoms' foreign and internal politics over the next century, Hungarian history textbooks and common knowledge tend to focus on a third achievement, namely the appointment of an alternative trade route for merchants to circumvent Vienna (Tulok, 2018). Pursuant to a special "staple right", Viennese officials could oblige foreign tradesmen to unload their goods and sell them in the city. This special right prevented products crafted in Central Eastern Europe from reaching farther German territories, provided the main trading road ran through Vienna. In relative peace, partly thanks to the achievements of the Visegrad Congress, the heyday of these Christian kingdoms, which were "local in provenance, moderate in size, and occasionally ambitious but never all-powerful" (Mikanowski, 2023:79) started in the post-Visegrad Congress period and lasted till the early 16th century, when the Ottoman conquest and the expansion of the Holy Roman Empire ended their territorial integrity.

Before elaborating on the aftermath and implications of the Visegrad Congress, which saw the rise of mutually important historical figures and events shared between the three kingdoms, it is necessary to take a step back and explain the differences between Central and Eastern Europe and the territories lying further West in a larger, continental context. Central Europe was a latecomer to convert to Christianity. Christian kingdoms were proclaimed between 800 – 1000 AD, "Mojmir of Moravia converted in 831, Bořivoj of Bhoemia in 884, Mieszko of Poland in 966 and Saint Stephen, the first Christian king of Hungary was crowned in 1000" (Mikanowski, 2023:10). The Central parts of Europe: today's Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia chose to vow allegiance to the Roman Catholic Pope, while Serbia and Kiev adopted Christianity from Byzantium. Sharing a common religion guaranteed easier communication and support between the churches of Visegrad countries, as well as inter-marriages between their royal families. Much later in the 20th century, the importance of shared religion – often used as a synonym of shared culture – would regularly appear in the discourse of prominent politicians and intellectuals, who advocated for joining Western institutions in the post-Soviet era. Thus, in their interpretation common religious foundations functioned both as a cohesive glue between Central and Western Europe, and as an othering factor between Central and Eastern Europe. However, at the wake of Christian

conversion, Central European kingdoms were all eager to curate their own institutions, and to canonise their own saints instead of adopting German traditions, as a sign of independence, and as a protest against the permanent threat coming from the Frankish Empire (Mikanowski, 2023). For instance, the first patron saint of Poland, Saint Adalbert was a high-born Czech (Mikanowski, 2023).

At the beginning of the 14th century, both the Hungarian and Bohemian traditional ruling dynasties, which assisted Christian consolidation were brought to an end, due to no male heir on paternal lineage, and the two kingdoms saw the rise of the Anjou and Luxembourg Houses respectively. The Luxembourg family had a legitimate claim on the Polish throne too, thus the linchpin of the Visegrad Congress was the peace talks between the kings of Bohemia and Poland (Szczur, 1993). The Hungarian King, Anjou Charles was chosen to be the most appropriate arbiter and host of the peace negotiations, as he nurtured close relations with both kings, who were at loggerheads. Charles essentially was the brother-in-law of the Bohemian and Polish kings, as first, he was married to Beatrice of Luxembourg, sister of the Bohemian King, who died tragically at an early age. Afterwards, Charles "resorted to asking his other neighbour for a fiancée" (Rácz, 2013:264). His marriage to Elisabeth in 1320, sister of Casimir the Great forged formidable good relations between the Hungarian and Polish royal families, who also assisted one another in consolidating their power and putting down rebellions instigated by large landowner families within the two kingdoms' territory (Rácz, 2013). Through the mediation of the Hungarian King, the peace negotiations brought incredible diplomatic success and yielded surprisingly robust accomplishments. The first treaty signed at Visegrad in September 1335 prompted a mutual defence clause between Bohemia and Hungary, who pledged to help each other in case of a military intrusion (original document available via the Visegrad Group's webpage). Poland joined a few years later. Subsequently, in November 1335, John of Luxembourg was persuaded to renounce his claim to Polish territories in return for 400,000 silver groats (high value silver coins at the time) (Davies, 2005:77). In addition, representatives of the Teutonic Knights were also present at the "quasi international court" of Visegrad, who had a feud with the Polish King over the territories of Kujawy, Dobrzyn, and Pomerania including Danzig (Davies, 2005). All disputes were settled and the peace treaties were duly respected by all parties involved, which is a daring achievement even by modern standards. Thus, Visegrad was not only a stint of diplomatic achievements, but also a guarantee of friendship between the three kingdoms, as well as a key to peaceful development, and the golden age of Central Europe. However, as a caveat, historians caution against simplifying the Visegrad meeting as a congress of peace, provided the alliance between the three kings was also a precursor of conflict with other neighbouring territories under the reign of Hapsburg princes, who were diplomatically alienated as a deliberate by-product of Visegrad (Tulok, 2018:18, Szczur, 1993).

To illustrate the longevity of the Visegrad conclusions' impact, it should be noted that the parties met multiple times in the late 1330s, well after the Congress. On one of these occasions, in order

to settle succession calamities, the Polish King, Casimir III, fearing that he would die without a mail heir, promised the Polish throne to the son of Anjou Charles of Hungary, called Louis. As a wholehearted advocate of the deal, Charles, Count of Moravia (later King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor), who was present at the Visegrad talks by his father's side, vigorously supported the initiative, as long as Louis would denounce his claim to Silesia upon his accession to the Polish throne, and the territory would be under Czech authority (Davies, 2005, Tulok, 2018). Eventually, Casimir indeed died without leaving behind a male heir and in the framework of a Personal Union between Hungary and Poland, Anjou Louis became King of both countries in 1370 (Tulok, 2018). His short rein had an enduring impact on the Polish-Hungarian friendship and brotherhood. Later Louis' elder daughter, Maria married Sigismund of the Luxembourg House, who ascended to the Hungarian and Bohemian throne and later also became Holy Roman Emperor. Whereas, his younger daughter, Jadwiga (Hedvig in Hungarian), transformed into a celebrated, well-known, saintly Christian figure in Poland, whose "image deeply influenced ideas concerning queenship at the time" (Brzezińska, 1999:407). Thus, shared cultural heritage in the Central European medieval context exceeded common religious foundations, as inter-marriages resulted in periodic fusions between the middle kingdoms.

To understand the origins of the Polish-Hungarian brotherhood, a few more words will be dedicated to Jadwiga, the Hungarian princess. Jadwiga, was forced to break up her engagement to Wilhelm von Hapsburg, Prince of Austria, owing to the protest of the Polish nobility, who refused to be subdued under Hapsburg rule (Davies, 2005). Instead, the nobility concocted a nuptial between Jadwiga and the then pagan Lithuanian Prince, Jogalia. As a direct consequence, the Great Dutchy of Lithuania, the last pagan worshipers in Europe, were converted to Roman Catholicism, and Jogalia was crowned as Christian king, called Wladyslaw II Jagiello. Wladyslaw essentially became the founder of the great Polish-Lithuanian ruling dynasty, the Jagiellos, in the helm of the vast Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (till 1569 only de facto commonwealth). Moreover, Jadwiga is still a beloved figure in Poland both due to her devotion to charitable work and the Christian faith. Upon her death in 1399, she left her entire personal fortune for the re-founding of the Krakow Academy, now called the Jagiellonian University (Davies, 2005:95), which still has a prominent, scientific research fund eponymous of the Queen (Jagellonian University, 2024). Thus, Jadwiga also evolved to a symbol of Polish-Hungarian togetherness. Despite the linguistic and ethnic differences between Hungarians and surrounding Slavic nations, Hungary became an integral part of Central Europe due to its shared history with surrounding regional actors and the geographical proximity between the medieval kingdoms of Hungary, Poland and Bohemia. Over the subsequent years, in 1440-4, and again in 1490—1516 Polish kings ruled over Hungary; between 1516-26 Louis II was king not only of Hungary, but Bohemia too; while and in 1576-86, "a Hungarian prince proved to be the most successful king in Poland's history" (Davies, 2005:83).

2.2 The age of empires

The late middle ages were the Golden Era of the middle kingdoms of Europe. For instance, Prague thanks to Charles IV of Luxembourg – who took over the throne from his father, John of Luxemburg – became one of the most beautiful cities in Europe and the centre of Gothic art (Mikanowski, 2023:80). Even though the 15th century saw the rise of kings with more expansionist ambitions, such as the enlightened Renaissance despot, Matthias Corvinus of Hungary, who conquered Silesia, Moravia and Bohemia, it didn't inflict a halt on the region's cultural and economic development (Rady, 2023). In fact, Matthias owned a world-renowned library, second in his time only to the Vatican collections, and he accomplished his conquest owing to his modern, mercenary army (Rady, 2023). After his death, Italian architects and sculptors, who were not appreciated in Hungary anymore found employment in Krakow, to rebuild the Wawel Palace (Rady, 2023). The events, which signified the beginning of a new, darker era, and which relegated Central Europe to a permanent buffer zone status: "being part, but never the centre of Empires, governed from faraway" (Mikanowski, 2023:79), were the Ottoman conquest, Russia's imperialist ambitions, and the religious wars between protestants and counter-reformists during the Thirty Years' War. Not only was the physical map of Central Europe radically redrawn, but also the imaginary geographical concept acquired a new meaning.

The fate of Hungary and Poland were eerily similar, they were both carved up into three segments, divided under three different authorities (Davies, 2005). Although, the two kingdoms' partition started over a century apart. The Ottoman threat coming from the south-east culminated at a decisive turning point, the Battle of Mohács (small town in the territory of modern-day Hungary), when the Hungarian army was defeated in a matter of hours, and king Louis II, ruler of both Hungary and Bohemia died at the battlefield, without a male heir (Ágoston, 2021). Ágoston (2021) goes as far as claiming that medieval Hungary died at Mohács. Exactly 15 years later, in 1541 on the very anniversary of Mohács, the capital city, Buda also fell, and under the Turkish Sultan Süleyman's reign, it became the seat of the regional governor (or pasha) (Rady, 2023). After years of intrigues and accession rivalries, Hungary's middle part was ushered under Ottoman rule. To the East, Transylvania enjoyed relative autonomy, but was still an Ottoman vassal, while the Dalmatian, southern and Slovak-populated northern territories, as a half circle around the Ottoman reign, fell under Archduke Ferdinand's Habsburg supervision. Essentially, Hungary became a hinterland of military frontiers along the Danube, between the Ottomans and Habsburgs (Ágoston, 2021). The 150 years long Ottoman conquest still bears tangible imprints both in a physical and mental sense in Hungary and its population. Half a millennium old mosques and minarets are among the main tourist attractions of Hungarian cities, whereas the popular imagination still remembers the "disastrous repercussions of the Ottoman age" for the local population (Pirický, 2013:122). In stark contrast, Slovak history textbooks tend to highlight Hungarians escaping the Ottoman occupation towards the north, both from the ranks of the nobility and ordinary serfs, which also sparked an early wave of 'magyarisation' in predominantly Slovak-populated areas (Pirický, 2013).

The Turks reached parts of Moravia (today's Czechia) and parts of modern-day Ukraine, which belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Union, yet these occasional intrusions posed a less imminent threat on their population. Poland's partition was much slower, "eaten away leaf by leaf, like an artichoke" – as Frederick II, King of Prussia observed (Davies, 2005:398; Rady, 2023). It started in 1660s, with the Cossack revolt led by Khmelnytsky against the Poles with Russian assistance. As a by-product of the generous Russian military aid and manpower, from then on Kyiv and the whole eastern bank of the Dnieper were considered to be Russian territories by the Tsar (Rady, 2023). The revolt was only a harbinger of the subsequent partition of the country, which was carried out in three stages: 1773, 1793 and 1795 (Davies, 2005), between Prussia, Russia and the Habsburg Empire. Pre-partition Poland-Lithuania was often described as "Polish Anarchy", where kings were elected and veto right was guaranteed to every parliamentarian representative in the Sejm, as a symbol of the nobility's liberty and power to counterbalance the sovereign. Practically, Poland succumbed into an ungovernable abyss due to constant vetoing. In this environment, cunning noble families like the Czartoryskis and Poniatowskis carved out their fair share of authority (Lukowski, 2014). A weak leader at the helm of the Rzeczpospolita (Polish-Lithuanian Union) was in the interest of both the surrounding great powers, and the country's own nobility. In 1768 Poland plunged into years of "guerilla and near-civil war" (Lukowski, 2014), between the Czartoryski and Poniatowski families, who backed the election of Stanisław Poniatowski as king, rumoured lover of Catherine the Great, Russian Empress; and the Confederacy of Bar, an association of Polish-Lithuanian nobles and magnets, who wanted to get rid of Russian influence. With the justification of ending calamities in their neighbourhood – and to quell Russian expansionism – Catherine the Great of Russia, Frederick II of Prussia and Maria Theresa of Austria brokered the first Partition Treaty in 1972, which "bit off more than a quarter of Poland-Lithuania's territory and a third of its population" (Rady, 2023). The final partition, which also meant the annihilation of Poland altogether came as a response to the adoption of the 3 May 1791 constitution. It was the first modern constitution based on enlightened principles, such as the separation of powers in European history, second only to the US constitution in the world (Rady, 2023). Although there was not much time to put the constitution into effect, as none of the surrounding great powers were interested in having a strong Poland in their backyard. Yet, its significance cannot be downplayed. The constitution evolved to become an important symbol, the embodiment of progressive Poland and "a moment to the nation's will to live in freedom" (Davies, 2005:403).

Modern day Czechia was less of a buffer zone between great powers, however, the kingdom of Bohemia had to endure episodic retaliation imposed from the central administration of the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburg monarchy due to religious conflicts. Throughout the late medieval and early modern history of Bohemia, the kingdom oscillated between periods of freedom, and periods of being centrally governed without any autonomy. When Charles of Luxembourg was elected in 1346 as Holy Roman Emperor (Charles IV), the kingdom of Bohemia became a quasi-appendix on the Empire (Thomson, 1953). Charles, who was Premyslid on his

mother's side and fluent not only in German, but also in Czech, offered legal guarantees in the so-called Golden Bull to sustain the Kingdom's autonomy, and to confirm the "permanent and preeminent status of the king of Bohemia as one of the seven princes and bishops serving as electors of the Holy Roman Emperor" (Mahoney, 2011:51). However, the longevity of Bohemia's independence was jeopardised by the Hussite revolution in the early 13th century. Jan Hus, who inspired the movement was a reformist priest, 100 years preceding Luther, in fact Luther was an avid admirer of Hus. Following the execution of Jan Hus at the Council of Constance in 1415, which was ordered by the Catholic Emperor, Sigismund, Bohemia succumbed to a civil war like struggle, and was deprived of its autonomy (Mahoney, 2011). While the kingdom partially regained self-governance in the 1500s, Bohemia became yet again the centre of calamities during the Thirty Years War. The religious conflict between Protestant Czechs and Germans on the one hand, versus the Catholic Habsburgs on the other hand reached its zenith at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 (Pánek et al., 2018). Protestants were brutally defeated, and Emperor Ferdinand II decided to punish most of all the Czechs for the rebellion. To illustrate the degree of backlash, which followed, Ferdinand famously stated that he preferred Bohemia to be "a desert than a country full of heretics" (Mahoney, 2011:71).

Hitherto the end of the First World War (WWI), the dynamics of being on the edge of empires inherently determined the history and development trajectory of Visegrad countries in Central Europe. Constant insurgences and struggle between centre and periphery also meant that the region was less prone to prosper and was considered to be a laggard in economic terms. However, empires were not the only factors to be blamed. The nobility in Hungary and Poland, and to a lesser extent also in Czechia was unwilling to give up their privileges and kept village dwellers, or in other words the peasantry in serfdom throughout the 19th century. Essentially, some remnants of the institution lingered until the end of WWI, despite the fact that Joseph II, the enlightened monarch practically abolished serfdom in 1781 in the territory of the Austrian Empire. After Joseph's death, the defiant nobility forced to repeal the "Serfdom Patent" (Mahoney, 2011:98). Similar societal power-dynamics evolved in Central Europe to those which were identified by Barrington Moore in agrarian pre-war Russia (Moore, 1966). Mounting tension between the nobility and the peasantry is well-illustrated with an anecdote from Habsburg-controlled Galicia (today's South-East Poland). When the wind of nationalism and revolutions reached Central Europe, the first insurgences broke out in 1846, instigated by the Krakow branch of the pro-constitutionalist, radical political organisation called "Democratic Society" (Rady, 2023). The revolutionary leaders, who were Polish intellectuals and members of the nobility soon encountered though not the rebuttal of the central Habsburg administration, but the local peasantry, who were allegedly told to receive a bounty from "the Good Emperor" in Vienna for harming traitors (Rady, 2023).

Even though the Galician massacre amplified conservative voices in the Hungarian nobility too, the revolution there a few years later in 1848-49 was more successful. The new, young Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph was even compelled to ask for assistance from Tsar Nicholas I to crush the

rebellion, who was eager to give a helping hand, provided several thousand Poles from Russian occupied territories volunteered on the side of the Hungarians (Rady, 2023). Notwithstanding the bloody retaliation in the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution, as a result, the famous 'Compromise' (Ausgleich) was born in May 1867, which provided the legal foundations of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and elevated Hungary to an almost autonomous status. As opposed to the territories of modern-day Poland, Czechia and Slovakia, Hungary became essentially independent except foreign affairs, defence and finances, which were still centralised in Vienna (Kirschbaum, 1995).

The above paragraphs so far discussed the historical congruences and shared patterns of development between the Kingdoms of Bohemia (and Moravia), Poland-Lithuania, and Hungary. Being exposed to the mercy of great powers and having more precarious, weaker, less continuous "traditions of statehood than those of the larger European nations" (Kundera, 2023) is a recurring topos in contemporary political discourse. However, as a caveat, it should be noted that fundamental divergences equally existed. For instance, Hungary simultaneously fulfilled the role of oppressed (by the Habsburg central administration) and oppressor (of ethnic minorities, such as Slovaks in its territory). Slovaks lived in relative peace and symbiosis with Hungarians throughout the middle ages. Even though it was far from an "idyllic situation", provided power-imbalance always favoured the Hungarian nobility, at least there were no open contestations and revolts (Kirschbaum, 1995:143). Landowners overwhelmingly came from the ranks of the Hungarian nobility, who "not only spoke Slovak, but also identified with the Slovak core culture" (Kirschbaum, 1995:143) in the northern territories of the Kingdom of Hungary. The end to peaceful co-existence started in the late 18th century, and came to a definitive halt when Hungarian became the official language of the Kingdom following the Diet in 1844 (Vermes, 2014). While it was an important victory for Hungarians, as language at the time was a symbol of national belonging, "the most significant marker of national existence" (Vermes, 2014:310), it was also the first step towards magyarising Slovaks. Slavic minorities were placed under the tutelage of Austrian and Hungarian masters. Revealingly, to capture this phenomenon, Gyula Andrássy first post-Compromise Hungarian Prime Minister once told his Austrian counterpart: "You look after your Slavs, and we'll look after ours" (Clark, 2013:66). When Slovakia ceded form Hungary to Czechoslovakia following WWI, and many Hungarians living in the territory became ethnic minorities, they equally had to suffer from oppression, under the aegis of thirst for retaliation. Due to these historical differences, Slovak-Hungarian relations saw periods of belligerence and periods of relative friendship even in modern times. For instance, during the first Fico government in 2009, the Slovak PM refused the entry of László Sólyom, Hungarian President to the border town of Komarno, to unveil a statue of the first Christian King of Hungary (Janicek, 2009).

The quest of Slovaks to differentiate themselves from their Czech brothers was less fervent, but still showcased tangible signs. Ľudovít Štúr, a revolutionary figure during the 1840s was instrumental in devising standard literary Slovak from Czech, and is considered by many as the

first modern Slovak publicist (Kirschbaum, 1995; Mikanowski, 2023). However, at the same time pan-Slavism was also an awakening movement, which reached its zenith at the Pan-Slavic Congress of Prague 1848, organised by the Czech historian František Palacký. The congress brought together not only people from Bohemia and Moravia, but also northern Hungary, Croatia, Serbia and Poland (Rady, 2023). In this context, Hungary seemed to be an even more obvious outsider. Additional differences existed due to the four Visegrad countries' economic development trajectory. Modernisation in the mid to late 18th century accelerated rapidly, during the reign of enlightened despots (Maria Theresa and Joseph II), and had positive impacts both in Bohemia and Moravia. Mass textile production in the districts north-west and east of Prague and Brno dates from this period (Evans, 2008:93). Czech lands also profited from the thriving glassmaking industry. Meanwhile Hungary, and the Russian-occupied parts of Poland remained primarily agricultural, exploiting the peasantry and lagging behind with industrialisation. In 1846, 64% of the reliable steam engines in the entire western part of the Austrian Monarchy were in operation in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia (Pánek et al., 2018:320). Thus, the proximity of Czech lands to the core of the Empire had a differentiating impact on the country's economy, which even hitherto is wealthier and more industrialised than the other three Visegrad neighbours.

In conclusion, the legacy of empires in the history of Visegrad countries can be interpreted both as a motor of convergence and divergence between the four nations. Milan Kundera, Czech novelist's imaginary Cold War projection of Central Europe as "kidnapped west" or west occupied by the east (Kundera, 2023) was yet to evolve, provided west and east were both perceived to be the occupiers in this era – even though Poland was more profoundly exposed to the Russian threat than any other Visegrad countries. Ivan Krastev in a Financial Times article went as far as arguing that the diverse, sometimes diametrically opposing reactions of Eastern Central European states to the war in Ukraine sprang from the "legacy of old empires" (Krastev, 2023). Those countries, which had to endure prolonged Russian occupation before WWI were more vocal in condemning Russia (Krastev, 2023). In addition, Czechia's industrial advancement during the 18-19th centuries has also lingering impacts. Nevertheless, the shared experience of being on the edges of empires as a buffer zone between great powers, forged between Visegrad nations a common understanding of what it means to be Central European: the constant urge of vying for national self-determination.

2.3 Interwar era, amplified divisions

Following the Great War, social and political tensions both within newly independent Central European states and between one another were flourishing. The calamities had two fundamental cornerstones. On the one hand, conflicts arose due to the patchwork distribution of different nationalities across the region, which made it difficult to live up to the Wilsonian promise of national self-determination for all. On the other hand, social contestation between the impoverished peasantry, and the well-off nobility, which represented a tiny minority of the overall society in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia equally induced discontent. Up until the Paris peace conference, which settled the borders of crumbling empires, fights did not abate in the region.

Poland "created itself in the void left by the collapse of the three partitioning powers" (Davies, 2005:291), which resulted in six wars fought along its borders between 1918-20, even with previous pan-Slavic friends, the Czechs. Poland and Czechoslovakia both had historic claims on the Duchy of Těšín, Silesia – the former emphasising the overwhelming Polish nationality of the inhabitants, and the latter the territorial cohesion of the Kingdom of Bohemia (Pánek et al., 2018). In reality, the two countries were at loggerheads with each other owing to Těšín's important coal mine and the Košice-Bohumín railway, which ran through the region and bridged together the Czech lands with Slovakia (Pánek et al., 2018). The most menacing of all disputes to the existence of Poland was the Polish-Soviet War between 1918-21. While Poland didn't enjoy the overwhelming support of Western great powers at the time of its rebirth, its victory over Soviet Russia with the leadership of Józef Piłsudski, father of the Second Polish Republic was hailed by many across Europe (Davies, 2005). Consolidation prevailed in the late 1920s, early 30s, yet Poland continued to be a diverse nation, prone to contestation by national minorities. According to the 1931 census, Poles formed only 68.9% of the total population, followed by 13.9% Ukrainians, 8.7% Yiddish-speaking Jews, 3.1% Byelorussians and 2.3% Germans (Davies, 2005:299).

In a viscerally different fashion, Czechoslovakia had excelling relations with Europe's victorious powers thanks to its representatives, such as the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic, T. G. Masaryk. Yet, it didn't resolve some entrenched issues in the newly independent state. The Czech National Committee in Prague announced the establishment of the first joint, independent state of Czechs and Slovaks on 28 October, and Slovaks did the same autonomously two days later on 30 October 1918, in the so-called Martin Declaration (Morvay, 2018). Albeit the Declaration acknowledged the "linguistic and cultural-historic" links between Czechs and Slovaks, the latter nation did not condone a centralised administration in Prague, that would govern the entire country (Pánek et al., 2018:440). While Slovaks would have preferred much more the formation of separate state institutions as detailed in the Pittsburgh Agreement[1], Czechs desperately needed to show a unified image with Slovaks in the international arena, to form an absolute majority in the diverse population of Czechoslovakia, and to have a claim for national self-determination as proposed by Wilson (Kirschbaum, 1995). The combined Czech and Slovak lands included German, Hungarian, Ukrainian (or Ruthen) and Polish minorities. The Slovak nation up until today cannot forgive Masaryk and Edvard Beneš the unfulfilled interwar promises, and questioning the existence of an independent Slovak nation. As a staunch proof, few if any street names in Slovakia commemorate the founding fathers of interwar Czechoslovakia (Morvay, 2018). Furthermore, Vavro Šrobár who was one of the architects of the new Czechoslovakian administration, and was the only Slovak present at the Czech declaration of independence in Prague, filled Slovak institutions with his loyal Lutherans, while the majority of the Slovak population was Catholic (Kirschbaum, 1995). Asymmetries between the Czech and Slovak parts of the Republic was further exacerbated by the

[1] The Pittsburgh Agreement was a memorandum between Czech and Slovak expats regarding the establishment of an independent Czechoslovak state, signed on 31 May 1918.

gaping difference in their economic composition. While the Czech lands were vastly industrialised even with Western European standards, Slovakia remained agrarian (under the tutelage of the Hungarian nobility till WWI) and a laggard in economic development. Even though a fair division of labour could have developed between the two parts of the Republic, lopsided policies aggravated divergences. During the land reforms of 1919 – 1927, "of the investment costs for rural modernisation, 95.1% went to the Czech Lands and only 4.3% to Slovakia (the remainder to Ruthenia), and 31.7% of the agricultural enterprises were electrified in the Czech Lands, whereas only 1.9% in Slovakia" (Kirschbaum, 1995:214). These circumstances provided profound breeding ground for jingoistic nationalism.

In Hungary, which was at the losing end of WWI, the interwar era was disastrous. The first government with the leadership of Count Mihály Károlyi was unable to resolve land redistribution and compensating the impoverished peasantry. Moreover, as a direct consequence of the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost its territorial integrity, industrial and logistical capacity and millions of Hungarians became ethnic minorities in surrounding countries: in Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Following the kickstart of the post-WWI Paris Peace Conference, the Károlyi government was overthrown, and the possibility for a democratic Hungary withered away with the rise of Béla Kun's short-lived, 133-day Bolshevik rule (Nagy, 2017). The ill-fated Soviet regime tried to invade the newly independent Slovak parts of Czechoslovakia in 1919 in hope of reasserting Hungary's authority over the area, which led to further military exhaustion and lowered the prospects of a just concluding peace treaty towards Hungary (Hupchick & Cox, 2001). Furthermore, the lead delegate, who was appointed as head of the Hungarian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference was Count Albert Apponyi. He was an educated, accomplished statesman, with perfect spoken English, yet he was equally responsible for enacting the so-called Lex Apponyi legal package in 1907, which was interpreted by ethnic minorities living in the Hungarian part of the Monarchy as curtailing their right to speak their own language. For them, Lex Apponyi was a prime example of magyarisation. In the framework of Lex Apponyi, Hungarian became an obligatory subject in all schools, even in those, which were situated in territories without any Hungarian population. In case pupils did not achieve a desired level of fluency, and teachers were suspected of neglecting the subject or chose not to utilise centrally approved patriotic textbooks, they could be put under investigation and get punished (Katus, 2015). Thus, Apponyi as lead negotiator did not increase the prospects of Hungary at the Peace Conference either. Hungary lost all its salt, gold and silver mines, 62% of its railway network, and had to manage 350-400 000 Hungarian refugees, who escaped from detached territories (Nagy, 2017). These circumstances were a perfect storm to fuel jingoistic nationalism in Hungary too. With the arrival of counter-revolutionary Admiral Miklós Horthy in November 1919 to take over control in Budapest "the liberal, sinful city", the progressive liberal (mostly Jewish) part of the population "became scapegoats for all the damage and harm that had befallen the country" (Nagy, 2017).

In conclusion, the interwar years begot wanton belligerence between the Visegrad countries and the medieval origins of their friendship completely vanished. In 1920-21 surrounding countries around Hungary except Austria, decided to form the Little Entente against possible reinvigorated Hungarian expansionism and revisionism. Their fears were not baseless, as the Hungarian administration on the side of Nazi Germany indeed sought to reconquest territories in modern day Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia and Romania. Milan Hodža, the only Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia of Slovak origins in the interwar era, attempted to foster cooperation and solidarity between Eastern Central European countries, including Czechoslovakia, Austria, Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia, but he was soon labelled as the "Hungarian Count" (Morvay, 2018) and was forced to resign following the publication of the Munich Agreement in 1938.

In a similar vein, the Second World War (WWII) meant the continuation and absolute amplification of tensions in the region. The legacy of irreconcilable differences casted a long, sombre shadow especially on Hungarian-Slovakian relations well after WWII. For instance, Edvard Beneš, war time President of Czechoslovakia between 1940-48 in response to the German occupation and Hungarian re-annexation of Slovak territories, introduced a series of decrees in exile, which deprived Germans and Hungarians of their Czechoslovak citizenship and facilitated the confiscation of their land properties without compensation. As the decrees have never been repealed, the first Fico government (2006-10) during the construction of the D4 highway, had a keen predilection to appropriate lands without compensation from their Hungarian owners, pursuant to the wartime decrees (Nagy, 2021). On the other hand, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is equally culpable of utilising the ethnic Hungarian question for political motivations. Recent scandals include him posing with a football scarf decorated with the map of Greater Hungary (Harloyd, 2022), or having the map of Greater Hungary in the background while he wished good luck to high-school students taking their final exams (Gascón Barberá & Vladisavljevic, 2020). In addition, the Hungarian government provides lucrative financial support to ethnic Hungarian projects and initiatives across the borders of the country, and in 2021 it had plans to purchase lands in Slovakia, that triggered a stiff reaction from the Slovak government led by Eduard Heger (Slovak Spectator, 2021). Thus, the new-found friendship between Hungary and Slovakia, represented by the amicable relations between PM Fico and Orbán does not have a profound history.

2.4 Under the shadow of the Soviet red star

The World Wars reasserted the belief that Central Europe was an imaginary hinterland at the border of West and East, and the former was equally interpreted as an occupier, like the latter. Nevertheless, it should be noted that a simultaneous, more positive, somewhat self-contradictory interpretation of “Westernness” had also existed, predominantly among the intelligentsia. The Visegrad countries of Central Europe were a fertile breeding ground for embracing or even influencing the ideals of reformation, enlightenment, urbanisation and industrialisation. Albiet, quite adversely, there were no wide-scale reforms in practice, and societal upscaling was lagging

behind. The Hussite revolution, and the pan-Slavic movement in Czechia; Poland's 1791 liberal constitution that became a symbolic motor of resistance and Polishness during the years of the partition; and the first ever metro line on the continent built in Budapest, second only to the Metropolitan line in London were all manifestations of a more proactive, positive belonging to Europe and the so-called West. Rather tellingly, the most influential literary journal of Hungary founded in the early 20th century was also titled "West" (Nyugat in Hungarian), which supported dozens of iconic poets and novelists, whose work is still taught at school. Those sentiments, which advocated for embracing the West, were present not solely in the pre-war years, in the lavish cafés of Prague, Budapest and Krakow, they became widely diffused in the society at large under Soviet occupation. A common enemy in the image of Soviet Russian repression, and the ethos of embracing Western-style democratisation (at that time interpreted as an equivalent of material prosperity too), fostered the replenishing of amicable, cooperative relations between the Visegrad countries, which triggered the second dawn, or the renaissance of the Visegrad Group.

The universal societal quest for getting rid of the Soviet yoke, the desire to adopt democracy, and to join Western institutions such as the NATO and the EU in the hope of establishing more comfortable living conditions, was a unifying struggle among Visegrad countries. Communism (or as often referred to, Socialism) after WWII was introduced in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, as well as in other Eastern European neighbours with different timelines, terms and conditions. Yet the Soviet tutelage had an equalising impact on countries, which belonged to Russia's sphere of influence. Communism exposed satellite states to similar historical, political and economic experiences, such as: one-party Socialism, collectivised agriculture, overemphasis on heavy-industrial production despite lacking raw materials or industrial capacity, the introduction of planned economy, the severe curtailing of human rights, purging the enemies – real or suspected – at show-trials, and practically eliminating the freedom of speech.

Following WWII, Stalin viewed as absolute priority ushering Poland under Soviet influence and transforming its economy and society to the mirror-image of the Soviet Union. Whereas, he was more hesitant with cajoling Czechoslovakia and Hungary into Socialism, in fear of possible retaliation from Britain, France and the US (Rothschild & Wingfield, 2008). As a result, the latter two enjoyed a brief period of awakening democratisation and free elections in 1946 and 1945 respectively (the freest ever organised until that point in Hungary), while Poland was deprived of such experience. Most likely, the Communists' abysmal performance at the 1945 Hungarian elections served as a further incentive in Poland to keep delaying elections in contrast to what had been promised at Potsdam. In Hungary the Smallholder party scored a landslide victory with 57% of the votes, whereas in Poland the most popular party was the Peasant Party led by Stanisław Mikołajczyk, which membership swelled to 600,000 in 1946, outstripping the Polish Workers Party (Rothschild & Wingfield, 2008). Thus, the Polish population's distrust towards Communists and hence Communist Russia too was tangible. Although, for a brief period, the Soviet Union was still viewed as the only great power that can guarantee the territorial integrity of Poland following

the westward shift of the country, with added German territories. Polish suspicion towards Germany was even stauncher. In stark contrast, well-industrialised Czechoslovakia with a larger segment of wage workers, had their own home-grown communists, rooted in the brief democratic interwar era, who managed to lawfully attain 38% of the votes in the country's first post-WWII elections, the largest portion of votes that any party received despite not reaching absolute majority. These emerging party cleavages had some enduring impact on the party structure of post-Communist satellite states, after the fall of the Iron Curtain. However, in the second half of the 1940s, all parties withered away or their leaders were forced to exile, and eventually all Visegrad countries succumbed to the same unfortunate faith, notwithstanding Stalin's initial hesitance towards Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

Once Stalin realised that Western allies were unable to secure democracy in Central Eastern Europe, the rise of so-called little Stalins (Mikanowski, 2023:247), and one-size-fits-all Sovietisation became inevitable. Interestingly, the most brutal, 'best' pupils of Stalin were Gottwald and Novotný in Czechoslovakia, and the Hungarian Mátyás Rákosi, while in Poland as a strange anomaly, Bolesław Bierut first Communist Prime Minster treated peasants more gingerly with gradual collectivisation, and allowed some breathing space for the Catholic church to operate, which later became a key element in the resistance. Thus, the Visegrad countries were all exposed to similar, horrific Communist repression with ruthless purges, secret police violence, poverty, food rationing, and high inflation. All these were fairly commonplace across the entire Soviet-dominated Eastern Central European region, not solely in the Visegrad countries. What made the V4 (or back then Viasegrad 3) special, which also fostered a different kind of comradery among them, was the first sparks of substantial resistance, which were ignited in Poland and Hungary in 1956, and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. After these events, the grip of Communist dictatorship eased.

A conglomeration of factors, such as rampant inflation, deteriorating living conditions, and the inner crisis of the Communist Party following the death of Stalin all contributed to outbursts of resistance against Communist repression in satellite states. Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev openly condemned the purges and the homogenous, straightjacket Sovietisation of all countries under Russian influence in the Stalin era. However, in Poland, the new leader's, Edward Ochab's gradual reforms could not suffice anymore the greater public. The Poznań insurrections, or also known as Poznań June of 1956, which was a wave of strike actions in the Cegielski Factory 300 kms west of Warsaw, sent shockwaves down the entire Communist block (Bloom, 2013). Even though the strikes were put down by severe armed conflict, resistance continued in independent worker councils, and in October 1956 the reformist, formerly purged Władysław Gomułka replaced Ochab as First Secretary. Gomułka's revision of the old Stalinist order resulted in abandoning forced collectivisation in the agriculture, the restoration of the Catholic Church's autonomy, the release of political prisoners, such as Cardinal Wyszyński, the spiritual leader of resistance, and greater tolerance towards freedom of expression and academia (Bloom, 2013:64-5). The visible cracks within the Soviet leadership and the hope of achieving similar reforms

triggered a new-found solidarity between Poles and Hungarians. Furthermore, the Hungarian leadership's dubious attempt at de-Stalinising the country's institutions failed. The hard-liner Rákosi was replaced by another strong-fisted Communist, Ernő Gerő, which concocted a perfect storm for the outbreak of the October Revolution of 1956. One of the initial events on 23 October in Budapest was a symbolic solidarity march to the statue of the Polish General József Bem – a hero of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-49 – where Polish and Hungarian flags were on display and the following slogans were chanted: "Poland shows us the way, let's follow the Hungarian way! We're the nation of Father Bem and Kossuth, let's walk hand in hand! Long live the Polish nation! Long live the Polish Workers' Party! Long live the Polish-Hungarian friendship!" (Granville, 2001:1061). Self-organised worker councils, following the Polish model equally played an important role in organised resistance and functioned as a transmission-belt for channelling reform demands. Unfortunately, the reform requests of the revolutionary government in Hungary led by Imre Nagy – such as establishing multi-party elections and exiting the Warsaw Pact – were deemed to be way too farfetched by the central Russian administration, and the revolution ended on 4th November with a bloody Soviet military intervention, and tanks on the streets of Budapest.

The Polish and Hungarian events bore obvious parallels. Explicit sympathy and solidarity displays in the crowds of Budapest and Warsaw were a commonplace in 1956. In comparison, the 1968 Prague Spring carries some inherent differences. Reforms were not only demanded from below, but also were steadfastly carried out by the Czechoslovak government. "Socialism with a human face", a project of Alexander Dubček (of Slovak origins), who became First Secretary on 5th January 1968 went as far as formally abolishing censorship in late June and rehabilitating the victims of Stalinist purges (Rothschild & Wingfield, 2008:136). This relatively free environment also guaranteed possibilities for writers and poets to express their criticism towards the regime. Playwright Václav Havel wrote extensively about discarding the one-party system in a magazine called Literarni listy, which "achieved a circulation of over 300,000, making it the most significant and widely read literary journal in Europe" at the time (Carradice, 2019). The most progressive programme proposals of Dubček – many of them never manifested in practice – were the possibility of a multiparty government, curbs on the power of the secret police, reinstating Slovakia's autonomy, building a federal state with equal Czech and Slovak parts, and lastly nurturing good relations with Western states (Carradice, 2019). The programme points resonated extensively with the demands of the 1956 Hungarian Imre Nagy government with one exception, Dubček made crystal clear that he insisted on staying within the Soviet sphere of influence, to avoid military retaliation. In fact, Czechoslovak leaders tended to refer to the revolution in Hungary as a negative example, with the aim of persuading the Soviet leadership to tolerate the reforms (Reynolds, 2020:96). Meanwhile János Kádár, who became Hungary's leader after the revolution and introduced his own version of milder 'Goulash Communism', saw a potential ally in Dubček. Kádár persistently argued that the Prague Spring was not a repetition of 1956, yet, at the same time he also used the revolution to precaution Dubček not to advance too far (Reynolds,

2020). In hindsight, all efforts were in vain as Warsaw Pact military units invaded Czechoslovakia at the end of August and upended all reform attempts.

Some scholars have attributed profound importance to these events and labelled them as different models of democratisation, cumulatively building on one another (Arato, 1985). Provided the onset of real democratic transition was still decades away, and the Russian leadership had made painstakingly clear that Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia could not exit its sphere of influence, the above is a rather exaggerated account of the legacy of 1956 and 1968. Inadvertently though, these events contributed to a prompter and smoother democratic transition in 1989/90 in a variety of ways. The Petőfi Circle in Hungary – named after the romantic, revolutionary poet, who died during the 1848/49 uprising – was a youth debate club, which enshrined writers, essayists and poets and became famous for cementing the intellectual foundations of the events in October 1956. The organisation operated under the auspices of the local Communist Party's youth movement (Hegedus, 2007), but was soon labelled too radical for the party leadership's liking, and was eliminated after 1956. The short-lived circle had a great impact on thaw within Soviet satellite states, also recognised across the borders of Hungary, such as by the Czech novelist Milan Kundera (Kundera, 2023). Thaw was apparent in Czechoslovakia too. As a result of easing censorship, samizdat literature was burgeoning even after the Soviet military intervention in 1968. Forbidden texts and publications, which promoted anti-dictatorial, pro-democratic ideals often crossed borders and were translated to Polish and Hungarian (Demszky, 2006:119). Similarly, in Poland, owing to the Committee of the Defence of Workers (KOR), a precursor to Solidarność (solidarity) and the Independent Publishing House (NOWA) the publications of Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian opposition figures were widely circulated in the society (Ananicz, 2006:28). Those intellectuals who had to flee their countries and stayed in emigration also nurtured strong bonds. Once Adam Michnik, Polish essayist and former Solidarity activist stated jokingly that his meeting in Paris in 1977 with Vacláv Havel and the Hungarian sociologist and historian Peter Kende was the first real Visegrad summit, where they contemplated about the possible ways of cooperation between the opposition activists of the three countries.

The first seeds of civil society activism were also sowed in the years following 1956/68. Solidarity was originally embroidered on the flags of demonstrators in Poland during the 1956 June demonstrations, which gradually carried on to become the motor of underground resistance against dictatorship (Ash, 1983). The real breakthrough came in the 1970s, when Polish intellectuals, students, and workers together managed to create a "whole opposition counter-culture", which was unique in the Soviet bloc (Ash, 1983:18), first under the banner of the Polish KOR (Committee for the Defence of Workers), which was succeeded by Solidarność (Solidarity). Lech Wałęsa, first President of post-Communist Poland, grew to become the leader of Solidarity. He was a shipyard worker at the Gdańsk Shipyard (then Lenin Shipyard), one of Poland's "shop-window socialist enterprise" (Ash, 1983:12). He witnessed the bloody retaliations in December 1970 as a member of the strike committee, following a concerted strike action initiated at the Shipyard, and a few

years later in 1976 he was fired from his workplace. The Polish Solidarność nurtured strong bonds with the Czechoslovak Charter 77 underground resistance movement. Charter 77's flourishing was precipitated by a declaration with the same title, which was a solidarity statement to criticise the regime for not respecting human rights. Even though the Charter itself, drafted in 1977 primarily by Vacláv Havel, candidly asserted that it was not an organisation, "nor was it a base for oppositional political activity" (Bolton, 2012), yet its symbolic force evoked a new vocabulary and activism in resistance circles. The terms "signatories" and "Chartists" evolved to become labels used for those who engaged in resistance activities (Bolton, 2012), including 40 Hungarians (Demszky, 2006). The most significant works of important Chartists were those essays, which have since been published in an edited volume under the title of Havel's seminal piece "Power of the Powerless". These essays were widely circulated as samizdat literature in Poland and Hungary. Besides, so called "flying universities" in Warsaw, Prague and Budapest equally functioned as a glue between the three countries' intellectuals, where the ideals of the resistance movement were disseminated and circulated (Stepan, 2009).

Periodically, waves of repression weakened solidarity dialogues between the resistance activists of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, such as the 1979-80 imprisonment of many Chartists, including Havel, or the introduction of martial law by Wojciech Jaruzelski in reaction to the rising popularity of Solidarność. However, these darker periods were only temporary setbacks. 1979 was also the year when the Hungarian Support for the Poor Fund (Hungarian acronym SZEFA) was established, which aimed at deconstructing the taboo around poverty in the Kádár era, and was also an intellectual motor of the Hungarian resistance. Following the introduction of martial law in Poland, the Fund organised several charitable collections for Polish children, and also tried to arrange a two-weeks holiday by lake Balaton for the most vulnerable kids, which was intercepted by the two countries' leadership (Lengyel, 2011, Haraszti, 1998). Even though the Fund was dissolved in 1984, its supporters kept pursuing resistance activities, and publishing samizdat literature via independent (even illegal) publishing agencies and periodicals, such as the Hungarian Beszélő or the AB Independent Publisher. Nonetheless, Hungary was somewhat a special case among the three countries, without a well-organised civic movement. In Poland the sharp increase in the price of basic goods triggered worker protests and the formation of KOR in the 1970s; while in Czechia, allowing the infiltration of too many reformists into the government caused head-aches for the Soviet regime. János Kádár managed to contain successfully both the economic decline, and reform aspirations (Haraszti, 2000). The so-called Gulash Communism under Kádár – also referred to as the 'happiest barracks of the Eastern Bloc' – managed to alleviate the ominous living-conditions previously experienced under Stalinism. At the same time, reforms were allowed to be implemented solely from above, with the involvement of those reformers, who were approved and vetted by the state (Haraszti, 2000). Organised civic movements rose to prominence, wen the economy eventually plummeted in 1986. Instead of violently repressing opposition voices, some reform-minded individuals from Hungary's political elite joined and fostered discussions between the state and opposition circles. The forum meetings at the town of Monor and Lakitelek in 1985

and 87 respectively were the harbingers of the roundtable discussions, which precipitated the regime change, as well as the formation of Hungary's multiparty system (Falk, 2003). For instance, as an outcome of the latter meeting, an intellectual and political movement called MDF (Magyar Demokrata Fórum) was set up, which also gave Hungary's first post-Communist Prime Minister, József Antall.

As a conclusion and final reflection on the legacies of 1956 and 68, three important observations be drawn. First, these events prompted reforms and civic resistance in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, which years later guaranteed a smooth, peaceful and bloodless change of regime in 1989-90. In Hungary and Poland roundtable discussions were held to introduce a multi-party system and democratic institutionalization, while in Czechoslovakia the nonviolent Velvet Revolution was the official democratic turning-point. Secondly, these events created a sense of solidarity and shared struggle between the three nations, which manifested not only in the dense circuits of samizdat literature publication, but also, in the rise of close-knit international bonds between intellectuals, who knew each other well, and later took a pivotal role in the renaissance of the Visegrad Group. Namely, Vacláv Havel, Lech Wałęsa and József Antall as Presidents and Prime Minister were the signatories of the Visegrad Declaration in 1991. Lastly, as a legacy of 1956/68, a distinct, shared, consensual understanding of what it means to be "Central European" emerged among the three nations. This imaginary community of Central Europeans was firmly anchored in democratic, enlightened "Western" traditions, while the East in a political sense was its antidote – this interpretation is formulated eloquently in Milan Kundera's essay titled 'A Kidnapped West' (Kundera, 2023). Kundera defines the central, European middle ground as a culturally Western entity (Catholic, and not Orthodox), but politically attached to the East via Soviet-type Communism, which deprives countries of their culture (Kundera, 2023). The Czech writer essentially located Central Europe on the mental, imaginary map of its inhabitants, vis-à-vis what was considered to be West and East. In the essay titled "Kidnapped West", Kundera starts his contemplation by quoting the Director of the Hungarian News Agency from November 1956, who sent a desperate telex to the entire world before the start of the Russian attack against Budapest, claiming that "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe". Kundera celebrated the courageous revolts of Central Europe, to which according to him "nothing that has occurred in geographic Europe can be compared", but at the same time, his tone carried a degree of resentment towards the West, which let its long-lost Central European brothers fall as victims of Communism in 1945. These shared topoi provided an incentive for the Visegrad countries to reactivate their partnership, vying to join the 'West' represented by the EU and NATO. However, the notion of being abandoned by the West, later became a fertile breeding ground for populist re-interpretations of what Europe and the EU means to Central Europe.

2.5 The renaissance of Visegrad

The topos 'Central Europe' from which the renaissance of the Visegrad group evolved, is not a simple geographical location, but an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) based on shared

history, religion and culture, which were especially pertinent among the emerging new elite and intelligentsia of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland. After the change of regime many dissidents, samizdat publicists and resistance activists took up an official role, and became diplomats, civil servants, and ministers in post-Communist governments. Pre-1989, they socialised together during underground activities, meetings in Western European capital cities, or translating each other's publications, which were deemed to be illegal by the Communist regimes ruling the satellite states. A sense of belonging together was present in the wider society too (Gyárfášová, 2013), yet it was even more diffuse and pertinent at elite level, which becomes clear from the wording of the Visegrad Declaration itself, as well as the memoir book published in 2006, which commemorates the 15th anniversary of the grouping. Starting with the latter, the book is a collection of essays from former and acting politicians, ambassadors, as well as philosophers and journalists who overwhelmingly evaluate the Visegrad formation as a success story, provided all four (initially three) nations by the time the edited volume was published had joined the NATO and the EU, which were openly declared aims already in 1991. Recollections vary profoundly about who initiated the Visegrad cooperation. Conspicuously, authors from all four nations attempt to underline the role of their own politicians, which is again a rectification of the group's positive achievements and relative success in the first 15 years of its existence. According to Géza Jeszenszky, first Foreign Minister of Hungary after the change of regime, it was József Antall then PM, who invited the "leaders of Poland and Czechoslovakia to Visegrad" as a symbolic gesture back in November 1990 when they met at the Paris summit of the CSCE (now OSCE) (Jeszenszky, 2006:60). Whereas, the Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia Jiří Dienstbier accredited special importance to the meeting of premiers on 9 April, 1990 in Bratislava for the calling of President Havel (Dienstbier, 2006). The book even has an image of Havel's handwritten draft version of the Visegrad Declaration, with some makeshift corrections. Meanwhile, Zbigniew Janas, Polish Solidarity activist claims that the very roots of this tripartite friendship dates back to the Polish-Czech and Polish-Hungarian Solidarity cooperation, fostered by Solidarność (Janas, 2006). Lastly, Mikuláš Dzurinda PM of Slovakia between 1998-2006 highlighted the revolutionary visions of an inter-war Slovak politician, Milan Hodža, who already made attempts to forge a formidable Central European bloc (Dzurinda, 2006). These varying narratives are not a sign of competition, but an indication that all parties had a vested interest in reinvigorating the Visegrad formation, and all of them wanted to claim ownership over the initiative thanks to its immediate, palpable success.

The Visegrad Declaration on the cooperation of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, together with a Solemn Statement, which directly mentions and commemorates the medieval Visegrad meeting of 1335, was signed on 15th February 1991 in the iconic Visegrad Castle in Hungary. The Declaration underscores the historical intertwining, which have evolved over the past decades between the three signatory states, and emphasises their cultural proximity and common spiritual heritage. Besides, the treaty also lists five basic objectives to be achieved together, and eight tangible practical steps to translate the objectives into actions[2]. The former list mirrors the EU's

[2] See the original text of the Visegrad Declaration in the Appendix

fundamental values (freedom, democracy, rule of law, human rights…etc.). While one action item even makes direct reference to the four freedoms of the EU: "in order to support free flow of labour force and capital, they (*the Visegrad states*) shall develop economic cooperation, based on the principles of the free market, and mutually beneficial trade in goods and services, moreover they shall strive to create favourable conditions for direct cooperation of enterprises and foreign capital investments, aimed at improving economic effectiveness". Lastly, the Declaration pledges to achieve the envisaged goals via close coordination between the member states and meetings at various political levels. The text of the Declaration was proven to be much more than eloquently worded empty words, as empirical, hands-on achievements followed shortly afterwards. Many of them showcased an open commitment to joining the EU, and imitating EU structures. The Visegrad Group set up to the Council of the EU's example a yearly rotating presidency, which became a linchpin of determining and implementing the organisation's goals. Then in 1992 the same member states established an economic offshoot, called the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which according to Dangerfield can be classified as a pre-accession instrument, and a "potential intensification of joining the Single Market" (Dangerfield, 2004:208). Even though the CEFTA and other similar free trade areas (Baltic Free Trade Area BFTA) were not more ambitious in scope than the Single Market itself. There is no formal requirement for regional cooperation between states, who wish to pursue EU membership simultaneously, yet the EU was also supportive of these initiatives. In fact, the European Commission expected progress on mutual relations between former satellite states, in order to develop further integration into the EU (Dangerfield, 2004:210). The emerging Visegrad formation was proven to be a sufficient guarantee for fulfilling the Commission's demands, provided Association Agreements in the leadup to the 2004 enlargement were first signed – although on an individual basis – between the EU, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland on 16 December, 1991.

The Visegrad Group equally aimed at sewing the connection tighter between their entrepreneur, businesses, civil society, youth and educational community via funding opportunities channelled through its Bratislava-based donor organisation, the Visegrad Fund. However, the fate of the group, the intensity and nature of member state relations, and the success of the cooperation ultimately depended on the leading political elite. After the first few years of success and harmony, driven forward by politicians, who socialised together in the resistance movements during the Soviet era, the Visegrad cooperation experienced its first large-scale setback in the period of 1993-98. Two factors played a pivotal role in the rise of VG-scepticism. In order to understand them, the above historical description is quintessential. As a by-product of Czechoslovakia's breakup in 1993, a Visegrad-sceptic economic hardliner called Václav Klaus became the Czech Prime Minister, who had strong Thatcherite inclinations regarding both the EU and the Czech economy (Štěpánovský, 1994). Whereas to the helm of the newly independent Slovakia, a nationalist-populist of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) was delegated, Vladimír Mečiar (Rybář, 2006). He was the first truly illiberal Prime Minister within the Visegrad formation, much before the rise of Orbán. Klaus as the leader of the economically more advanced Czech regions,

preferred to sustain the Visegrad cooperation on purely economic terms, and instead of using the Visegrad brand, he preferred to label the cooperation with the CEFTA banner (Štěpánovský, 1994). Klaus also rejected the Maastricht model, although he never admitted to be a Eurosceptic. Instead, as a self-proclaimed Eurorealist, Klaus first and foremost sought to reduce customs barriers to increase trade between the Visegrad countries, as a precursor of Single Market integration, provided trade flows between Central European nations severely plummeted in 1990-92 (Štěpánovský, 1994). The premiership of Klaus was less detrimental though to the Visegrad Group and their chances of joining the EU and the NATO in comparison to the premiership of Mečiar in Slovakia, as Klaus still kept adhering to EU principles, and back then did not directly challenge the consensus of joining the EU.

In stark contrast, the Mečiar era between 1994 – 1997 resulted in hampering the unity of the Visegrad Group in their endeavours, and demolishing Slovakia's hopes of joining the EU and the NATO. Mečiar was accused of disrespecting the Rule of Law, entrenching its power, halting the introduction of market economy, and derailing a referendum that would have ensured direct Presidential elections Slovakia, and the country's NATO membership (Szomolányi, 2000). In addition, the Mečiar government introduced a number of legislations that impacted unfavourably the Hungarian ethnic minority in the country's territory. For instance, the 1995 law on the usage of minority languages "made proficiency in Slovak a condition for employment in any state-run institution, all official documents had to be filled-out in Slovak, and local government meetings were also required to be conducted in Slovak, even if the entire local institution was composed of Hungarians" (Hacker, 2010:171). As a result, Slovakia was not mentioned in the conclusions of the Luxembourg European Council in 1997 as a potential new member state (European Council, 1997). Moreover, despite Visegrad leaders' proclaimed interest in Slovakia fulfilling the Euro-Atlantic criteria, the country's NATO membership was delayed until 2002, while the other three nations had already joined in 1999 (Hárs, 2006). Anachronic conservativism and nationalism were the results of vying for independence, which at that time was muted or not present in the other Visegrad states. Eventually, the elections of 1998 both in Czechia and Slovakia brought more pro-EU Prime Ministers to the government, which resurrected the Visegrad Group, and reawakened their hopes of joining the EU together. However, this initial setback a few years after the Visegraed Group's renaissance proves that shared cultural roots or being exposed to similar historical experiences cannot ultimately guarantee the longevity of a subregion's collaboration and success. Therefore, it is quintessential to investigate the conditions under which subregions (in this thesis specifically the Visegrad Group) rise to a prominent role, and the oscillation of narratives at elite level, which prompt either the rise or demise of a subregion.

2.6 Conclusions

This chapter attempted to review in a descriptive, narrative fashion the intertwining and diverging periods in the relations between the four Visegrad countries in longue-durée, historical terms, starting from the 1335 Visegrad Congress, to the renaissance of the group more than half a

millennium later in 1991. It was an important exercise, serving the better understanding of the subsequent analytical chapters of the thesis, where the role of elite discourse on Central Europe and the discourse on the EU will receive increased attention. It has been showcased that geographical proximity exposes members of a subregion to similar historical experiences, which may trigger solidarity between them, and a sense of belonging together despite linguistic or ethnic differences. All four (initially three) countries adopted the same religion and their royal families inter-married, which led to occasional fusions between these countries. Moreover, located between Western and Eastern Europe as a buffer zone between great powers, the small 'middle-kingdoms' were exposed to invasions, domination, and fragile statehood in a similar vein. Revolutions and independence movements spread rapidly from one nation to the other, again due to geographical proximity and shared struggles often against a common enemy. The cross-border support between Czechs, Poles and Hungarians both in 1948 and the aftermath of 1956/68 turned out to be a strong, adhesive experience, which tied together the histories of the Visegrad states. However, robust, cross-border bonds were often limited to the intelligentsia and some circles within the nobility. On the other hand, this chapter has also demonstrated that geographical proximity in itself is not a guarantee of amicable relations. Animosity can also stir up between neighbours, as it has been demonstrated in the case of Slovakia and Hungary, and occasionally between Czechia and Slovakia. The Slovak-Hungarian conflict kept haunting the Visegrad Group and casted a long shadow over the success of the group in 1993-98. Differences were surmounted only after the illiberal, nationalist Mečiar government was toppled, and a more pro-European coalition gained mandate to form a government in Slovakia. In conclusion, answering the question whether subregional members are natural allies of one another, the answer is not straightforward. Neighbours in the region, who have been exposed to similar historical experiences can bond over a shared struggle against a common enemy, or when vying for achieving similar goals. Nonetheless, mutual grievances might equally be present between countries in close vicinity, that can resurface depending on the ruling political leadership in power.

3 Once upon a time when permissive consensus vanished: theorising about subregional activism

EU subregions such as the Visegrad Four, the Frugal Four or the New Hanseatic League have increasingly been in the limelight of media and scholarly attention (Howarth & Schild, 2022; Schoeller & Falkner, 2022; Verdun, 2022; Bedea & Kwadwo, 2020; Nič, 2016; Schulz and Henköl, 2020; Braun, 2020). Yet, only a few studies attempt to classify and analyse these member state aggregates in a systematic fashion. Dangerfield's classification of EU subregions is one of the most rigorous attempts to academically assess intra-EU regionalism. His categories (pioneer, substitute, complement or pre-accession instrument types) are exclusively based on the subregion – EU integration nexus, and all of them presuppose an inherently positive connection between the subregional entity and the EU (Dangerfield, 2004; Cottey, 1999). In a similar vein, András Inotai identifies EU integration as an upgrade to subregional cooperation. Should the subregion be a precursor to the Union (Benelux) or a stepping stone towards integration (CEFTA, Baltic), according to him, all of them represent an "interim status between association and full membership" (Inotai, 1998:33). While these studies promulgate important observations about the origins of subregions, their initial relations to the EU, and the motivation behind countries pursuing a concerted goal, they say little about subregional activity once the members of a subregion get admitted to the EU. Neither do they analyse the formation of novel subregional entities of states, which are already part of the EU. Furthermore, before joining the EU, these organisations were free trade zones, pursuing in tandeom purely economic policies, which lost relevance after embracing the EU's common external tariffs. Thus, theoretically, these studies are confined to examining subregions in their momentum of permissive consensus, without taking into account that all subregions, which function within the borders of the EU are political in nature.

Although subregions have been important lynchpins of initiating, and later widening integration geographically, the newfound attention dedicated to these meso-level actors springs from a different source. Over time, these groupings went through substantive changes. Subregions in the past decade often acted as 'policy sceptic' protest groups (De Vries, 2018:80), confronting reforms or hindering the advance of integration (Duszczyk, Podgórska & Pszczółkowska, 2019; Edtstadler in Grüll, 2020; Koß & Séville, 2020; Kurz, 2020a). The Visegrad Group, once a flagship project of democratisation and regime change after the fall of the USSR (see Chapter 2) has transformed into the enfants terribles of Europe (Bakke & Sitter, 2020) owing to the presence of democratic backsliding to varying degrees in all its member states, and their concerted opposition to the refugee quota system (Duszczyk, Podgórska & Pszczółkowska, 2019; Koß & Séville, 2020), as well as some tenets of the EU Green Deal (Fabianowicz, 2023). Similarly, a group of North-Western European member states under the banner of the New Hanseatic League and the Frugal Four have successfully opposed deeper fiscal integration at two separate occasions, during the Euro and COVID-19 crises (Bokhorst & Schoeller, 2024; Verdun, 2022). The groups are both spearheaded by the Netherlands, a country, which is also member of the dormant Benelux

formation, the forerunner of EU integration. In conclusion, for the better or the worse, during the past decade when subregions made their voice heard and appeared as a concerted front, they came across as effective actors which can influence EU decision-making.

Yet, classic EU-integration theories such as liberal intergovernmentalism or neo-functionalism outright disregard meso-level, inter-state coalitions as actors of EU integration. These theoretical trends tend to prioritise individual member states and supranational institutions among the plethora of actors, which influence integration and EU decision-making (Haas, 1958; Moravcsik, 1998; 2001; Schmitter, 1969). Only following the comparativist turn did the discipline of EU studies attempt to examine regionalist patterns of cooperation among member states in Council and EP voting, within the framework of numerous quantitative studies (Bailer et al., 2015; Hagemann, 2008; Hix, 1999; Hosli et al. 2011; Mattila, 2008; Thomson, 2009; Zimmer et al., 2005). These studies identified either functionalist or ideological reasons behind countries cooperating on certain issues and voting concertedly, such as being net contributor or net beneficiaries of EU funds (Bailer et al., 2015; Hagemann, 2008; Thomson, 2009; Zimmer et al., 2005). The ideological position of governments was also proven to be vital when it comes to Council voting. Hagemann's (2008) findings in her research about decision-making in Council settings between 1999-2004 demonstrate a clear left-right pattern in member states' voting behaviour. Moreover, "the rightward shift in a considerable number of member states in the examined period also meant a considerable shift in how votes were cast in the Council" (Hagemann, 2008:37). Even though the comparativist turn shifted the focus of attention towards regionalist patterns of cooperation, subregionalism as a phenomenon remained underexamined.

A possible reason why subregions garnered subdued attention up until the recent past could be the greatly fluctuating intensity of their activity. For instance, the Visegrad Group became a formidable brand after having achieved NATO, EU and Schengen membership (Törő, Butler & Grúber, 2014), still the group was unable even in the short aftermath of their EU accession to establish a common position during the 2003-4 Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on the Constitutional Treaty. In early 2004, former Polish Foreign Minister Andrzej Olechowski went as far as stating that "the Visegrád Group de facto disintegrated at the time of Poland's biggest diplomatic push in its post-1989 history—the crusade to defend the Nice Treaty provisions" (Dangerfield, 2008:648). They equally failed to project a unified front when crisis alleviating policies were negotiated during and in the aftermath of the Eurocrisis (Copeland, 2014). Up until the refugee crisis of 2015, Visegrad members showcased willingness to coordinate and achieved successes within policy fields, which at that stage were not politicised, such as energy security, regional development, cohesion policy and the EU's neighbourhood policy (Eihmains, 2024; Törő, Butler & Grúber, 2014). Consequently, the Group did not attract visibility and recognition from other actors.

In contrast, the Visegrad Group reinstated their brand, and became well-known among Eurocrats when the group was the lead formation to oppose the idea of an automatic (compulsory) refugee distribution quota system (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023). Moreover, the Eurocrisis and the financial implications of the COVID-19 crisis also inflicted temporal peaks in subregional activism (Bokhorst & Schoeller, 2024; Fabbrini, 2022; Verdun, 2022), as the New Hanseatic League managed to tone down monetary reforms in 2017, and the Frugal Four opposed the introduction of Eurobonds in addition to tweaking the portion of grants and loans channelled to member states in need. Kriesi explained this phenomenon via differentiated patterns of politicisation in the public due to regionally embedded conflict structures (Kriesi, 2016; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Meanwhile others proposed that differentiated politicisation has more supply-side origins, and opportunistic leaders often with a sovereignist discourse (Brack, Coman & Crespy, 2019; Borriello & Brack, 2019; Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2023) come together in regional inter-state coalitions, on an ad-hoc basis to further their political longevity. In line with the latter reasoning, scholars have pinpointed that novel interacting cleavages induced by crises produce unstable, opportunistic coalitions, labelled as 'strange bedfellows' (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019; Eihmanis, 2024), instead of clear regional patterns of cooperation. According to Zeitlin et al. "the European political system, rather than moving towards a normalisation of left-right dynamics at EU level, as some had hoped" is rather characterised by temporary alliances, where actors may side with one another on certain issues, but would not be able to compromise on others, creating negotiation impasses (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019, 2019:966). Lastly, peaks in subregional activism, especially in the Eastern Central European context was explained with the presence of a novel division-line propelled by a thin-centred ideology (Laurelle, 2022) called illiberalism (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Havlík & Hloušek, 2021). In conclusion, the contemporary literature is ambiguous about the nature of inter-state coalitions – as in, whether they are stable units following regional or ideological patterns, or if they are ad-hoc formations on a case-by-case policy basis.

This thesis will serve a binary purpose on the theoretical level. First, it attempts to fill the gap in the EU integration literature, which undertheorises subregional activism. Provided subregions became increasingly visible, often conflictual actors in the EU's polity, it would be essential to better understand their nature, and the reasons, which prompt them to create politics traps. Secondly, the thesis will attempt to decipher whether there are some recurring triggers or constellation of factors that lead to subregional activism, conductive to negotiation impasses; or subregions are indeed nothing more than an expression of ad-hoc, interest-based EU member state ensembles. Even though tailormade theorisation about subregions is scarce, the literature on coalition formation between EU members, the literature on small-state actors, and some novel theorisation about differentiated politicisation could provide important cues to assess the circumstances under which subregions become effective actors. In order to answer the research question proposed in this thesis: "Under what conditions do subregions become effective actors in EU-level negotiations?" this chapter will formulate testable theories based on the existing literature, which will also provide the backbone of the initial QCA (qualitative comparative

analysis) test, where instances of effective subregional activism will be analysed in a truth table. The below paragraphs will not only present testable theories, but will also introduce possible ways to operationalise them in the subsequent empirical chapters. The literature review will be divided into three sections: the first will overview three theories that assess so-called functional cleavage theories of coalition building, the second part will tap into theorisation about the role of ideologies and ideological alignment among governments, and the last one will dissect differentiated politicisation as a motor behind cross-cutting cleavages. However, before turning to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis, the below section will reflect on the nature of subregions and why cleavage and politicisation theories are better suited to explain subregionalism instead of the regionalism and the IR literature in this current study.

3.1 The nature of subregions

This thesis is positioned in an ontological and epistemological constructivist middle ground and conceptualises the nature of regions according to Neumann's region-building approach: "regions are not pre-given, constant entities, but imagined communities, which are constantly being defined and redefined by its members" (Neumann, 1994:53). Accordingly, subregions are not considered to be constantly active, stable coalitions in every policy area. They might be dormant or show low activity with little visibility and recognition by other actors. Moreover, subregions are intentionally loose, institutionally non-binding formations, which allow its members to opt out of cooperating with one another, or to cooperate with other EU member states outside the remits of the subregion. The aim of this thesis is to identify the conditions, which drive subregional actors to have an interest in representing their stance together, in subregional settings. For this purpose, a number of hypotheses will be discussed below, which are derived from different schools of thought, including rationalist, realist, and postfunctionalist theories. It should be highlighted that this theoretical chapter does not seek to contemplate whether ideas are simple epiphenomena of material changes, or whether our material world is incomprehensible in the absence of ideas and cultural frames (Moravcsik, 2001) – which is a futile exercise that can only lead to the chicken or the egg causal dilemma. Instead, the goal is to outline testable theories, so that they can be examined via QCA, in order to identify whether any of the proposed conditions qualify to be necessary or sufficient conditions of effective subregional actorship.

This thesis will argue that subregional activity at EU level is an elite-driven project. It is true though that a sense of solidarity and belonging together might exist at the level of the overall population among subregional members (as it has been discussed in Chapter 2). The politicisation of EU-related issues in the general public along regionally embedded conflict structures can also propel interconnectedness. Yet, these factors do not translate automatically into subregional activity without the elite's capitalisation on certain issues. Increased elite activity might also boost public awareness of subregions and a common subregional identity. In a study conducted during the spring of 2015 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Visegrad Group, "54% of Slovak respondents said they heard of the Visegrad Group and knew what it was about, compared to 37%

of the Czechs, 26% of the Hungarians, and only 17% of the Poles" (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2016:5). Meanwhile, 70% of Slovaks considered the V4 as a meaningful cooperation, compared to about 50% of the Czechs and solely 40% of the Hungarians and the Poles (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2016:5). Heightened Slovak awareness and interest in the organisation can be explained by the V4's pivotal role in advocating for Slovakia joining the EU together with the rest of the group in 2004, despite Slovakia's laggard position in terms of RoL reforms during the Mečiar era. The above opinion poll was conducted just before the refugee crisis hit Europe, while the Visegrad cooperation was still dormant, and the surveys were repeated in 2021 March-April, which showcased strikingly different results. Awareness of the region increased in every country. The highest rate was observed in Hungary (69%), the loudest advocate of the Visegrad formation, followed by respondents of Slovakia (65%), Czechia (52%) and Poland (49%) (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2021:7). In addition, the Visegrad cooperation was viewed as "meaningful and important by 82% of Hungarian, 78% of Slovak, 71% of Czech and 59% of Polish respondents" (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2021:18). Thus, it can be concluded that the elite-level reactivation of the group had palpable impacts on public awareness about the Visegrad Group. Therefore, the level of analysis in this thesis focusses on elite-level interaction.

3.2 Why not IR and regionalism

Initially, to derive testable theories, which could explain peaks in subregional activity, three different trends of literature have been scrutinised including regionalism, IR and the EU-integration literature. This section will justify why in this research project mainly the latter will be employed to construct the theoretical backbone of the thesis. More specifically, the QCA truth table will encompass the literature on small state behaviour, coalition theories which were established following the comparativist turn in EU studies, post-functionalist theories of politicisation and the newest literature on poly-cleavages, sovereignism and illiberalism, all borrowed from the EU integration discipline. These theories will be divided into three broader analytical categories, under the banners of functionalist, ideology related and post-functionalist cleavage theories.

While contemplating how to approach the research question of this thesis, which asks "Under what conditions do subregions become effective actors in EU-level negotiations?", I encountered the same conundrum as when researching the EU, the N = 1 dilemma. Subregions are relational to the larger context in which they are situated, in this research the EU, which is a unique, sui generis polity (Hix, 1998): less than a state more than a multilateral international organisation. Schools within IR speak volumes about inter-state relations, regionalisation and regional actorship, however, IR theories presume that states operate in a world of anarchy and disregard the highly regulated, complex political system in which EU subregions exist. Neo-realist scholars tend to emphasise the role of security communities, balance of power considerations, and the role of hegemons either internally or externally to a region, that might lead to regional aggregates between states (Baldwin, 2013; Risse, 1995). In the past, security concerns and the presence of a strong

security community played a pivotal role in setting up subregions, still outside of the EU, such as the Visegrad Group, the Nordic Council or the Baltic Assembly (Buzan & Waever, 2003; Waever, 1990). However, neo-realism especially after the end of the Cold War and the bipolar world order (Waltz, 1979) remained increasingly unable to explain European integration (Grieco, 1995), let alone subregional activism within a densely institutionalised context. Still, a particular strand of literature, which alters some of the auxiliary assumptions of neo-realism about international anarchy (Grieco, 1995) could provide important guidance to explain the periodic rise of subregional activity in EU negotiations. Without violating the core assumption of neo-realism about states being rational actors, which attempt to preserve their independence and own interests, a strand of EU literature on small-state behaviour and the role of the Franco-German internal hegemons carries important conclusions to hypothesise about subregional activism (Bailes & Thorhalsson, 2013; Panke, 2010; Paterson, 2011; Verdun, 2022). Classic neo-realism might still be relevant for subregional activism when foreign policy is in focus or an external threat is looming on the EU.

Similar to neo-realism, liberal institutionalism and rational functionalism are state-centred, power-based approaches, which attempt to explain cooperation between states (Börzel, 2016:45). Their primary focus is on the functional need of resolving collective action problems, the role of mutual interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977), and the need to establish institutions, which guarantee that all states adhere to mutually agreed expectations and commitments (Keohane, 1984). Grand integration theories in the EU literature such as liberal intergovernmentalism and neo-functionalism are also ultimately informed by these IR theories. However, even if interconnectedness and functional drivers could be an ultimate source of subregionalism, institutionalisation and deeper integration are neither possible, nor desirable for subregional formations, as it has been argued in Chapter 1. Moreover, if there is disagreement between subregional members, or some members deviate from a pre-determined strategy, it will entail no negative consequences or repercussions due to the lack of formal institutionalisation. Hence, the outcome that the above theories attempt to explain pose little relevance to study subregions, provided subregional entities are intentionally loose forms of cooperation, where supranational institutionalisation happens mostly for consultative purposes. Consequently, theories, which regard functional alignment as a key driver of cooperation between states, but do not consider integration as an ultimate end goal – such as coalition theories in EU studies – are better suited to formulate testable statements about subregional activism.

The constructivist (Wendt, 1995) turn both in IR and EU integration theory introduced novel ontological building blocks in theorising about regions and regionalism, such as ideas, identity, culture and ideology. Although, in the regionalism literature, a handful of scholars who theorised about so-called subsystems (synonym of subregions) have already recognised the importance of culture, religion and identity long before. Etzioni (1965) and in a co-authored piece Cantori and Spiegel (1969) identify some key drivers behind the rise of ‘subsystems’, which are enshrined

under the banner of social cohesion (language, ethnic and religious background) and political cohesion (regime type, political structure). Language, ethnicity or regime type might have played an important role in the formation of subregions such as the Visegrad Group, the Benelux formation, the Nordic Council or the Baltic Assembly (Elgström et al., 2001; Törő, Butler & Grúber, 2014). However, due to the constant nature of these factors, which hardly ever change, these theories are unfit to explain temporary peaks in subregional activism. Even though the linguistic, ethnic or religious composition of countries are not prone to change, another constructivist element, namely ideological alignment between governments, is subject to periodic changes. In democratic states the fate of a government ultimately depends on elections. Not only coalition theories in the EU literature, but also the literature on South American subregionalism equally recognise the fundamental importance of ideology as a driving force of regional activism (Riggirozzi, 2012). Therefore, theories, which hypothesise about cooperation between states based on the ideological alignment between their government in power, will also be considered in this theoretical chapter.

These introductory paragraphs before turning to detailing testable theories, have served an important purpose. It had to be justified why and which theories in the EU integration literature would be employed to compile the QCA truth table, instead of looking for inspiration in IR or the regionalism literature. Even though the word subregion carries the notion of 'region' in itself, and in fact subregions possess a number of region-like characteristics such as cohesive geography, these groups do not have institutions that guarantee reciprocity between their members or that would abide all members to adhere to common decisions. Moreover, these groups operate within the densely regulated polity of the EU, therefore IR and regionalism theories provide insufficient theoretical underpinnings for this thesis. The theories discussed above – small state behaviour vis-à-vis a local hegemon, functional coalition theories and ideological coalition theories from the comparativist EU literature – will be categorised under the banner of functionalist and ideology related cleavage theories. The final category, which has not been addressed here is post-functionalism. Provided post-functionalism fully originates in the EU integration discipline (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), and does not have an IR or regionalism alternative, it did not have to be justified why the EU integration variant of this theoretical trend was chosen to be part of the analytical framework.

3.3 Functional cleavage theories

3.3.1 Power politics: small and medium-size state strategy as a motor of regionalism

The first, functionalist theory discussed in this thesis to spell out testable hypotheses about subregionalism, originates in neo-realist inspired assumptions. Classic neo-realism surmises general mistrust between states and attached little importance to integration (Waltz, 1979; Waltz, 1999), which has been proven empirically questionable. After the rise of the EU and multilateral organisations, some of the basic auxiliary assumptions of realism has undergone transformations

– such as presuming general anarchy between states (Grieco, 1995), Still, theorisation about the behaviour of local hegemons, and their relation to small and medium-size neighbours relies on realist assumptions of cost-benefit calculations (Pedersen, 2002). For instance, the Mercosur and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) (Acharya, 2009; Carranza, 2010; Caballero Santos, 2015; Fawcett, 2004; Hurrell, 1995; Lehoczki, 2022) are autonomous trade organisations, which were triggered in reaction to US hegemony and the Washington consensus, while the ASEAN was called into existence as a response of South-East Asian countries to Chinese threat (Acharya, 2001; Acharya, 2004; Fawcett, 2004; Hurrell, 1995). In the EU context, France and Germany are considered to have hegemonic status in decision-making processes, and in fact, a significant body of literature has showcased that the so-called Franco-German tandem when cooperation emerges between the two, is an essential determinant of where EU integration should be heading (Paterson, 2011; Schoeller, 2018). Security considerations may no longer inform the actions of small and medium-size EU states, rather, the difference and distance between their own policy-stance vis-à-vis the local hegemons, the extent to which their relations are institutionalised, and the asymmetry of power between the small or medium-size state and the hegemon (Maes & Verdun, 2005; Verdun, 2022). Before turning to defining testable theories, it should be noted that this research defines small and medium size states in the EU context as "the weaker part in an asymmetric relationship, unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on their own" (Mouritzen and Wivel 2005:4), which translates into all member states except Germany, France, and until Brexit the UK (Gron & Wivel, 2011:524).

Recent research on the actions of subregional entities have highlighted that the rise of publicly visible coalitions could be regarded as an essential tactic of small and medium-size member states in the EU, with the purpose of making their voice heard, and to counterbalance the hegemonic Franco-German tandem (Jones, 2022; Schoeller, 2021; Schoeller, 2022; Verdun, 2022). Reactionary regionalism to counterbalance a local hegemon or hegemons has a vast literature in IR, especially when it comes to Latin American and Asian subregionalism (Hurrell, 1995; Riggirozzi, 2012). However, this realist inspired theory has scarcely been applied in the EU context systematically. Individual studies though point at countering the Franco-German local hegemons, as a key driver of subergional actorship. As early as in 2000, Bossaert and Vanhoonacker (2000) in their study of the Benelux formation's resurge hinted at similar observations. The Benelux states at the time when the Maastricht Treaty was under reform, expressed their vision on the future of Europe in several concerted position papers, and advocated for communitarianisation to counter the intergovernmentalist tendencies in France and Germany (Bossaert and Vanhoonacker, 2000). Since Benelux states perceived that they would suffer most from sticking to the status-quo, they employed a pace-setting strategy instead of foot-dragging (Börzel, 2002;Verdun, 2022). The difference between their position and the Franco-German one, as well as visible power asymmetries both informed the actions of the Benelux.

In a more recent example during the late 2010s, the New Hanseatic League, a subregion of NW EU members focussed most of its powers on "pushing against the centralising inclinations of France and Germany with Macron and Merkel possibly moving the EU towards deepening fiscal integration" (Verdun, 2022:307; Schild, 2020; Schoeller & Falkner, 2021). Both the New Hanseatic League as well as its offshoot the Frugal Four, employed considerable foot-dragging in order to preserve the status quo, which was thought to be more beneficial for small creditor states in the EMU as opposed to fiscal deepening (Schoeller, 2022). Accordingly, subregionalism emerged on the one hand because the policy stance of small creditor states was diametrically in opposition to France's stance, which after a U-turn in the German leadership was also supported by the more frugal hegemon of the Franco-German tandem (Capati, 2023). On the other hand, power asymmetries, especially following Brexit (Fabbrini, 2022), when frugal states lost a formidable ally, became also apparent. The possible centralisation of power in the Franco-German tandem was an undesirable prospect for these small and medium-size states (Schoeller, 2022), which would have created even more asymmetric power relations between them.

Similar patterns have manifested not only in NW, but also Central Eastern (CE) Europe. Zaun (2017) showcased that some countries, in particular the Visegrad Group, acted as gatekeepers in the process of negotiating the Dublin reforms in 2016, which led to non-adoption, and the lingering of the status-quo. Again, distance between the Visegrad, and the Franco-German tandem's policy stance was a key driver of subregionalism. Nonetheless, EU member states not always choose to bypass a hegemon, siding with one of the two (Verdun, 2022), playing one against the other could also be a relevant small or medium-state strategy. Empirical evidence demonstrated that the Visegrad Group acted in a reactionary manner even in the absence of Franco-German leadership. For instance, Macron's veto on the EU's enlargement towards the West Balkan prompted a stronger Visegrad stance on the issue, as the group has been a long-time advocate of embracing the West Balkan region in the EU (Visegrad Group, 2019). Another example includes the V4's adamant campaign for including nuclear energy in the green taxonomy, which was the favoured option of France, and was profoundly opposed by Germany. Both the tactics of bypassing the Franco-German tandem and siding with one hegemon will be scrutinised as the first testable theory of the QCA table. Thus, the first condition in the QCA table will be investigate via the following hypothesis: *"subregional actorship is augmented when the subregion holds an opposing view to one or both of the Franco-German hegemons".* Regarding empirical evidence, issue-specific policy papers adopted by subregional units at the time of heightened subregional actorship will be compared and contrasted with the French and German stances. The in-depth case study element of the empirical analysis will also detail whether the subregion used the tactic of bypassing the Franco-German tandem or sided with one hegemon to challenge the other.

3.3.2 Functional coalitions in the comparativist EU literature

Functionalist theories are at the very heart of the discipline of EU-integration, as the field was dominated for long by the debate between two fundamentally functionalist concepts: neo-

functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. These theories seek to explain integration and institution-building with reference to functionalist pressures, which either stem from a previous round of incomplete integration, also called spill-overs (Haas, 1958; Schmitter, 2004); or from the economic self-interests of nation states through the exploitation of asymmetrical interdependence (Moravcsik, 1998:5). In addition, both theories try to explain why and in what form integration and supranational institution-building happens, even though they identify different actors as the main drivers of the EU project. As it has been pointed out, these theories pose insufficient relevance to study subregions, provided subregional entities do not vie for integration at meso-level. Much rather, the increased visibility of subregions tightly connects to member states' desire to influence political decisions about specific policies within the EU. Thus, theories following the comparativist turn in the EU literature could provide more useful guidance to study subregions.

The comparativist turn shifted the focus of the discipline away from purely integrationalist considerations, towards novel ontological dimensions: the cognitive structure of the political space in which actors operate and make decisions within the EU polity (Hix, 1999:71). A particularly useful research area for the current investigation is the abundant literature on coalition formation in the Council of Ministers (Bailer et al., 2015; Hagemann, 2008; Hosli et al. 2011; Mattila, 2008; Thomson, 2009; Zimmer et al., 2005). Subregionalism is a fundamentally elite-led project, which stems from the cooperation between governing parties to influence policy decisions. Therefore, theories that investigate cooperation in intergovernmental settings, such as the Council of Ministers is a useful starting point. Transnational party cooperation in political groups of the European Parliament (EP) have minor or no influence at all on subregional cooperation. Often times subregional activity flared up while the governing parties of member states (or the lead coalition partner) set in different party groups within the EP. Therefore, the coalition literature that investigates voting patterns in the EP will be disregarded (Hix & Noury, 2009).

Studies, which examined either roll-call voting patterns in the Council, post-vote statements or policy stances within COREPER I or II during negotiations showcased clear regional patterns, often due to shared functionalist concerns. Many of these studies focus on comparing voting patterns pre- and post-2004, when the big bang enlargement happened. Mattila (2008), who investigated the output-end of negotiations, the so-called roll-call votes, observed a general North-South divide in terms of coalition patterns pre-enlargement. Whereas Hagemann (2008), who also included post-vote statements in her dataset, observed vague geographical clustering in the post-2004 era. Meanwhile, Naurin and Lindahl's study (2008), which is based on survey data on cooperation and communication patterns in the Council demonstrated a clear North-South divide pre-accession, complemented by a latitudinal East-West dimension post-accession.

Even though these studies do an important job to identify patterns of cooperation along regional inclinations, they provide scarce explanation for why regional voting happens. Bailer et al. (2015:437), who examined structural attributes of member states to explain conflict dimensions in

the Council in general, and in some selected policy areas found that "country-level redistributive interests shape the interactions of member states" in most cases; or to put it differently, the net-contributor net-beneficiary divide is the most important predictor of coalition formation. Similarly, Zimmer et al. (2005), who investigated ex-ante preferences instead of voting output found an even more pronounced net-contributor net-receiver divide. Whereas, Hosli et al. (2011) explained geographical fragmentation along the old vs new member states axis. These structural patterns are combined and confirmed in Plechanovová's (2010) investigation too, that identifies a core-periphery divide in Council settings when it comes to coalition building.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the existing studies. On the one hand, geographical divide is more pronounced when ex-ante preferences are examined, which does not come as a surprise, provided Council voting was mostly consensual, and remained so even after the large-scale 2004 accession (Heisenberg, 2005; Mattila, 2008). Therefore, this study will also focus on ex-ante preferences, especially since none of the subregions achieve blocking minority in QMV arrangements. On the other hand, structural explanation behind geographical alignment include redistributive reasons and division between old and new member states. Hence, functional alignment will be operationalised in the following forms in the QCA truth-table: Subregions become effective actors if:
"the subregional unit is composed of solely old or new EU member states."
"the subregional unit is composed of solely net-contributor or net-beneficiary member states."

3.4 Ideological alignment

3.4.1 Ideology related cleavage theories in the EU literature

In contrast to the above findings, several pieces of empirical research on Council voting showcased that member states prefer entering into coalition based on the stance of their government on the left-right, the GAL-TAN or the pro-contra EU ideological axis. Hagemann's (2008) research about decision-making in the Council between 1999-2004 demonstrates a clear left-right pattern in member states' voting behaviour. Moreover, "the rightward shift in a considerable number of member states in the examined period also meant a considerable shift in how votes were cast in the Council" (Hagemann, 2008:37). In a similar vein, Hagemann and Hoyland (2008) pointed out that when a new government enters the Council, and the government change also meant an ideological one, its closest coalition partners will not coincide with the previous government's preferences. Mattila attested these findings based on a dataset that covers a slightly earlier period from 1995 to 2000. His research proved that left-wing governments tend to vote much less against the Council majority, while right-wing governments are the most active 'no voters' (Mattila, 2004:29). Furthermore, the research paper also demonstrated that pro-integration governments are unequivocally the least likely to vote against the Council majority, regardless of their stance on the left-right axis.

Other studies have also demonstrated that the left-right ideological position of a party could be a robust and significant predictor of the party's stance on EU integration (Aspinwall, 2002). Thus, the left-right and the EU integration position of governments could provide important cues regarding coalition formation among member states. Indeed, the literature on subregional activities also suggest similar assumptions. For instance, Bossaert and Vanhoonacker found that one of the factors that contributed to the increased visibility of the Benelux formation in the late 1990s was the strongly pro-EU stance of all member states and hence the excellent relations between the governing PMs (Bossaert and Vanhoonacker, 2000). The 1994 coalition formation process in the Netherlands resulted in the inclusion of the more Euro-critical liberals as part of the governing coalition, which ignited fears about the Dutch commitment to Europe. Yet, PM Wim Kok, who came from the Labour Party, PvdA, as well as the third coalition partner in the government, D66 were more pro-EU and perceived cooperation with the other two Benelux partners as beneficial (Bossaert and Vanhoonacker, 2000:161-2). Accordingly, this thesis will operationalise ideological stance as the position of the lead coalition partner or in case absolute majority is achieved, the sole governing party during those times when subregional activism reached its pinnacle. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that in countries with established traditions of coalition governments, coalition parties have a stronger agency to hold the main governing party to account in national parliaments, exerting a greater influence on the country's political stance (Bokhorst & Schoeller, 2024).

There are several issues with reducing the conceptualisation of ideological stance solely to the left-right or EU integration axis. Firstly, the left-right dimension tends to manifest only when "basic socioeconomic issues are tackled in the EU" (Hix, 1994:21). Secondly, the overall party competition has shifted from the economic left–right dimension to the GAL–TAN cultural dimension (Vachudova, 2021). GAL stands for green, alternative, and libertarian, and TAN stands for traditional, authoritarian, and nationalist. This more novel cultural axis has also been labelled as post-materialist (Inglehart, 1990) or libertarian-authoritarian (Kitschelt, 1995). Thirdly, Hooghe et al. (2002) found that both the left-right and the GAL-TAN position of parties in EU member states are strongly associated with their stance on integration. The GAL-TAN dimension becomes a particularly strong predictor of a party's views on integration when environmental and asylum policies are at stake. Whereas, as it's been foreshadowed above, the left-right position of a party is a reliable predictor of its stance on economy and finance related questions regarding EU integration. Additionally, the association between the three axes of competition show pronouncedly different, regional patterns in old, Western European and new, Eastern European post-Communist states. In 'old Europe' economically right-leaning parties tend to be culturally TAN, while economically left-leaning parties tend to represent a culturally GAL position (Vachudova & Hooghe, 2009). Whereas, in 'new, post-Communist Europe', it is the exact other way around, economically left-leaning parties tend to represent a culturally TAN, while economically right-leaning parties have a culturally GAL stance. Consequently, in Western Europe Euroscepticism is clustered at the two ends of the party-competition diagonal (extreme left and

extreme right), while in Eastern Europe it's clustered around one pole, the culturally TAN, economically left-leaning. Thus, it can be concluded that the three ideological axis of party competition are all inter-related and showcase consistent patterns along regional lines. Therefore, ideological intertwining between governments could be valid explanatory condition to investigate subregional actorship. All three ideological axes will be taken into consideration when operationalising ideological alignment in the QCA truth table. Using Chapel Hill data, the following statements will be tested. Subregional actorship is augmented if:
"the main governing parties in all member states are aligned along the left-right ideological axis."
"the main governing parties in all member states are aligned along the GAL-TAN ideological axis."
"the main governing parties in all member states are aligned along the pro-anti EU axis."
Thus, this thesis attempts to clarify not only whether ideological alignment plays a pivotal role in the rise of subregional actorship, but also which of the three axes (if at all) was the most relevant. In case the lead governing parties of a subregional unit show more than 2 points difference in the Chapel Hill index, they will be considered non-aligned on the examined ideological axis.

3.4.2 Illiberalism

The final section on ideological alignment will concentrate on a particular ideological trend, which have had the most profound effect on Central-Eastern Europe, namely illiberalism. This thesis will conceptualise illiberalism based on the work of Marlene Laruelle (2022) and Julian G Waller (2024), who dissociate the phrase from regime types and rather propose that illiberalism is a thin-centred ideology. Illiberalism may pose relevance and arise globally, but it is ultimately a context-dependent movement "that varies in intensity and ideational expressions across countries and regime types" (Laruelle, 2022:304). Despite the volatile nature and context-dependent, varying forms of illiberalism, there are some uniform elements in different types of illiberalism across the globe, such as advancing a backlash against today's liberalism, the proposition of majoritarian, hierarchical structures as a solution to the ills of liberalism, and claims to cultural rootedness in an age of globalisation (Laruelle, 2022). It is different from populism, another thin-centred ideology that revolves around framing issues as conflict between the people and elites (Laruelle, 2024), and it equally differs from anti-liberalism or not-liberalism, as illiberalism is more than a simple reactionary ideology, provided it puts forward its own substantive, concrete ideas in cultural, political and economic terms (Waller, 2024). In conclusion, illiberalism is a distinct form of ideological reaction against hegemonic liberalism by those actors, who operate in countries, which experienced liberalism in the past three decades "either internally or through foreign dependence" (Waller, 2024:372).

Illiberal democracy is a term coined by Fareed Zakaria in 1997, and became a widely applied after the infamous 2014 Baile Tusnad speech of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. However, Slovakia already experienced illiberal trends in the early 1990s under the leadership of Vladimír Mečiar, which led almost to the exclusion of Slovakia from the 2004 enlargement round and the

falling apart of the Visegrad 4. Conversely, in the aftermath of the refugee crisis, when the V4 celebrated its renaissance, all four countries had illiberal strongmen in their helm. Although illiberalism undertook different forms and varying courses of manifestation in the four countries, palpable illiberal turns and swerves were pointed out by several scholars in all of them (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Havlík, 2019; Scott, 2021). For instance, Andrej Babiš then PM of Czechia was a media and business mogul turned politician, while the concentration of media and business interest in the governing PiS and Fidesz parties in Poland and Hungary respectively happened after their electoral victories (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018). In addition, Czechia and Slovakia experienced only illiberal swerves, as illiberal strongmen lost their power at parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2021 respectively, while in Hungary and Poland power grip lasted much longer, and continue to be present in the former country (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). Despite the above differences, there are some common tropes in the actions and discourse of leaders with illiberal tendencies. Börzel (2024:3437) pointed out that European political leaders back in the 1950s were able to invoke identity discourses built around overcoming Europe's nationalist past to move towards an ever-closer union in the aftermath of the Second World War; however, it did not translate automatically into the unequivocal realignment of identity allegiances in the EU's supranational centre. Illiberal alternatives both on the extreme left and right challenge the EU's cosmopolitan internationalism and present, religious, ethnonationalist or Marxist alternatives in response (Börzel, 2024).

The heyday of the illiberal grip in all four countries coincided with the most visible actorship of the V4 in EU-level negotiations. Various scholars theorised that the group can showcase a counter-hegemonic project to mainstream EU integration (Bauerová, 2018a; Kazharski, 2018; Nič, 2016), which might render the EU into a more heterogenous space in terms of political and cultural norms. Leaders with illiberal tendencies especially in Eastern Central Europe challenged the basic tenets of liberal democracy, a fundamental building-block of the EU through actions of violating media freedom, exacerbating the entanglement of political and business interests, boosting executive aggrandisement, and curbing judicial autonomy (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). The academic research also identified a patriarchal, family-friendly labelled illiberal economic model in these countries, which vests the state with a profoundly interventionist role (Orenstein & Bugaric, 2020). In addition, illiberal leaders were adamant to propose a counter-hegemonic, Christian, conservative, hierarchical alternative to the European liberal model (Scott, 2022). Thus, at the very core of illiberalism specifically in the EU context lies in the structural challenging of the values and beliefs that the EU represents. Accordingly, illiberal leaders, who converge on the overall, structural criticism of Europe, might hold deeper sympathy towards one another, and hence nurture closer political connections. The final, section of the QCA analysis will test whether subregions become effective actors if: *"all member states experience illiberal tendencies".*

3.5 Post-functional cleavages

3.5.1 National conflict structures, bottom-up politicisation

The above section on ideology already tapped into the realm of politicisation, and the final two hypotheses regarding the nature of subregional activism will build on post-functionalism even more explicitly. Post-functionalism was first established by Hooghe and Marks (2009), who argued that functionalist theories cannot any longer account for EU integration, but instead the direction and extent of integration became contingent upon domestic patterns of conflict across the EU, how and when identity is mobilised, and the politicisation of specific issues and communal identities (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In this thesis politicisation will be defined in line with De Wilde et al.'s conceptualisation, which is widely applied in contemporary research projects about the EU (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024; Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan, 2019). Accordingly, politicisation in the EU context encompasses a "higher intensity of public debate or in other words amplified salience, increased polarisation, and an expansion of actors and audiences engaged and interested in EU affairs" (De Wilde et al., 2015:6). In addition, this research recognises that politicisation of European issues is characterised by "a patchwork of politicising moments" rather than a uniform, linear pathway from less towards increasingly more politicisation (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019:997). Hence, due to the volatile nature of politicisation it is assumed that theories that build upon it could potentially explain temporary peaks in subregional activism. Lastly, it should be underlined that politicisation is a two-way street, and can be fed from demand or supply side inputs. The former means a bottom-up fashion of politicisation at the public level, while the latter refers to a top-down direction, where public opinion is shaped by elite cueing (Steenbergen et al., 2007). In the below paragraphs the first hypothesis will encapsulate demand side politicisation, while the latter will be based on theories that promulgate supply-side arguments and operationalisation.

The first hypothesis of this section focuses on how the actions of subregions altered in light of the end of permissive consensus about EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). As it has been described above, the literature on subregionalism, which systematically attempt to classify and analyse subregional units, presume an ultimately positive relation between subregional cooperation and EU integration (Dangerfield, 2004; Inotai, 1998). In contrast, recent research that zooms into investigating the actions of subregions in specific policy negotiations have showcased that post-functionalist politicisation also plays a pivotal role in the rise of these groups to effective actorship (Braun, 2020; Olaert & Gheyle, 2022; Verdun, 2022). According to Kriesi, the politicisation of European integration is not only time-dependent, "but also, it is embedded in national political conflict structures, which vary systematically between three European regions: the Northwest, the South and the East of Europe" (Kriesi, 2016:32). Kriesi points out that crises induced a heterogenous set of globalisation losers, who have been mobilised by the New Right or populist radical right in France, Germany, Sweden, Austria, Finland and Germany (Kriesi, 2016:37). In NW Europe, the New Right technically became the party of the working class. Similar

right-wing mobilisation can be observed in Eastern and Central Europe, even if there persists an absence of clear-cut cleavages, and mobilisation is more identity-based. Lastly, he points out that given the legacy of authoritarian/fascist regimes in the mid-20th century, the New Right was slower to manifest in Southern Europe initially. Where it did so, like in Spain and Italy, it was due to motivations of regional secessionism. In addition, the financial crisis favoured challengers from the left: Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, M5S in Italy and Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, who called for European solidarity (Kriesi, 2016:42). However, with the onset of the refugee and COVID crises, the politicisation of EU issues was also strongly captured by New Right parties in Southern Europe too (Arana, 2021; Puelo & Piccolino, 2022). Thus, politicisation as a means to respond to economic losers or those who resent cultural changes, showcases distinct regional patterns.

The entry of populist parties, which usually appeal the most to the losers of globalisation and crises can also alter the axis of party competition (De Vries & Hobolt 2012, Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Hutter & Kriesi 2019). Over time mainstream parties became overwhelmingly tempted to adopt the rhetoric of challenger parties, in order to avoid losing votes and becoming irrelevant (Vachudova, 2021). Vachudova demonstrated that both left and centre populist parties upended the existing party structures, however, the greatest impact was exerted on longstanding conservative parties, which remodelled themselves via using ethnopopulist rhetoric (Vachudova, 2021). Ethnopopulist, EU-critical rhetoric as a means of winning votes, even in governing parties became especially prominent in Central European EU members, such as Hungary, Poland, Czechia and Slovakia (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Vachudova, 2022). While the same rhetoric is also strong in the challenger parties of NW Europe (Vachudova, 2021). Hutter and Kriesi also confirms that "the Eurocrisis saw a boost in the politicisation of Europe in the South, and the refugee crisis in the Northwest of Europe" (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019:1013). Hence, it is unsurprising that EU-critical subregional formations, capitalising on post-functionalist politicasion emerged in NW and CE Europe in the aftermath of the refugee and COVID crises, where popular disillusion with mainstream parties was pertinent. Whereas, in Southern Europe no flareup of subregional activism emerged so far. The only exception was rather positive, which also supports the predictions of Kriesi. As a byproduct of the Eurocrisis experience, an informal short-lived stint of the solidarity cooperation of Southern states in the aftermath of the COVID crisis advocated for greater fiscal integration in a quasi-subregional setting (Fabbrini, 2022). However, the formation has never institutionalised, and remained issue-specific. Therefore, this thesis will hypothesise that subregional actorship is augmented if: "*an EU-related issue becomes widely salient and uniformly politicised in the society of all subregional member states"*. To assess this hypothesis, data from Eurobarometer surveys will be investigated, focussing on those policy areas, in which subregions showcased prominent activity.

3.5.2 Sovereignist discourse, top-down ad-hoc politicisation

The other side of the coin when it comes to politicisation is the top-down, supply side conceptualisation. As a disclaimer, it should be noted that it falls outside the scope of this research to decipher whether public opinion has a more profound impact on party-competition, or rather the other way around, the actions and rhetoric of political parties mould and shape public imagination about EU policies. Since the established literature presents evidence for both demand and supply-side explanations, the QCA analysis will also embark on enshrining both. For instance, Bokhorst and Schoeller in their analysis of the Frugal Four pinpoint that "domestic constraint to a considerable extent is contingent on the agency of national governments", and "the agency of governments is a crucial factor for understanding the varying dynamics of politicisation in regional integration" (Bokhorst & Schoeller, 2024:3275). Eihmanis (2024) arrived at similar conclusions while investigating the Visegrad cooperation, stating that high-saliance issues become subject to politicisation only when it fits the political strategies of incumbent governing parties (Eihmanis, 2024). Both articles were part of a special issue published in the Journal of European Public Policy, which was a continuation of a previous special issue published in 2019 about shifting cleavages in the age of 'polycrisis' (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan, 2019). Both special issues propose that crises or other highly politicised events create cross-cutting cleavages, which result in temporary alliances among 'strange bedfellows', and seemingly irresolvable politics traps (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan, 2019). To capture the supposedly ad-hoc, policy-focussed and opportunistic politicisation of EU-related issues by incumbent elites, the supply-side hypothesis will examine the application of a sovereignist rhetoric by political leaders at national and subregional level too. Thus, sovereignist rhetoric is a proxy for elite-level politicisation, and emphasises the issue-specific nature of subregional activism.

Sovereignty became a newfound, ubiquitous buzzword in political discourse, despite its ambiguous, ethereal meaning. Sovereignty is a two-way street, as the term refers both to the pooling of power that sets law (usually at state level), as well as the question of who authorises the sovereign to carry out this function (e.g. popular sovereignty) (Van Roermund, 2003). The concept is older than political science itself and have been the key pillar of the Westphalian system (Brack, Coman & Crespy, 2019; Rone et al., 2023). Nonetheless, as a result of EU integration, which triggered a shift in the locus of decision-making to the supranational level, a new set of sovereignty conflicts emerged. These new conflicts are not confined anymore to the religious vs secular state, or popular vs authoritarian rule division lines, but have a new vertical, more complex dimension. These new conflicts often focus on EU-wide or EU-level issues, while they are "rooted in the everyday political life of national states" (Bickerton et al., 2022:258). Furthermore, claims to sovereignty today have been exacerbated by politicisation (Brack, Coman & Crespy, 2019), and the entry of new anti-system parties into the political arena. Thus, debates are no longer constrained to the constitutional, theoretical level.

Conflicts between national and supranational sovereignty are not solely about policy repatriation from EU to national competences along vertical dynamics. Intersecting horizontal dimensions of parliamentary and popular sovereignty foster debates to be increasingly complex (Brack, Coman & Crespy, 2019). Sovereigntist discourse is more prevalent among anti-system, Eurosceptic parties, which either stand on the extreme right or left scale of the political spectrum (Borriello & Brack, 2019; Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2023). However, pressure from these parties, and their quest to represent the will of the people in a populist fashion have impacted also the centre-right and centre-left. "Sovereignty has been increasingly invoked by European politicians from the centre-right and centre-left too" (Rone et al., 2023:18; Dennison & Zerka, 2020). Some centre parties, such as the party of Emmanuel Macron expressed a "grand vision of European sovereignty" (Rone et al., 2023:18), while others like the Dutch VVD or the Austrian ÖVP tried to adopt Eurosceptic sentiments, although in a more toned-down manner than extremist parties. Eurosceptic sovereignism has created unlikely alliances, that cut across traditional political alignments. The Frugal Four comprised of Austria, Denmark the Netherlands and Sweden; or its precursor, the New Hanseatic League at the height of their activities were alliances of ideologically diverse governments (Fabbrini, 2022; Heidebrecht & Schoeller, 2022; Jones, 2022), even though some research argued that the left-right and GAL-TAN position of a party could be a valid predictor of the type of sovereignist discourse they put forward (Boriello & Brack, 2019).

Brexit had also exerted a substantial impact on how sovereignist, Eurosceptic discourse is expressed across member states. First, Euro-critical governments in the Eastern and North-West part of Europe lost a traditional ally (Brattberg, Brudzińska & de Lima, 2020; Verdun, 2022). Secondly, "either for the political opportunity structure's constraints or for the costs triggered by Brexit", the so-called exit scepticism no longer remained a viable option for Eurosceptic parties in the aftermath of the referendum (Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2024:341). Instead, coined by De Vries (2018), regime scepticism and policy scepticism became more prevalent. The former evaluates the "rules and procedures" how the EU functions compared to national level, while policy scepticism is characterised by criticising the effectiveness of policy provisions created at EU-level, compared to national solutions (De Vries, 2018:80). The policy fields most susceptible to be framed within sovereignist conflicts lie at the heart of core state powers, such as monetary and fiscal policy; migration and the protection of external borders, and finally the Rule of Law and judiciary independence (Brack, Coman & Crespy, 2019; Coman & Leconte 2019). Therefore, it is expected that a congruent sovereignist framing that attempts to position national vs EU competences against one another will influence subregional activity especially in the above policy fields. Thus, it is hypothesised that subregional actorship will be boosted if: *"a congruent sovereigntist framing is applied by all governments of a subregion in a specific policy field".* This will be tested via discourse analysis, focussing on speeches performed by lead government actors.

3.6 Translating theory into empirical anlysis

This chapter intended to establish the theoretical backbone of the QCA analysis, which seeks to answer the following research question: 'Under what conditions do subregions become effective actors in EU-level negotiations?'. Systematic theorisation about intra-EU subregionalism is scarce, and the only exception in the literature focusses solely on instances of subregional cooperation as a stepping-stone to EU integration. Therefore, to construct testable hypotheses, theories have been borrowed from the EU integration. The theoretical propositions were divided into three groups under the banner of functionalist, ideology related and post-functionalist hypotheses. These hypotheses also differ in terms of how they view the longevity of subregional actorship: whether it is a recurring regional tool to express interests or it is simply an occasional, opportunistic, ad-hoc flare up. Therefore, identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for effective subregional actorship based on this analytical scheme will hopefully contribute towards the better understanding of the nature of subregions.

These hypotheses have been operationalised in various ways and translated into nine statements that can be analysed as crisp-set, binary variables in a QCA truth table. For instance, the second condition based on functionalist coalition theories, which stated that "*a subregion becomes effective actor if the subregional unit is composed of solely old or new EU member states"* would receive "1" if the given subregion is homogenously composed of only old or new member states in a binary QCA calibration. If the group is a heterogenous mix, the condition would be designated with a "0" in the truth table analysis. To provide another example, condition number three *"the main governing parties in all member states are aligned along the left-right ideological axis"* would receive a "1" if in the year when the subregion became a visible actor, all main governing parties showed no more than 2 points difference based on the Chapel Hill index. The truth-table has been populated following this logic with instances of effective subregional actorship discussed in the introductory chapter, as well as instances of subregions falling apart. The next chapter, Chapter 4 will meticulously address set calibrations both regarding the outcome and the conditions.

Despite the fact that the analytical framework first and foremost outlined the conditions to be analysed in QCA settings, it also speaks to the second, case study part of the mixed method research design. As it will be demonstrated in the next chapter, sufficiency pathways were successfully identified as a result of performing QCA that can trigger effective actorship at subregional level. However, further investigation was needed to observe how the relevant conditions affect actorship in practice, and whether any of then could be qualify as necessary. Based on the results of the QCA analysis, two typical cases and a deviant case were selected for in-depth case study analysis. Typical cases are the Visegrad Group's actions during the Dublin reform negotiations (Chapter 5), and the compilation of Fit-for-55, whereas their actions to influence the content of the green taxonomy signify a deviant case (Chapter 6). Since the fit-for 55 package and the green taxonomy both relate to the same policy process, the EU Green Deal,

they will be discussed in the same chapter. Theoretical cues to analyse actorship, which were presented in this chapter will be employed in the case study section too.

4 Occasional bedfellows or systematic symptoms of post-functional politicisation? – The drivers of subregional actorship

In order to investigate the conditions under which subregions become effective actors in EU negotiations, this research project proposed a two-stage research design, starting with a preliminary QCA assessment and then zooming into specific case-studies. For the second part, case studies have been chosen based on the results of QCA, with the aim of providing a thick case description that can unpack in further details the sufficiency pathways, which presumably contributed towards effective actorship. Those conditions which were identified as having no causal effect will equally be addressed in the second, case study phase. QCA has several methodological advantages to answer the proposed research question, such as being a method that is most fit to decipher puzzles, which investigate 'causes-of-effects' dilemmas (Oana, Schneider & Thomann, 2021:5). Thus, QCA is best suited to examine the absence or presence of a single cause, and the conditions or combination of conditions that may lead to the manifestation of the cause, hence taking into consideration causal complexity. The first step to execute QCA is the precise and careful definition of all concepts, rooted in established theoretical underpinnings and the existing literature, both concerning the examined conditions and the outcome (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). The outcome has been precisely delineated in Chapter 1, while the conditions, which stand as the pillars of the truth table of the QCA analysis were identified in Chapter 3. This chapter will guide the reader through the operationalisation and coding of the QCA table's elements, and their calibration into binary crisp set data, starting with the outcome and proceeding on to the conditions. Then, the concluding remarks will present the results of the QCA analysis.

4.1 Calibrating crisp sets – outcome, case selection

QCA is a case-oriented research method, unlike quantitative studies, which are more variable oriented. This statement purports that QCA does "not intend to establish causality or generalisation to a wide population of cases, but instead, it strives to pinpoint limited generalisations concerning a specific empirical phenomenon" (Ragin, 2014:35). Therefore, the QCA method may function best with small and medium N studies. Being a case oriented rather than a variable driven method, that does not pursue finding causality or generalisation to a large population of cases, have direct implications on the case selection process too. Even if King Keohane and Verba in their seminal piece on revisiting qualitative research designs caution against choosing cases based on the dependent variable (King, Keohane & Verba, 1994), QCA's case-oriented inclinations tap into this territory. QCA analysis does not employ the language of variables, and QCA researchers are interested in examining cases "as a whole, not as collections of variables" (Ragin, 2014:52). In statistical research, relation between cases are analysed in the context of the entire population or large N sample, whereas QCA is interested in pinpointing "the combinations of conditions, the causal complexes that produce specific outcomes", which means each case is viewed as a whole on its own too (Ragin, 2014:52). Consequently, in a QCA research first and foremost the subject matter or the issue at hand – with QCA terminology, the outcome – must be neatly delineated and

defined with robust theoretical or explorative empirical backing (Berg-Schlosser & Meur, 2009). Therefore, the outcome will ultimately determine case selection, and the subsequent steps of carrying out research too.

The empirical phenomenon that this thesis strives to examine is the effective actorship exercised by subregional groups within the confines of the European Union in specific policy negotiations. Chapter 1 has presented the theoretical elements and possible empirical manifestations of effective actorship (the outcome) based on the literature, which are summarised in Table 1 (see revisited below). Based on this criteria, Table 2 below presents the positive as well as negative cases selected for analysis. The notion of positive case encompasses all those instances, which are designated with number "1" on the outcome. Meanwhile negative case refers to the opposite, when the outcome is assigned with number "0" in crisp set QCA settings. The QCA methodology allows the researcher to establish pathways of sufficiency both in positive and negative cases, even if the two processes are not the reverse mirror image of one another, thus the causal relationship is 'asymmetric' (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012:53). However, due to the inadequately low number of cases assigned with "0" on the outcome, based on a robust theoretical and empirical selection process (N=2), the investigation of sufficiency pathways that might lead to a negative case falls outside the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, the inclusion of negative cases is indispensable for the proper application of Boolean logic (Roig-Tierno, Gonzalez-Cruz & Llopis-Martinez, 2017), therefore they will be incorporated in the truth table. This chapter will first unpack how the different elements of effective actorship are manifested in the selected cases, then it will move on to justifying the selection and definition of negative cases, and discussing set calibration with crisp 0-1 values. It is quintessential that the definition of cases, as well as the threshold that determines dichotomised set membership in crisp set QCA (csQCA) rest on robust theoretical and empirical backing instead of allegedly arbitrary decisions, which is often posed as a criticism against performing crisp set research design (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009).

Table 1 – The elements and manifestations of "actorship"

Elements of actorship	Possible empirical manifestations of components
Presence	• sharing common ideas, values or policy goals • communicating concerted policy papers at subregional level • communicating in the name of the subregion
Recognition	Recognition by external actors, including: • Supranational institutions (Commission, EP) • EU member states • In the media • By actors external to the EU
Autonomy	• Independent decision-making capacity with the aim of influencing EU policies • The ability to exploit institutions and policy instruments to express the region's opinion, which can deviate from the Commission proposal and other member states' proposals

Table 2 – Presenting and coding the outcome

Cases	Coding	Outcome
New Hanseatic League toning down EMU reform (2018)	NewHansa_1	1
New Hanseatic League advocating for capital markets union (2018)	NewHansa_2	1
Visegrad 4 Dublin deadlock (2016)	Visegrad_1	1
Visegrad 4 advocating for nuclear energy in green taxonomy (2021)	Visegrad_2	1
Visegrad 4 arguing against climate neutrality (2019)	Visegrad_3	1
Visegrad 4 W Balkan campaign (2019)	Visegrad_4	1
Visegrad 4 divided in negotiating the RoL Mechanism (2020)	Visegrad_5	0
Visegrad 4 falling apart due to Ukraine military aid (2022)	Visegrad_6	0
Frugal Four during RRF negotiations (2020)	Frugal_1	1

It is equally important to note, that the QCA section of this thesis follows a "most-similar systems design" (Gerring, 2009; Przeworski & Teune, 1994). This particular research design builds on the logic of John Stuart Mill's method of difference, which purports the following: "if an instance in which the phenomenon under investigation occurs, and an instance in which it does not occur, have every circumstance in common save one, that one occurring only in the former; the circumstance in which alone the two instances differ, is the effect, or the cause, or an indispensable part of the cause, of the phenomenon" (Anckar, 2020:35). Using the vocabulary of QCA, the above definition could be rephrased the following way: if the outcome of the cases selected for analysis show either "0" or "1", yet the cases display a high number of similarities concerning the conditions that may trigger the outcome, the few differences will likely explain the nature of the outcome. Consequently, this design dictates that the first step to carry out the research in practice should ultimately be distinguishing in a dichotomous manner positive and negative cases, which will be demonstrated via addressing the tenets of actorship identified in Table 1 – presence, recognition and autonomy.

As a disclaimer it should be noted that only those instances were picked for analysis as positive cases, where empirical evidence was found to support the existence of all three tenets of actorship. Subregions have the tendency to publish concerted policy papers or non-papers, hence showing "presence" without pursuing systematically their common goals together, which may lead to the lack of external "recognition" by other actors or the lack of "autonomy" to exploit their existing, low-key institutional instruments. For instance, the Visegrad Group has long been a supporter of expanding the EU geographically towards the Western Balkans, provided concerted policy papers to bolster the integration of Balkan states into the EU date back to 2009 (Visegrad Group, 2009). Moreover, the Group also provides grants and financial support to selected countries of the

Western Balkans via the International Visegrad Fund, which is an indication of utilising autonomous channels to pursue their common goal. Yet, the Visegrad 4's joint attempts did not receive external recognition in the media, and by other actors up until 2019. Therefore, in this specific policy area, those attempts of the Visegrad Group that predate 2019 will not be considered for analysis. Since this thesis conceptualises the outcome (effective actorship) as a binary category, and not as a scale – as in, effective actorship does not have different degrees – those cases that exhibit empirical evidence only on one or two of the tenets of effective actorship were disregarded.

The reason why effective actorship did not manifest to the fullest was the absence of a triggering or infliction moment, which was coined as "opportunity" in Chapter 1 (Bretherton & Vogler, 2005). For instance, in 2019 the imminent vote on Albania's and North Macedonia's fate to commence EU accession talks was the material infliction point, which provided a window of opportunity for Visegrad Group. Other examples of opportunity considered in this research are the fiscal reform project of the EU in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the reform of the Dublin system in consequence of the refugee crisis, the negotiation of the Green Deal to avert a climate catastrophe and the fiscal implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, it should be noted that various instances exist when geographically coherent regions became effective actors, however, the regional grouping did not qualify as a subregion. For instance, the Visegrad Group was a strong motor of the Friends of Cohesion coalition of East-South EU member states, which played a key role in counteracting Norther states both during the negotiations of the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 budget cycles (Eihmanis, 2024; Mrak, Sandor & Szemlér, 2015). Similarly, the solidarity coalition of Southern member states during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic campaigned concertedly, with high visibility for deeper fiscal integration (Fabbrini, 2022). However, neither the solidarity coalition, nor the Friends of Cohesion can be considered as subregions, as none has an establishing document that would set out exclusive membership, nor do their cooperation exceed a single policy-paper. Therefore, the below sections will discuss only cases of effective actorship performed by groups that qualify as subregions, while one-off, ad-hoc coalitions will be disregarded.

4.1.1 Presence

"Presence" is the first expression of actorship, which was defined as the "consequences of being" (Bretherton & Vogler, 2005) or "subjective consciousness" (Hettne, 2014:4). "Presence" manifests empirically if a subregion formulates shared policy goals using consciously the name of the subregion; the representatives of subregional member states communicate shared ideas and values, and they pursue their interests in EU settings by naming the subregion. Starting with joint policy-papers or non-papers, in all 7 positive cases subregions put forward common propositions, not only in a technical sense, but also emphasising shared values and views. These position papers are also quintessential in indicating the year or years when the group became an effective actor. Out of the three subregions under examination: the Visegrad Group, the New Hanseatic League and the Frugal Four, only the first had a well-established brand, while member states in the latter two

groups grew to embrace their novel title. Hence, members of the Visegrad Group were more open to express support for general views, common values, and even technical policy details under the banner of "We, the Ministers of the Interior of the Visegrad Group" (Visegrad Group, 2018), "Joint Statement of the V4 Ministers Responsible for Energy" (Visegrad Group, 2021c), or even at the highest political level as "The Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group" (Visegrad Group, 2019). The Visegrad brand was occasionally omitted from concerted initiatives in case the Group strove to create an even wider coalition behind a policy proposal, such as the joint letter sent to the EU Commission about incorporating nuclear power in the green taxonomy, where France, Romania and Slovakia also participated as signatories (Visegrad Group, 2021a).

Strong cooperation at the time when concerted proposals were formulated was corroborated in a series of interviews conducted in Brussels with Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovak civil servants and diplomats, who were familiar with the discussed portfolios. The period of the refugee crisis, especially between 2015-17 was unequivocally described as the heyday of the Visegrad by two Slovak, as well as a former Hungarian civil servant (Interview 5, Interview 25, Interview 24). However, they also attested that this momentum of effective actorship faded away as disagreements became inevitable between the political leaders of member states, especially following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A Czech, a Slovak and a Hungarian civil servant working in Brussels and familiar with climate politics all described the group's cooperation concerning nuclear energy as a pivotal cornerstone of the Visegrad 4 (Interview 1, Interview 10, Interview 28). Furthermore, the Slovak civil servant also confirmed the general opposition of the V4 to way too ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets by 2030, with Poland in the helm of opposition (Interview 10). Lastly, regarding enlargement of the EU towards the Western Balkans – despite some frictions within the Visegrad due to Slovakia's unwillingness to recognise Kosovo's independent status – a Hungarian former civil servant underlined that cooperation between the V4 was harmonious and strong, even if due to the French and Dutch veto the Group's policy ambitions did not bear immediate fruits (Interview 24). This final argument also supports that actorship should not be defined in light of the final policy outcome, especially when voting arrangements require unanimity instead of QMV like in the case of enlargement.

The Visegrad and the New Hansa brands showcase thematic similarities, provided both names appeal to successful medieval diplomatic and commercial achievements negotiated by the leaders of those countries, which largely cover the territory of their modern-day members. Yet, due to the rather informal origins of the New Hanseatic League, the group published its first policy papers, "shared views and values", and concerted goals only by listing all 8 participating countries (Government of Finland, 2018). According to pundits, the group got together first in a Brussels steakhouse in 2017 after an Ecofin meeting (Khan, 2018d), and was once mocked as "Wopke and the Seven Dwarfs" echoing the Dutch leadership within the group, as a namesake of the Dutch ex-Finance Minister, Wopke Hoekstra (Khan, 2018d). The more appealing New Hanseatic League,

also coined and conjured up by journalists was soon adopted and systematically applied especially by the Dutch Foreign Ministry (Verdun, 2022).

The group also relied heavily on the long-standing informal institutionalisation of the Nordic Baltic 6 (NB6) grouping (Schulz & Helnköl, 2020), that encompasses the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) together with the Scandinavian flank of the EU (Denmark, Finland, Sweden). Thus, the New Hanseatic League was much more the project of the sceptic Scandinavians than the Eurogroup Ministers, provided two members, Denmark and Sweden are not part of the Eurozone (Schulz & Helnköl, 2020). Even though Mark Rutte and his cabinet were proclaimed to be the flagship of the New Hansa initiative, the then Swedish Finance Minister, Magdalena Andersson equally spoke as a proud representative of the group at various panel discussions, highlighting the standpoint of those EU member states, which have a "more restrictive view of the EU's developments" regarding financial and economic matters (Persson, 2019; Swedish House of Finance, 2019). To anticipate the Finnish rotating presidency's objectives, the then Finance Minister Petteri Orpo published a journal article in November 2018, where he actively took accountability for establishing the New Hanseatic League with other fellow Finance Ministers, stating that after the UK's departure "Finland (…) must systematically build good relationships with like-minded EU countries that share the objectives of anti-protectionism and managing finances responsibly" to which a good example is the Hanseatic League (Orpo, 2018). The Tánaiste of Ireland, Simon Coveney in a speech delivered at the Hague gave voice to his predictions that "the views of our Dutch, Irish and Nordic/Baltic cluster will be heard with increased frequency and effect in our European Union" (Coveney, 2018). Furthermore, all countries involved in the cooperation published joint communiques on their official governmental websites, including small Baltic countries, as well as Ireland (Government of Ireland Department of Finance, 2018; Republic of Estonia Ministry of Finance, 2018). In conclusion, the New Hansa brand despite being less ubiquitous than the Visegrad Group, was a strong point of reference embraced by all members of the group.

Lastly, the Frugal Four, a group of four countries, which includes Austria, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, a quasi-offshoot of the New Hansa, similarly grew to embrace their name, which was given to them by other member states. Sebastian Kurz Austrian then Chancellor published an article in the Financial Times in 2020, where he proclaimed that frugal "does not mean that we are any less committed to the EU than those member states who are arguing for an expanded budget" (Kurz, 2020a). Rather, he underlined that frugals are committed to the EU, yet they wish to achieve tangible results for citizens not by extending the size of the budget (Kurz, 2020a). In a similar vein, Stefan Löfven, Prime Minister of Sweden during the pandemic published an article in the Financial Times, in which he readily adopted the collective name of the group, and underlined the need for a sustainable and responsible crisis management built on loans instead of mutual debt (Löfven, 2020). Thus, similarly to the New Hansa, the non-papers and proposals published by the Frugal Four did not explicitly bear the Frugal label (The Government of the Netherlands, 2020), however

it was wilfully embraced later by all group member states without exception. A Commission civil servant, who was involved in budgetary discussions at the time when the MFF was negotiated in 2020 corroborated the above observations, and said that Frugals not only pursued close coordination, but often one Minister spoke out in the name of all four countries, and they also presented joint position papers together (Interview 26). In addition, the interviewee also pointed out that during this time the first cracks started to appear in the Visegrad Group, as the division between the pragmatic Czech-Slovak and illiberal Polish-Hungarian units became increasingly obvious while negotiating the general regime of conditionality.

4.1.2 Recognition

The above analysis already tiptoed into unpacking the views and observations of actors external to the examined subregions, provided "recognition" is an inherent counterpart of "presence". However, the second element of effective actorship should deserve further attention. As it has been underlined in Chapter 1, if a region is not accounted for by others as a relevant player in the negotiation games, the region's actorship is futile. Therefore, it is not enough if member states of a regional congregate present their ideas together, and manifest features of belonging to the same unit. Other negotiating counterparts, as well as media platforms should deem the group as a political force to reckon with.

Starting with the New Hanseatic League, over the course of late 2017 and especially 2018, high profile quality newspapers which pay increased attention to European issues such as the Financial Times, The Economist and Politico published a series of articles that not only underlined the potential of the New Hansa, but also expressed the indignation of French and other Southern European politicians (Khan, 2018a; Khan, 2018b; Khan, 2018c; Khan, 2018d; O'Leary, 2018; Taylor, 2018; The Economist, 2018). Some articles reported that Bruno Le Maire, French then Finance Minister following an Ecofin meeting scolded his Dutch counterpart for the activities of the New Hansa, that could "threaten deeper Eurozone integration" (Khan, 2018d). Le Maire was quoted by the Financial Times saying the following: "Let's imagine that France tries to create a club of the southern countries with Portugal, Italy, Spain — what would be the reaction of the other member states? Do you think that it would be a positive one? Do you think it would improve the situation of Europe?" (Khan, 2018c). Thus, the French politician criticised not only the motivations, but also the regional coalition building tactics behind the New Hansa, as a force that can threaten European unity. At the same time, with a shrewd political move, Spain's Finance Minister, Nadia Calviño purportedly attempted to downplay the group's importance as "small countries with small weight" in defiance of the group's propositions (Khan, 2018d).

Similar to the New Hansa, the Frugal Four inflicted strong reactions in the media from those actors, which disagreed with the group's push for loan-based assistance to countries in need and to cap the size of the EU's budget. Even the President of the EP, the late David Sassoli issued a statement in which he gently, but firmly called out the Frugals to "be aware of the seriousness of the

challenges" and cautioned not to end up "with a Europe moving at different speeds" (Sassoli, 2020). Meanwhile, Spain's Foreign Minister at the time, Arancha González, not so gingerly scolded his Dutch counterpart, Minister Hoekstra with a witty analogy, following Hoekstra's much-maligned intervention at an Ecofin meeting. "Europe hit an unexpected iceberg and we all share the same risk. No time for discussions about first- and second-class tickets … History will hold us responsible for what we do now" (Adler & Roos, 2020). Besides EU politicians recognising the Frugals as a force to reckon with, quality newspapers such as the Financial Times, Euractiv, the Guardian and the Politico all reported on the manoeuvres of the Frugals, and built into their vocabulary the Frugal Four (Adler & Roos, 2020; Brusden & Fleming, 2020; Euractiv, 2020a; Khan, 2020; von der Burchard & Tamma, 2020). The majority of articles proclaimed Mark Rutte as the leader of the group, yet it is clear that Danish, Swedish and Austrian reservations about deeper fiscal integration equally held out unwaveringly (Euractiv, 2020a), despite the fact that Sweden and Denmark at the time were led by Social Democrats (Euractiv, 2020b). As it has been mentioned above, a Commission civil servant involved in budget negotiations perceived the group even at technical meetings as united and cohesive (Interview 26).

The unity of the Visegrad countries to protest against the compulsory migrant redistribution quota was widely reported in the news media (Foy & Byrne, 2016; Hasselbach, 2016; The Economist, 2016) and sent shockwaves down the EU, even if at the end Slovakia and Czechia gave in and accepted a tiny portion of their share set out in 2015, more precisely 16 and 12 refugees respectively (Kroet, 2017; Sandford, 2020). Furthermore, those who were involved in the negotiation of the EU's initial response to the refugee crisis, including Commission staff and members of Permanent Representations and other governmental representatives external to the V4, described the group with acknowledging words when they reflected on their unity and coordination during a series of interviews conducted in Brussels. An Austrian public servant told that "everyone knew who the Visegrad 4 were" and the "Visegrad brand was used in parallel to national interests" when the member states of the group put forward their proposition in intergovernmental settings (Interview 4) at the time of the Dublin deadlock. When it comes to the EU's Green Deal, recognition was less fervent, yet it was still detectable (Bodalska, 2019; Cloet, 2019; Keating, 2019). A Commission official also admitted that regional cooperation due to similar exposure to negative externalities was inevitable among the V4, even though cooperation between group members became more sporadic after the government change in Slovakia in 2020 and subsequently in Czechia in 2021 (Interview 12). When Czechia took over the rotating Council presidency in July 2022, its 'honest broker' status became a further impediment to pursue Visegrad aims (Interview 12). Finally, when the French veto on initiating accession talks with Albania and Northern Macedonia became imminent in the prelude to the Council vote in 2019, the news media reported on concerted Visegrad efforts to avert the unsuccessful outcome at various occasions. Examples include the September Visegrad summit in 2019, which resulted in a joint declaration at the highest, prime ministerial level (Wolska, 2020); and the Group's last-ditch effort to alter the French veto in a letter by the Visegrad 4 to the European Council President (Euractiv, 2019a).

4.1.3 Autonomy

For the full-fledged expression of effective actorship, it is indispensable to consider whether subregions made use of their independent institutional capacities to form their autonomous opinions. Even though such capacities might be intentionally loose, ad-hoc in nature and often tied to larger EU gatherings, such as European Council, thematic Council meetings at Ministerial level or even COREPER gatherings, they are important expressions of independent mobilisation. In line with the expectations, it was the Visegrad Group, which accomplished the greatest diversity of means to mobilise individual capacities, as the most well-established group out of the three subregions under examination. The Group has a yearly rotating presidency, which often assisted to catapult important topics to the top of their agenda. For instance, Czech Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček proclaimed enlargement and specifically the kickstart of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia as a top priority for the Czech presidency (Euractiv, 2019b). His Hungarian and Polish counterparts not only echoed the Czech initiative, but also pinpointed their differences in contrast to the French point of view (Euractiv, 2019b). At other occasions, the Visegrad 4 issued concerted invitations to EU officials from the Commission (Interview 17), and to politicians of the Franco-German leadership (Interview 1). For instance, in 2016 the Visegrad leaders welcomed Angela Merkel concertedly to discuss the reform of the EU's migration regime (DW, 2016). Meanwhile in 2020 they attempted to persuade together the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz about including nuclear energy in the green taxonomy, which was staunchly opposed by the V4's Western neighbour (irozhals, 2020). These endeavours were arranged as an addition to frequent pre-agenda coordination meetings before General Affairs Council summits (Interview 28) and other thematic Council and COREPER discussions (Interview 24).

The New Hanseatic League and the Frugal Four as a consequence of being more contemporary subregions, showcased less intense and less diverse institutional means to pursue autonomous initiatives. Nevertheless, a series of informal ministerial meetings between the member states of both groups were widely reported in the news media and even official EU platforms. Throughout 2018, regular working dinners with the participation of the Finance Ministers of the New Hansa became commonplace (Reiermann & Müller, 2018). A high-ranking diplomat from the Hansa was also quoted to claim the following at the zenith of their activities: "Our meetings are irregularly regular, usually every two months on the sidelines and after the Eurogroup (the official meeting between the 19 finance ministers of the euro zone), but sometimes for logistical reasons we have to reschedule." (Amaro, 2018). This statement hintis at the informal, yet recurring nature of Hansa gatherings. The Estonian Prime Minister also regularly reported about the meetings on the official Government webpages and X (formerly known as Twitter). For instance in late June 2018 the Government of Estonia's website published a news release stating that PM Ratas would participate in EUCO meetings, and beforehand he would coordinate with fellow Nordic Baltic 6 (NB6) Prime Ministers together with the Netherlands and Ireland (Government of Estonia 2018 a,b). The Frugals also exploited similar informal meeting formats, which were often reported on the X accounts of member state representatives with a photo illustration (Frederiksen, 2020; Kurz,

2020b). As one of the first in-person meetings after the easing of COVID restrictions, a European Council (EUCO) news bulletins captured with photographic evidence as Frugals prepared to align their agenda in the prelude to the marathon July 2020 European Council (European Council, 2020).

4.1.4 Negative cases

The above paragraphs presented some empirical evidence structured according to the theoretical definition of effective actorship to justify the selection of positive cases. This last section of calibrating the outcome according to qualitative parameters will focus on the selection of negative cases, which implies the absence of the outcome (Mikkelsen, 2017). The inclusion of negative cases is particularly important if the research design follows an approximation of Mill's method of difference (Mikkelsen, 2017), which purports that selected positive and negative cases are highly similar reverse image of each other, even if symmetric causality should not be inherently assumed. Therefore, if positive cases were opportunities exploited by subregions via presence, recognition and autonomy, negative cases should be opportunities, that resulted in the denial of cooperation, even open hostility between subregional members. If negative cases were defined simply as instances of passivity, inert non-cooperation or the absence of common position papers, not only the set boundaries of negative cases would be difficult to delineate, but also, the specific empirical phenomenon that this thesis tries to capture would be blurred. Furthermore, if every single EU policy initiative, which did not trigger a concerted response from subregions would count as "0 output" cases, it would result in an overly large pool of negative cases, which disproportionately outnumbers positive ones. Empirical evidence to identify negative cases would still follow the opportunity, presence, recognition and autonomy theoretical framework, converted to the flipside. Thus, negative cases would manifest if subregional members openly challenge one another and some even find the subregional label as non-desirable to be applied collectively; external actors recognise the fallout between subregional members; and autonomous policy channels, which are routinely used (rotating presidency, pre-Council meetings) are reduced to a lower, technical level, or even sabotaged by some member states. Based on this criterion, two negative cases have been picked for analysis, the Visegrad Group's open infights during the negotiations of the general regime of conditionality in 2020, and the complete deterioration of the Visegrad friendship in 2022 when military aid to Ukraine was discussed in the EU.

The general regime of conditionality, also dubbed as the Rule of Law conditionality became a hot topic in late 2020 when the MFF was discussed. That time, Germany held the rotating Council presidency. A German civil servant involved in the negotiations reported that Poland and Hungary were in unison to reject the novel tool, however, the Visegrad was never mentioned during the negotiations, as the Slovak and Czech governments were cautious to pursue direct opposition against the proposed budgetary tool (Interview 3). The Visegrad lacking a concerted approach was equally confirmed by a civil servant from the Council Legal Services. In fact, a Slovak civil servant in Brussels reported that the once advantageous V4 format gradually became a nuisance to the Slovak government, as it was hard to dissociate the country from the Visegrad brand (Interview

25). Meanwhile, Czech civil servants were adamant to underline the country's pragmatic approach to the EU and to the Visegrad as well (Interview 1, Interview 2). The Polish PM still paraded the Visegrad as a united front in an FT article, claiming that the Visegrad Four's support was indispensable for the budget to pass (Peel et al., 2020), hinting at Poland's and the entire group's opposition to linking funds to RoL conditionality. Yet, no Visegrad communique or joint statement includes any reference to the rule of law. To the contrary, the Czech and Slovak Foreign Ministers in late December 2020 openly called for "the depoliticisation of the whole issue" referring to the RoL, and urged swift action to end the deadlock (Dunai & Charlish, 2020). Even though disagreements on how to approach the conditionality mechanism opened initial cracks within the Visegrad cooperation, which was recognised by external actors too, it did not halt altogether collaboration on all fronts. For instance, the group still collaborated on cohesion fund related issues and some technical agricultural questions, which was attested by a German civil servant working closely on the rotating presidency, who described the group as a "coalition of convenience" (Interview 9).

In contrast, the most visible rupture within the Group, which also triggered journalists to entertain the end of the Visegrad cooperation, was inflicted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Open hostility between even Poland and Hungary had clearly visible signals, such as Kaczyński, PM of Poland mocking Orbán, PM of Hungary saying "he must be advised to see an eye doctor" (Jack, 2022b) if he cannot see the atrocious crimes committed in the Ukrainian city of Bucha. Meetings between high raking politicians were also postponed, such as the one scheduled for late March 2022 between the Defence Ministers of the V4. The cancellation was swiftly followed by the vitriolic comments of some Visegrad members criticising Hungary, which were widely publicised in international news. Czech Defense Minister Jana Černochová pulled out of the meeting with the following comment on Twitter: "I have always supported the V4 and I am very sorry that cheap Russian oil is more important to Hungarian politicians than Ukrainian blood" (Jack, 2022a). A Polish civil servant working in Brussels equally certified that the Russian invasion divided the group into a Visegrad 3 vs Hungary, which reached a visible pinnacle when Czechia and Poland offered to patrol the Slovakian airspace with fighter jets while the country was waiting for the delivery of novel aircrafts, from which Hungary was left out altogether (Interview 13). Most visibly, as of October 2024, no new Visegrad joint statements or communiques have been published on the Group's official website in the past two years, the final publication dates back to 5 December 2022. Thus, due to the open denial of being associated with the Visegrad by various group members, the recognition of contentious relations inside group by external actors and the media, and finally, the avoidance of making use of autonomous institutionalisation, qualify the RoL and Ukraine cases to be picked as negative cases in this thesis.

4.2 Calibrating crisp sets – conditions, csQCA findings

Table 3 – Calibrating conditions

Conditions to be tested in csQCA ***Subregions become effective actors if:***	**Operationalisation**	**Assigning 1 in the truth table**	**Assigning 0 in the truth table**
Functional drivers			
the subregion holds an opposing view to one or both of the Franco-German hegemons (Fr_Gr)	Qualitative assessment of the policy stances	Subregional members have a congruent policy stance, which is in opposition to one or both of the hegemons	Subregional members do not have a congruent stance, some members align with the hegemons, others not
the subregional unit is composed of solely old or new EU member states (Old_new)	Qualitative assessment of when subregional members joined the EU	All subregional members joined pre-2004 or post-2004 the EU	Some subregional members joined pre-, others joined post-2004 the EU
the subregional unit is composed of solely net-contributor or net-beneficiary member states (Netc_b)	Quantitative assessment based on Eurostat	All subregional members are net recipients or contributors	Some subregional members are net recipients, others net contributors
Ideological drivers			
the main governing parties in all member states are aligned on the left-right political axis (L_r)	Quantitative analysis based on the Chapel Hill dataset	There is no more than 2 points difference between the lowest and highest score among the lead parties in government within a subregion	There is more than 2 points difference between the lowest and highest score among the lead parties in government within a subregion
the main governing parties in all member states are aligned on the left-right political axis (Gal_tan)	Quantitative analysis based on the Chapel Hill dataset	There is no more than 2 points difference between the lowest and highest score among the lead parties in government within a subregion	There is more than 2 points difference between the lowest and highest score among the lead parties in government within a subregion
the main governing parties in all member states are aligned on pro-contra integration axis (EU)	Quantitative analysis based on the Chapel Hill dataset	There is no more than 2 points difference between the lowest and highest score among the lead parties in government within a subregion	There is more than 2 points difference between the lowest and highest score among the lead parties in government within a subregion
all subregional member states experience illiberal tendencies in their governments (Illib)	Discourse analysis of speeches and interviews of political leaders, qualitative analysis of government actions	All lead governing parties challenge the liberal values represented by the EU and pursue a counter-hegemonic illiberal agenda	Some lead governing parties pursue a counter-hegemonic illiberal agenda, while others align with the liberal EU mainstream

Postfunctional drivers			
an EU-related issue becomes widely salient and uniformly polarised in the society of subregional member states (Publicop)	Qualitative analysis based on Eurobarometer data (salience and polarisation related questions)	In the majority of subregional member states the issue at hand is salient and polarised in the same direction	Only in some subregional member states the issue at hand is salient and polarisation is not uniform
a congruent sovereigntist framing is applied by the governments of a subregion in a specific policy field (Sovereign)	Discourse analysis of subregional policy papers, non-papers and speeches from top government representatives	Governments within all subregional member states frame the issue at hand with a congruent sovereignist discourse	Governments withinl subregional member states do not have a common framing of the issue at hand

The above paragraphs presented the evaluation of qualitative evidence, which assisted to specify the set membership of cases concerning the output (positive and negative cases). In order to compile a truth table, the same calibration exercise must be performed on the conditions, which were identified in the theory chapter. Table 3 presents all the conditions, their specific operationalisation, and the criteria, which were applied to assign 1 or 0 to them in csQCA. The ca libration of the conditions was performed both via analysing quantitative and qualitative data such as the Chapel Hill dataset, Eurobarometer and national opinion polls, speeches, interviews and policy papers. Also, evidence from individual member state level and collective subregional level have been scurinised. The first column of Table 3 showcases the abbreviation of the conditions for the easier understanding of the csQCA truth table. Based on the most up-to-date findings in the available literature, a hunch hypothesis was formulated, according to which subregional activism is opportunistic and is driven by differentiated politicisation (Kriesi, 2016; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2023), as "the European political system, rather than moving towards a normalisation of left-right dynamics at EU level, as some had hoped" is rather characterised by temporary alliances, where actors may side with one another on certain issues, but would not be able to compromise on others, creating negotiation impasses (Zeitlin et al., 2019:966). Therefore, the conditions under the functionalist and ideology labels are hypothesised to affect less the outcome.

Table 4 – Subregions and their member states

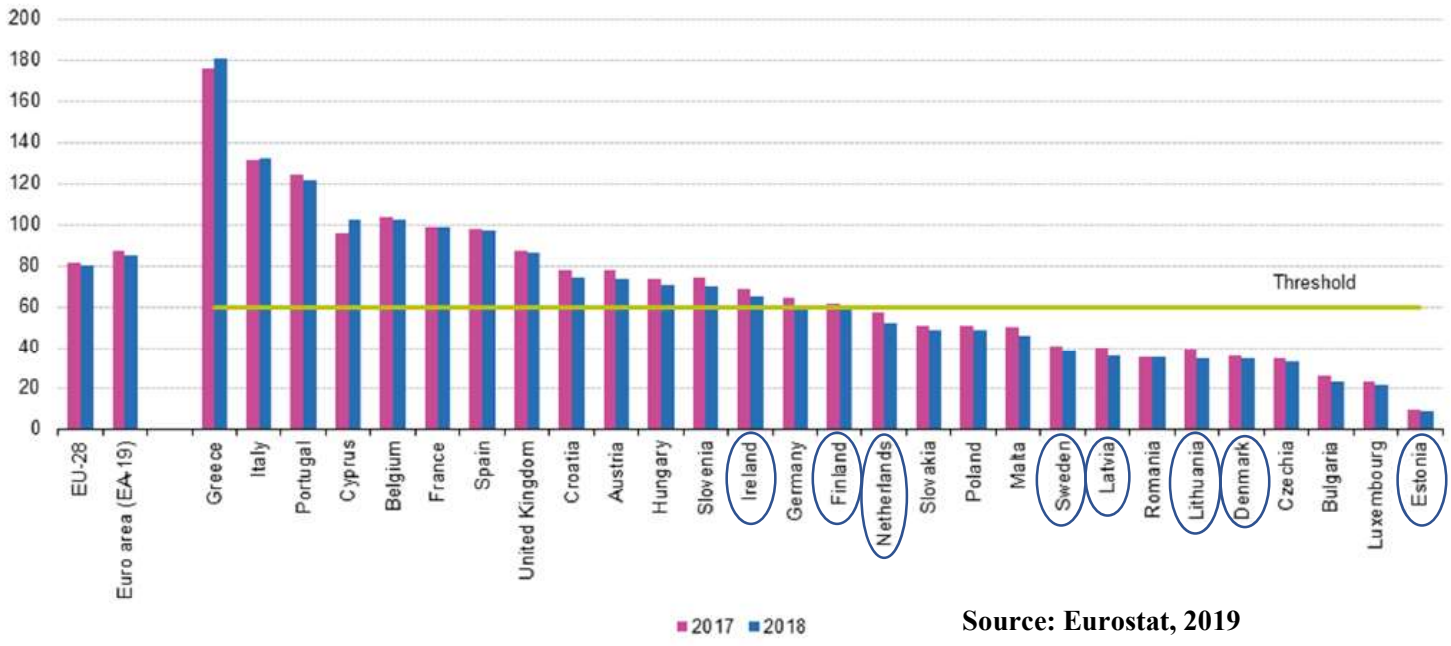
New Hanseatic League	Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden
Visegrad Group	Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia
Frugal Four	Austria, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden

4.2.1 Functional drivers

Some conditions required elaborate soaking and poking (King, Keohane & Verba, 1994:38) to determine whether to assign them with "1" or "0" in the truth table, while others were easier to calibrate. Starting with the conditions under the functionalist banner, both "old_new" and "netcon_netbenefit" represent proxies for structural alignment among member states of a subregion, either for historical or financial reasons. It was expected that structural, functional alignment might be necessary, but insufficient to explain the rise of subregional actorship, as subregional members are fairly aligned on both conditions even in negative cases. Members of the Visegrad Group (see Table 4 above) all joined the EU in 2004, and hence are all considered new member states. In addition, they are all ex-Soviet satellite states with more modest economic conditions compared to the EU average, hence they are all beneficiaries of EU funds. The historical and economic intertwining between these countries expose them to a variety of shared negative externalities as well as internal similarities, such as being more dependent on EU funds, having a larger share of fossil fuel-based energy production, or being dependent on Russian energy till the invasion of Ukraine. On the other end of the scale stands the Frugal Four, a group of northwest European states, which all joined the EU before 2004 and which are all among the greatest net contributors to the EU budget, especially following Brexit.

The only exception among the examined subregions is the New Hanseatic League, which represents a mix between old (Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden) and new member states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). The same is true with respect to the net-contributor

Table 5 – General government debt, % of GDP 2017-18



Source: Eurostat, 2019

net-beneficiary status of these countries. Missing to score 1 on these conditions, which are proxies for functional alignment does not mean though that the New Hanseatic League had no common functional interests. For instance, for the first time in 2018 ever since joining the EU in 1973, Ireland qualified for becoming a net/contributor to the budget (European Commission, 2024a) (see also Table 6). Thus, functionally the country became more interested in becoming a signatory of New Hansa proposals, that promoted tougher budgetary control and ensuring finances via a private funds channelled through a completed Capital Markets Union instead of debt mutualisation or further fiscal integration. Moreover, almost all Hanseatic member states in the year when the subregion became an effective actor had a debt-to-GDP ratio well below the Maastricht criteria, except Ireland, which showcased a declining trend and scored just a little above 60% (see Table 5 above). Lastly, the Baltic states cherish dearly their cultural ties to their Nordic neighbours, and tend to appeal to the medieval Hanseatic notion as a symbol of prosperity, free trade and responsible economic spending. For instance, Estonia organises every year the Tallinn Day to mark the city gaining admission to the Hanseatic League of European cities in 1248 (back than Tallinn was known as Reval) (ERR news, 2020). Latvia and Lithuania equally hold similar Hansa Days and commemorations (The Baltic Course, 2024). In conclusion, functional alignment among the members of the New Hansa is palpable, especially in matters of trade and financial management. Therefore, even if in accordance with the most-similar systems design all cases should have been marked with 1 on the "net-contributor or net-beneficiary" and "old or new member state" conditions –

Table 6 – The net contributor net beneficiary status of EU states, 2018

Source: Statista (2023)

which was not the case as the New Hansa is composed of states with heterogenous backgrounds – the principles of the research design were not violated.

On a different note, it must be pointed out that functional alignment in and of itself is not enough to generate effective actorship, which becomes clear based on the QCA analysis too (see table 7). The "old-new" and "net-contributor net-beneficiary" conditions were marked with "1" in both of the negative cases too. The Visegrad Group is composed of solely net beneficiary EU member states, in fact, Poland and Hungary are among those, who receive the highest EU benefits (see Table 6). Initially during the MFF negotiations throughout 2019 and 2020 Visegrad members appeared united and technically prepared as the lead group within the so-called Friends of Cohesion. In accordance with the confirmation of a German civil servant, member states often proposed their interests using the Visegrad label (Interview 9). Thus, the Visegrad Group shared a crucial functional need to coordinate, as all its members are net-beneficiaries of the EU budget especially through CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) and the cohesion funds. Yet, later on the Visegrad label became a liability for Slovaks and Czechs due to Poland's and Hungary's opposition to the general regime of conditionality, the novel RoL instrument of the EU. Initially the Pellegrini government in Slovakia and the Babiš government in Czechia had some reservations about the proposed voting arrangements to inflict the new mechanism (Interview 1, Interview 18, Interview 25) – in the Commission's 2018 proposal it was reverse QMV (Commission, 2018). However, Slovakia and Czechia were in general contented with the compromises, which were reached by the end of 2020 and rejected the veto of Hungary and Poland. The change of government in both countries drifted further away the Czech and Slovak flank of the group from

Table 7 – csQCA truth table to analyse effective actorship in subregions

Fr_Gr	Netc_b	Old_new	Gal_tan	L_r	EU	Illib	Publicop	Sovereign	Outcome	Coverage	Cases
1	0	0	0	0	1	0	**1**	**1**	**1**	2	NewHansa_1, NewHansa_2
1	1	1	0	1	0	0	**1**	**1**	**1**	1	Visegrad_1
1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	**1**	**1**	1	Visegrad_2
1	1	1	0	1	1	1	**1**	**1**	**1**	1	Visegrad_3
1	1	1	0	1	1	1	**1**	**1**	**1**	1	Visegrad 4
0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	Visegrad_5
0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	Visegrad_6
1	1	1	0	0	1	0	**1**	**1**	**1**	1	Frugal_1

the Hungarian and Polish cooperation. Regarding the other negative case, possible functional alignment between group members could have been expected, knowing that the renaissance of the Visegrad originated in the shared struggle against Russia, the strong bond between the resistance movements of the four (back then three) member states, and their common wish to join the EU and the NATO – as it has been discussed in Chapter 2. Yet, animosity between Hungary and the other three members stirred up, after Russia invaded Ukraine. Thus, being post-Soviet satellite

states that joined the EU after 2004 should not automatically mean that the Visegrad Group would become an effective actor. Accordingly, it can be concluded that neither the "net-contributor, net-beneficiary", nor the "old or new" member state conditions are sufficient conditions for subregions to become effective actors.

Table 8 – Sufficiency pathway to effective actorship based on csQCA

(Publicop) ∗ (Sovereign) ∗ (FR_GR) → Effective actorships

The final part of discussing functional drivers will zoom into the condition that investigates the role of the Franco-German hegemons. This somewhat neo-realist inspired condition understands subregionalism as a form of challenge to a local hegemon, whose interest do not align with surrounding smaller states. Analysing reactionary regionalism to a local hegemon has an established literature to explain South American and Asian subregionalism., as it has been discussed in the analytical framework (examples include the Mercosur, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas – ALBA, and the ASEAN). Even though in the highly institutionalised context of the EU balance of power considerations may not manifest in the same manner as on the global stage, some recent literature embarked on investigating the role of the Franco-German hegemons in triggering subregionalism inside the EU (see Chapter 3). The calibration of this condition requires deeper discussion as subregions can either challenge both hegemons together if the Franco-German tandem is united, or subregions can also side with one hegemon to play off the other.

Starting with the New Hanseatic League, the group became first visible owing to a series of joint papers that the eight member states published concertedly over the course of 2018. Regarding their content, the papers called for EMU reforms to be carried out in an "inclusive format" with all 27 EU members instead of solely Eurozone states. Also, they underlined that a "stronger EMU requires first and foremost decisive actions at member state level" and implementing structural reforms to respect the Stability and Growth Pact. Finally, New Hansa members wished to reassure that the "far-reaching transfers of competences to EU level" would be avoided and instead the money to assist member states would be channelled via private sector loans and the completion of the Capital Markets Union (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Finance, 2018; Government of Ireland Department of Finance, 2018). Some of these statements are in stark opposition to what Emmanuel Macron, French President communicated in his 2017 Sorbonne speech, and the so-called Meseberg Declaration, a joint Franco-German initiative signed in the Meseberg Castle, that proposed reform initiatives among other things concerning the EMU and the Eurozone (Macron, 2017; Présidence de la République Française, 2018). Macron's speech was more far-reaching than the Meseberg Declaration: the former proposed the creation of a new office for a common European finance minister, who would be responsible for the political oversight of the Eurozone budget, and stronger fiscalisation at EU level with an emphasis on solidarity (Macron, 2017). In fact, prominent

economists like Thomas Piketty and Ferdinando Giugliano described the Meseberg Declaration as a missed opportunity, and a compromise without ambition (in Merler, 2018). Still, this obvious sign of Franco-German conciliation and push for reforms in the prelude to key EMU reform negotiations and in anticipation of the 2018 December EUCO meeting stirred concerns in small creditor member states with a neat budget sheet.

Not all Hansa members expressed concerns to the same extent. For instance, the Swedish Finance Minister Magdalena Andersson, and Mark Rutte Dutch PM were intent on emphasising the financial gap that Brexit left behind both in terms of financing the EU budget, and as an ally of opposing centralisation at EU level (Dagensarena, 2019; Khan, 2018a). Together with the Finnish Finance Minister, Petteri Orpo, they also rejected any possibility of risk-sharing (Orpo, 2018a). Non-Eurozone countries like Sweden and Denmark felt particularly threatened by the possibility of setting up a separate Eurozone budget as proposed in Meseberg, that would exclude them and create a multi-tier Europe (see the New Hansa joint paper of March 2018). Meanwhile, the three Baltic states as net beneficiaries of the EU budget campaigned for an increased MFF, but at the same time stood by responsible spending and less mutualisation in support of the position of other Hansa members. To praise Baltic fiscal consciousness and to reiterate the responsibility of nation states to maintain fiscal stability, Swedish ex-Finance Minister stated: "We believe in national responsibility for economic policy. The Baltic countries, which were hit hard by the crisis and took tough measures afterwards, think that other countries should do the same" (Dagensarena, 2019). Even if the opposition of New Hansa members to EMU and budgetary reforms sprang from different sentiments and concerns, they uniformly felt threatened by losing a strong ally after Brexit, and the possibility of Merkel granting further concessions to Macron to support risk-sharing at EU-level towards which allegedly Meseberg was the first – even if watered down – step (Schoeller, 2021).

Net-contributor states from the Hansa already articulated their strong opposition to the possibility of an increased budget back in 2018. Unsurprisingly, the article written by Sebastian Kurz Austrian Chancellor that first coined publicly the name Frugal Four was also a call for no substantive increase in the EU's budget (Kurz, 2020). However, the group rose to an effective actor status somewhat later, during the negotiation of the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF). The Frugals were even more vocal to express their frustration when in May 2020 a Franco-German joint declaration proposed the establishment of a Recovery Fund as an "extraordinary complementary provision, integrated in the own resources decision" (…) "beyond the current MFF" (Présidence de la République Française, 2020). Despite previously rejecting the idea of corona bonds, that would have implied a degree of debt mutualisation (Herszenhorn, Barigazzi & Momtaz, 2020), Angela Merkel agreed to introduce grants to member states in need (Reuters, 2020). The joint declaration served as a blueprint for the Commission proposal to establish the RRF, which put forward the creation of a €603 billion fund divided between €335 billion in grants and €268 billion in loans (European Commission, 2020a). In a joint non-paper, Frugals firmly rejected the prospect

of any debt mutualisation, and stressed the importance of member states staying committed to fiscal reforms, as well as the funding of activities that boost innovation, fight against climate change and digitalisation (Government of the Netherlands, 2020). "Lending on favourable terms" promoted in the Frugal non-paper was a direct challenge and response to the Franco-German initiative (Heikkla & von der Burchard, 2020).

Moving on to the Visegrad Group, in 2 out of the 4 identified cases the group rose to effective actorship due to opposing the vision of the Franco-German tandem. Concerning the refugee crisis, the Visegrad Group's standpoint was closer to France's position on refugee quotas, provided France repeatedly rejected the introduction of a compulsory quota system before the refugee crisis of 2015 (DW, 2015). The common position emerged following a telephone conversation between President François Hollande and Chancellor Angela Merkel. The two leaders emphasised that their plan would be communicated as soon as possible to European institutions to foster action (Federal Government of Germany, 2015). Subsequently, the Commission swiftly proposed reforms to Europe's Dublin system with the inclusion of a mandatory redistribution quota (European Commission, 2015). It was fervently opposed by the Visegrad Group, which envisaged managing the refugee crisis with more emphasis on tougher external border control, providing assistance to safe third countries, and keeping the quota system optional under the aegis of "flexible solidarity" (Visegrad Group, 2016c). Similarly, it was the Franco-German motor, which pushed for the establishment of a robust response to climate change, to back up the EU's commitment to the 2015 Paris Agreement (European Council, 2015). On October 16, 2019 it was a joint declaration by Germany and France, which significantly speeded up the creation and adoption of the European Green Deal, which among other milestones set out carbon neutrality by 2050, towards which Fit-for-55 – reducing the EU's greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels – is an incremental first step (Federal Government of Germany, 2019). Once again, just like in the previous cases presented above concerning the New Hansa, the Frugal Four and the Visegrad's role in the refugee crisis, the Group played a foot-dragging role (Börzel, 2002; Maes & Verdun, 2005). The Visegrad spoke out against Fit-for-55 and called for a more gradual transition, underlining the importance of fairness, solidarity with lower income member states, and the right to determine their own energy mix (Visegrad Group, 2021b).

The above examples exhibited instances when regionalism became a tactic to oppose significant institutional changes (foot-dragging) exercised by small member states in opposition to the reform initiatives propelled by the Franco-German cooperation. Germany is a supporter of sensible spending and hence tends to be a natural ally of member states in the New Hansa and the Frugal Four (Verdun, 2022). Therefore, Germany easing its stance on issues concerning fiscalisation together with Brexit triggered those states with a balanced spread sheet and net-contributor status to form an opposing pole. Similarly, Germany is the lead trading partner of all Visegrad countries, and hence an influential partner of the group. Therefore, Germany representing opposing views generated strong reactionary moves in the Visegrad not only when the Franco-German cooperation

was united, but also when Germany alone pressed for unfavorable policy goals from Visegrad's point of view. For instance, Germany was a lead figure in cajoling a coalition to stop the inclusion of nuclear energy in the green taxonomy (as part of the Green Deal) (Simon, 2021). Provided cooperation on nuclear energy has been an important cornerstone of the Visegrad – despite Poland not having any nuclear powerplants (Interview 1, Interveiw 10) – the Group held on to maintain the status quo and sided loudly with France in order to uphold their nuclear strategy. The only exception when a subregion, namely the Visegrad played a pace-setting role while becoming an effective actor was in 2019, when France with the tacit support of the Netherlands vetoed Albania's and North Macedonia's chance to start accession talks with the EU. It should be noted that it was the only instance when the policy under discussion was subject to unanimity vote, and not QMV, so the no-vote of a single state could result in a negative overall outcome. Therefore, the Visegrad as long-time advocates of Balkan accession pursued several last-ditch efforts to convince France to vote positively, which they hoped would also bring the Netherlands on board (Brzozowski, 2019).

4.2.2. Ideological drivers

In the analytical framework chapter, a long section was dedicated to ideology and the possible ways how ideological alignment could bolster subregional cooperation. Hooghe et al. (2002) found that both the left-right and GAL-TAN position of parties in EU member states are strong predictors of their stance on integration. The GAL-TAN dimension is particularly relevant to determine a party's view when environmental and asylum policies are at stake, whereas its left-right position is rather associated with its stance on economic and fiscal integration. Other researchers, who examined Council roll-call vote data also confirmed voting behaviour based on ideological patterns and divisions (Aspinwall, 2002; Hagemann, 2008; Mattila, 2004). With these theoretical expectations in mind, it was originally assumed that left-right alignment will be stronger among Hansa and Frugal states, while GAL-TAN association will be the driver of cooperation between Viasgrad states. Table 7 demonstrates that none of the subregions had ideologically aligned members regarding GAL-TAN values, and only in a few instances were members aligned on the left-right axis at the time when the subregion attained heightened visibility. On the other hand, in almost all identified cases, including negative ones, subregional members were largely aligned concerning their overall stance on European integration. In accordance, table 8 shows that the QCA analysis deemed none of the operationalisations of ideology sufficient or necessary to boost effective actorship, including illiberalism, which didn't play a significant role even in the Visegrad Group's recent history. In fact, Chapter 5 and 6 will argue that illiberalism could eventually function as an extra glue in the Visegrad when all states experienced illiberal trends. However, illiberalism was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to trigger effective actorship in the first place, as opposed to the theoretical expectations laid out in the analytical framework.

The assessment of ideological alignment relied primarily on the CHES dataset, more specifically its 2017, 2019 and flash 2023 European editions, which was also complimented with some

qualitative data. As it has been argued above, the theoretical expectations foresaw the possibility of ideological alignment among New Hansa and Frugal members on the left-right axis, provided their cooperation became visible in policy areas, which focussed on economic, banking and fiscal integration. The main governing parties of Hansa and Frugal members were moderate supporters of EU integration in 2018 and 2020 respectively. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 stands for "strongly opposed" and 7 for "strongly in favour" governing parties in Hansa member states took up values between 4.82 and 6.29. The former, most Eurosceptic position represents the Kučinskis cabinet in Latvia, where the PM had the backing of the Union of Greens and Farmers party and was in a centre-right, conservative, green coalition with other two centre-right parties till January 2019. Whereas, the most pro-European stance represents Leo Varadkar's first mandate as Taoiseach in Ireland, who came from the generally centre-right Fine Gael, with a reputation of emphasising budgetary discipline and economic liberalism (Hutter & Malet, 2019:323). Alignment on the pro-contra EU axis was even closer within the Frugal Four, where Sebastian Kurz Chancellor's People's Party scored the lowest mark at 5, and the Swedish Social Democrats with Stefan Löfven as PM scored the highest at 5.75. This notwithstanding, not even the net-contributor Nordic core of the Hansa, neither the Frugals exhibited ideological vicinity in other measurements. For instance, on a scale from 0-10, where 0 stands for extreme left and 10 for extreme right in terms of economic positioning, the Swedish Social Democrats scored 4.12, while in the Netherlands Mark Rutte's VVD party stood on the other extreme of the scale with a score of 8.15 (Lorenzini & Ditmars, 2019:276). Since the same parties were in the helm of the Swedish and Dutch governments respectively both at the time when the New Hansa and the Frugals became effective actors, it can be concluded that ideological coherence regarding economic issues didn't play a causal role. Differences on the GAL-TAN axis were also gaping. In line with the observations of Vachudova & Hooghe (2009), economically left-leaning parties in the government of Baltic states, especially in Latvia and Lithuania showcased extreme TAN values, which stood in contrast with the rest of the group. Meanwhile among the Frugals, Austria showcased the greatest deviation from the rest of the group, with a more pronounced TAN cultural stance.

Moving on to the Visegrad, their cooperation extended to migration, environmental and enlargement policies. Hooghe et al. (2002) predicted that the stance of parties in these policy areas when it comes to European integration is more likely to be determined by their positioning on the GAL-TAN cultural axis. However, in none of the selected cases did governing parties in the Visegrad converge on the GAL-TAN axis. It is true that on average governing parties in the Visegrad, especially Law and Justice in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary took up hard TAN values (9.14 and 9.2 respectively), which indeed was in line with their radical stance on migration. However, when the Visegrad first became visible in 2016 as an enemy of the Dublin reforms, the ideologically diverse Cabinet of the Czech PM Bohuslav Sobotka included the Social Democrats (ČSSD, Sobotka himself coming from this party), the nominally liberal ANO 2011 and the Christian and Democratic Union. Sobotka's party on the 0-10 scale, where 0 stands for hard TAN and 10 for hard GAL took up a middle, very much centric position (5). Furthermore, later on when

Andrej Babiš took over the leadership a year later, his party was categorised only slightly more TAN (5.73). As a further proof of the ambiguous ideological inclinations of the ANO party, it rose to become the leading coalition partner in the Czech government as an anti-corruption, technocratic, liberal platform (Vachudova, 2021), and chose to sit within the liberal Renew Group in the EP. Although later on the party "captured state administration and policy making for oligarchic and criminal interests" (Vachudova, 2021:489). Robert Fico's Smer party, which led the Slovak government till 2020 equally represented an ideological mix, provided it scored slightly less TAN compared to their Hungarian and Polish counterparts (7.35 in 2017 and 7.88 in 2019), yet the party has been a long-standing member of the S&D EP Group. Following the change of government in Slovakia, there too an anti-corruption platform earned the highest number of votes called OLANO. Therefore, the ideological difference between the Polish-Hungarian and Czech-Slovak halves of the Visegrad grew significantly in terms of positioning on the GAL-TAN axis (OLANO scored 6.79).

The only time period when some ideological convergence emerged between Visegrad partners was between 2017 – early 2020, till the government change in Slovakia, which encompasses partly the Green Deal and the Balkan accession cases. Over the span of this short time period all Visegrad governments were classified as rather left-leaning economically (which is a simplified indicator and will be discussed in more details in Chapter 5 and 6) and all lead parties in government showcased illiberal trends. However, as the QCA analysis demonstrates in Table 7 and 8, none of these factors qualified either as significant or sufficient to trigger effective actorship. Later on, in Chapters 5 and 6 a more thorough discussion will be dedicated to the role of illiberalism in the Visegrad cooperation. Illiberalism is a thin-centred ideology, which is a distinct form of ideological reaction against hegemonic liberalism by those actors, who operate in countries, that experienced liberalism in the past three decades "either internally or through foreign dependence" (Waller, 2024:372; Laruelle, 2022). Since illiberalism is context dependent and has different degrees of manifestation across countries, regime types and even across policy areas within the same country (Laruelle, 2022), it is hard to propose generalisable statements about the role of illiberalism without knowing other context-dependent factors. As it will be showcased, occasionally, illiberalism functioned as an additional glue between Visegrad member states, even as a proxy for amicable relations between country leaders. Meanwhile, illiberalism was also the very reason why animosity sparked between member states first in the RoL and then in the Ukraine cases.

4.2.3. Post-functional drivers

The final section of this chapter before concluding will scrutinise the set calibration of the two post-functional conditions: bottom-up politicisation based on public opinion polls and its flipside, top-down politicisation, which is expressed as sovereignist discourse. As it has been discussed in Chapter 3, in the EU context an issue becomes politicised if it is subject to "higher intensity of public debate, amplified saliency and polarisation" (De Wilde et al., 2015:6). Since politicisation

can correlate with regionally embedded conflict structures (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019), it is expected to contribute towards the rise of subregions to effective actorship. It is outside the scope of this thesis to determine whether public opinion is conductive to a response from the elite in the form of sovereignist discourse, or rather the other way around, political pundits influence public opinion. This thesis solely aims at shedding a light on whether any of the expressions of politicisation leads to regional fragmentation in the EU. Therefore, the final two conditions will be discussed simultaneously, together. To do so, Eurobarometer data has been scrutinised from every year when a subregion became effective actor. Saliency has been operationalised as the response of citizens in subregional member states to the question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?". Whereas, the direction and extent of polarisation was determined through investigating issue-specific questions. On a different note, turning to supply-side politicisation, sovereignism springs from conflicts between national and supranational sovereignty. Thus, sovereignist discourse is a two-way street and on the one hand, it may be utilised by politicians and pundits in the form of regime scepticism and policy scepticism (De Vries, 2018) when they demand repatriation or retention of policy competences at national level. Whereas, sovereignism can also surface in political discourse when more supranationalism is demanded, such Macron's "grand vision of European sovereignty" (Rone et al., 2023:18). In the "sovereignism" column of the truth table only those cases were marked with "1", where politicians in all member states pursued a congruent sovereignist discourse.

Both the New Hansa and the Frugals were active in policy areas, which related to economic and fiscal issues. Therefore, it was expected that in all Hansa and Frugal member states in 2018 and 2020 respectively, "economic situation" and "member state public finances" would score high on the Eurobarometer question, which asks citizens about the most important issues facing the EU. In the survey, respondents could choose from 13 different answers, and both issues were among the 5 most mentioned in all member states. It should be underlined though that migration, terrorism and climate change too were highly salient issues in almost all member state. To determine whether these issues have been politicised similarly, and are polarised in the same direction, further Eurobarometer data had to be investigated. Table 9 shows the perception of citizens in Hansa member states regarding whether the EU should have greater financial means for its political objectives. Meanwhile, Table 10 demonstrates the perception of citizens in Frugal member states about whether the EU should be given greater financial means to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. With the exception if Ireland and Austria respectively (in the latter case with an almost 50-50% stance), all other member states had a markedly negative opinion on increasing the EU's financial means. The above figures become even more meaningful when viewed in comparison to the other EU27. In 2018 70.08% of the Hungarian, 59.51% of the Polish and 63.25% of the Portuguese respondents agreed with increasing the EU's financial means. Especially Southern European member states were also heavily in favour of supplementing the recovery fund.

Table 9 – Member state perception of EU budget in the New Hanseatic League

Question: EU should have greater financial means given its political objectives OR the EU's political objectives do not justify an increase in the Union's budget Answers in %								
	Denmark	Estonia	Finland	Ireland	Latvia	Lithuania	Netherlands	Sweden
Agree	18.9	44.11	30.98	66.43	29.35	34.35	24.11	27.81
Disagree	81.91	55.89	69.02	33.57	70.65	65.65	75.89	72.19

Source: Eurobarometer 89.1, 2018 GESIS

Table 10 – Member state perception of RRF in the Frugal Four

The EU should have greater financial means to be able to overcome the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic Answers in %				
	Austria	Denmark	Netherlands	Sweden
Should	51.12	36.57	47.38	47.54
Should not	48.8	63.43	52.62	52.46

Source: European Parliament COVID-19 Survey – Round 2, 2020 GESIS

In the same vein, sovereignist discourse was detected at elite level, whic demanded no fiscalisation at EU level and keeping member states in charge of their own balance sheet. Even the first concerted policy paper of the New Hansa published in March 2018 openly demanded that "a stronger EMU requires first and foremost decisive actions at the national level and full compliance with our common rules", and "further deepening of the EMU should stress real value-added, not far-reaching transfers of competence to the European level" (Government of Finland, 2018). A variety of political actors both from governing and opposition parties also reiterated the same agenda. To provide a few examples, Petteri Orpo, Finnish Finance Minister in a speech was intent to repeatedly underline that EU countries in need should be responsible for their own recovery and hence "the ESM needs better tools to ensure debt sustainability and, if necessary, orderly restructuring of debt" instead of taxpayers financing bailouts (Orpo, 2018a). Strengthening the ESM was also among the key appeals of a concerted Hansa non-paper (Government of Sweden, 2018). Whereas, Sara Skyttedal, who was top candidate on the list of Christian Democrats in Sweden during the EP elections, opened her campaign in November 2018 by attacking PM Löfven and his government for not halting a massive transfer of power to Europe, which requires increased joint financing too (Skyttedal, 2018). The sovereignist discourse in Frugal states pursued strikingly similar themes, emphasising member states' own responsibility to resolve their spending issues and avoiding the boost of fiscal capacities at European level. Commenting on the possibility of reaching an agreement before the marathon 2020 July EUCO, Austria's Finance Minister Karoline Edtstadler reiterated that states must remain sovereign in financial matters and painted a grim picture of reaching a compromise (Grüll, 2020). Whereas, Wopke Hoekstra Dutch Finance

Minister became "Europe's bond villain" when during a video conference in March 2020 he allegedly called for Brussels to investigate why "some countries did not have enough financial room for manoeuvre to weather the economic impact of the pandemic" (von der Burchard, Oliveira & Schaart, 2020). The RRF and avoiding debt mutualisation lingered on as a dominant, divisive topic in Nordic countries well into the 2024 EP elections. Far-right candidates, such as Kristoffer Storm from the Danish Democrats bashed the Danish government for "accepting to finance Bulgaria's and Greece's debt through Danish taxpayers' money" (Bruhn, 2024).

It is remarkably telling about the nature of subregional activism, that in almost all selected cases, but one, sovereignist discourse demanded keeping policy competences in the realm of member states. As the sole exception, Visegrad states in their last-ditch effort to influence France's decision on the fate of Albanian and North Macedonian accession talks, they readily appealed to sovereignist tropes, this time emphasising the importance of a geopolitical Europe, European stability, security, and Europe's role to take matters into its own hands in its neighbourhood (Government of Czechia, 2019). "We must realize what is at stake: the decision that we are to take this week will irreversibly affect our credibility in the region and even more importantly, it will have serious and long-lasting consequences for our own stability and security" – emphasised the

Table 11 Member state perception of future EU enlargement in V4 states

EU proposal for future enlargement				
	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
For	39.88	67.06	65.67	55.91
Against	46.5	23.44	20.34	30.88
No response	2.47	2.67	3.97	2.88
Don't know	11.15	6.82	10.02	10.33

Source: Eurobarometer 92.3, 2019 GESIS

Table 12 Member state perception of migrants arriving from outside the EU in V4 states

Feeling towards immigration from outside EU Answers in %				
	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Very positive	2.95	2.08	4.66	1.04
Fairly Positive	15.07	12.75	23.17	10.79
Fairly negative	32.79	32.02	42.68	43.57
Very negative	49.19	53.16	29.49	44.61

Source: Eurobarometer 85.2, 2016 GESIS

Table 13 Member state perceptions of a fair and affordable energy transition by 2050 in V4 states

By 2050 energy, products, services will be affordable for everyone Answers in %				
	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Totally agree	4.69	14.66	15.58	12.95
Tend to agree	26.45	34.95	38.86	29.38
Tend to disagree	40.62	27.38	29.29	29.18
Totally disagree	21.56	15.34	10.36	20.62
Don't know	6.69	7.67	5.92	7.87

Source: Eurobarometer 97.4, 2022 GESIS

Table 14 Citizens' commitment to pay more for a quicker green transition in V4 states

Willing to pay more for quicker green transition Answers in %				
	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Yes (10%, 20%, 30% or even more concerted)	31.05	31.56	21.17	32.47
No, because I cannot afford	43.91	53.2	61.93	57.17
No, because I don't want to	22.51	14.56	15.19	8.07
Don't know	1.1	0.68	1.18	2.29

Source: Eurobarometer 97.4, 2022 GESIS

concerted letter signed by Andrej Babiš (ANO, Czech PM), Mateusz Morawiecki (PiS, Polish PM), Viktor Orbán (Fidesz, Hungarian PM) and Peter Pellegrini (Smer, Slovak PM). In line with the political elite's conviction, public opinion is also largely supportive of enlargement in all Visegrad states except Czechia, where enthusiasm was more muted (see Table 11). Again, looking at the EU27 context reveals a striking East-West and North-South divide in this issue. Solely 24.76% of the Danish, 25.17% of the Finnish, 26.65% of the Dutch and 28.11% of the French respondents supported enlargement back in 2019. In Chapter 5 more words will be dedicated to explaining this phenomenon together with the refugee crisis, as the two issues were very much related in the Visegrad's understanding. Furthermore, it will be addressed that Visegrad states had different functional and ideological interest behind promoting Balkan enlargement, however, they still agreed on pursuing a discourse centred around European sovereignty.

Balkan accession became even more pivotal for Visegrad states in the aftermath of the refugee crisis, partially with the aim to push the EU's external borders even farther, and to intercept the Balkan migration route. Migration and terrorism have been for the past years a highly salient issue among the citizens not just of Visegrad countries, but all-around Europe. Although, citizen perceptions were far from uniform back in 2016. Table 12 projects that the overwhelming majority of Visegrad citizens perceived migration from outside the EU as a fairly or very negative

phenomenon in contrast to some Western and even Southern European countries with a far larger migrant population (see Chapter 5). For instance, altogether 56.38% of Spaniards, 46.45% of the Dutch, and 61.98% of the Swedish respondents chose either very or fairly positive as a response to the same question. Accordingly, Visegrad politicians were adamant to sustain the capacity of member states to determine "whom to let in", and to oppose the quota system, including Bohuslav Sobotka Czech PM, the most moderate PM of the block back in 2015-6 (Radio Prague International, 2015). It is important to underline that the "public opinion" and "sovereignism" conditions have been marked with "1" in the truth table when looking at the Dublin reform case, while illiberalism was assigned with "0" (see Table 7). The illiberal turn in the government of Czechia started to manifest following the 2017 general elections, after which all Visegrad states experienced a degree of illiberalism in their government. Thus, illiberalism at the first time when the Visegrad became highly visible was not present unequivocally in the government of all its members, even though later on illiberalism amplified the cooperation between Visegrad states.

Lastly, concerning the European Green Deal, the Visegrad Group rose to effective actorship in two instances, first in 2019 concerning the plan for reducing greenhouse gas emission, then secondly, in 2021 they uniformly campaigned for the inclusion nuclear energy in the green taxonomy. Even though national opinion polls showcased that citizens in Visegrad members did not concertedly support the expansion of nuclear power plants – the only exception among the cases, which was assigned with "0" on the public opinion condition – Visegrad PMs and relevant ministers still formulated a pertinent sovereignist discourse around the issue. Strangely, even the Polish PM and Energy Minister, despite Poland not having a single nuclear power plant, were adamant to emphasise the crucial importance "to respect the sovereign right of each EU member state to determine the conditions for utilising its energy mix and its choice between different energy sources recognised in the TFEU" (Visegrad Group, 2021a, b, c). The Visegrad's cooperation to include nuclear energy in the green taxonomy was deeply intertwined with their efforts to slow down the pace of reducing greenhouse gas emission levels, which will be discussed in more details in Chapter 6. Over the series of interviews conducted in Brussels for this thesis, it emerged that tackling climate change is considered important in all Visegrad states in a technical sense. Opposition to the allegedly way too rapid pace of reducing greenhouse gas emission was embedded in economic considerations (Interview 1, Interview 10, Interview 12, Interview 15). Interviewees expressed their fear that lower income countries with higher reliance on fossil fuel energy production would be disproportionately affected by the Green Deal in a negative sense. Table 13 and 14 reflect the general scepticism of Visegrad citizens regarding the fairness of the green transition, and the perception of citizens regarding their economic means that they would be able or willing to dedicate to the more rapid reduction of emission levels. In contrast (see Chapter 6), Northern and Western European countries demonstrate a far greater willingness and capability to spend: 55.33% in the Netherlands, 53.59% in Sweden and 53.89% in Denmark would be willing to contribute more financial means to a swifter transition. Accordingly, the sovereignist discourse of Visegrad politicians reiterated not only the right of member states to determine their own energy

mix, but also the right of Visegrad citizens to affordable energy security (Bodalska, 2019; Reuters, 2019; Szalai, 2019; Tagesspiegel, 2019; Visegrad Group, 2021b).

4.3 Summary of csQCA, presenting set membership logic

This chapter aimed at assessing the necessary and sufficient conditions under which subregions become effective actors via crisp set QCA (csQCA), implementing a most-similar systems research design. The QCA analysis extended to functional, ideological and post-functional conditions (Table 3 on p11) and the truth-table (Table 7 on p15) was populated by 7 positive and 2 negative cases (Table 2 on p3), which encompassed three subregional groups: the New Hanseatic League, the Visegrad Group and the Frugal Four. The above paragraphs presented evidence not only for why positive and negative cases have been picked for analysis based on the criteria presented in Chapter1; but also, demonstrated the calibration of set membership regarding the conditions. In line with the most-similar systems research design numerous conditions showed solely "1" or solely "0" values across all cases, including negative ones, such as the "net-contributor net-beneficiary", the "old-new" member, ideological alignment on the pro-contra EU axis, and ideological alignment on the GAL-TAN axis. In some instances, the most similar research design could not be applied seamlessly, which is a highly likely occurrence when real life events are analysed instead of counterfactuals. For instance, the New Hansa is a mix of old and new, as well as net-contributor and net-beneficiary states, while in the rest of the cases subregional members were homogenous. In addition, Visegrad Group members were not aligned on the pro-contra EU axis in 2 cases, even though all the other cases were assigned with "1" on this condition. None of the groups in either positive or negative cases exhibited convergence on the GAL-TAN ideological axis. Despite the above limitations, it has been concluded that the 4 conditions listed above are not part of the sufficiency solution term. Following the completion of set calibration, an excel QCA add-in was employed to identify the sufficiency pathway, and which conditions fall outside the solution term (Cronqvist, 2019). Special attention will be dedicated in the next two case study chapters to determining whether any of the conditions, which are not part of the sufficiency solution term could qualify as necessary, but insufficient.

To determine which if any of the remaining 5 conditions could qualify as sufficient, Boolean logic had to be applied. Figure 1 illustrates the remaining 5 conditions as intersecting sets, populated by the cases under analysis (see Figure 1 and also Table 14). The blue set, which stands for opposition to the French and/or German hegemons, as well as the purple set, which stands for sovereignism contain all of the cases. Meanwhile the red set, which stands for public opinion (salience and polarisation in the same direction) has all the cases, but one, namely the Visegrad cooperation in the field of nuclear energy. Since the combination of these 3 conditions produces a high consistency, it can be concluded that together they compile a sufficiency pathway to effective actorship. Whereas, due to low coverage – 1 and 2 cases respectively – left-right alignment and illiberalism were eliminated in line with the minimising tactic. Minimisation is an inherent part of

Figure 1 – Illustrating cases as set members, where sets stand for QCA conditions

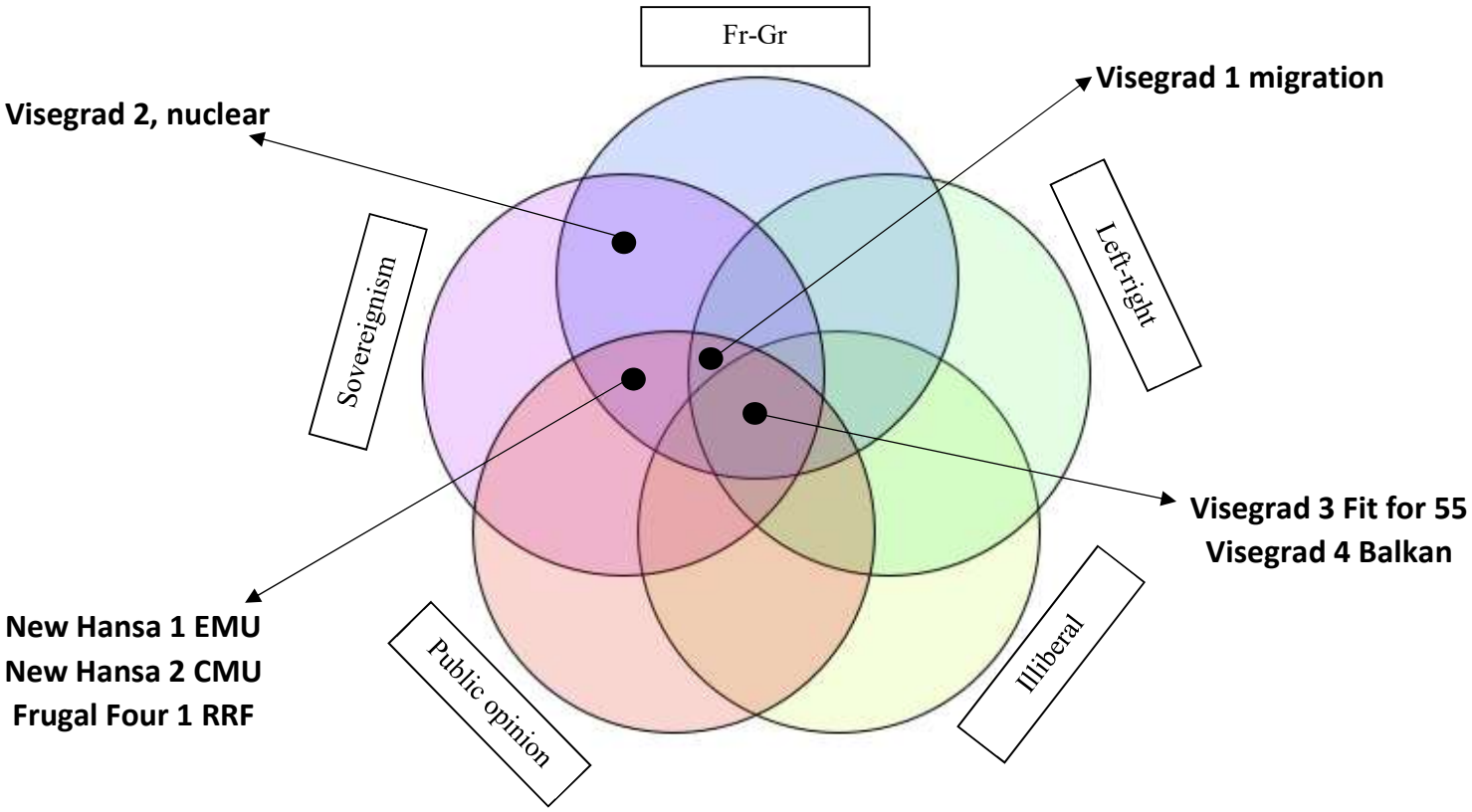


Table 14 – csQCA truth table to analyse effective actorship in subregions after eliminating 4 conditions

Fr_Gr	L_r	Illib	Publicop	Sovereign	Outcome	Coverage	Cases
1	0	0	**1**	**1**	**1**	3	NewHansa_1, NewHansa_2, Frugal_1
1	1	0	**1**	**1**	**1**	1	Visegrad_1
1	0	0	0	**1**	**1**	1	Visegrad_2
1	1	1	**1**	**1**	**1**	2	Visegrad_3, Visegrad_4

Table 15 – csQCA truth table to analyse effective actorship in subregions after eliminating 4 conditions

Fr_Gr	Publicop	Sovereign	Outcome	Coverage	Cases
1	**1**	**1**	**1**	6	NewHansa_1, NewHansa_2, Frugal_1, Visegrad_1, Visegrad_3, Visegrad_4
1	0	**1**	**1**	1	Visegrad_2

(Publicop) ∗ (Sovereign) ∗ (FR_GR) → Effective actorships
Consistency = 1
Deviant case: Visegrad_2

QCA that serves the purpose of finding the simplest possible sufficiency pathway to the outcome, via eliminating those conditions, which are present only in a few positive cases. "Including each truth table row as a term in the solution would create a very complex solution and would merely describe the cases, rather than identify the most salient combination(s) of conditions for the outcome" (Kahwati & Kane, 2020a:37). After performing this quintessential step, Table 15 demonstrates, that the combination of opposition to the Franco-German hegemons, consistent politicisation of public opinion and coherent sovereignist discourse at elite level cover almost all cases, but one, and produce a perfect consistency, which is equal to 1. Consequently, the Visegrad cooperation in the nuclear energy case qualifies as somewhat deviant, and for this reason special attention will be dedicated to this particular occurrence in Chapter 6.

As a final conclusion, it can be stated that the cooperation of subregions is indeed much more determined on a policy-by-policy basis instead of functional or ideological alignment. However, subregional activism is not entirely ad-hoc based on the cooperation of occasional bedfellows as hinted at by some scholars (Bokhorst & Schoeller, 2024; Eihmanis, 2024; Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024; Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019). Rather, recent subregional activism is triggered by regional patterns of politicisation both in the population of subregional members and among their elites (Kriesi, 2016). Therefore, 'politics traps' (Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024), which often resulted in negotiation stalemates at EU level are not entirely ad-hoc in nature. In conclusion, this thesis presented evidence not only to decipher the conditions (sufficiency pathway) under which subregions become effective actors, but also advanced the better understanding of the nature of effective actorship, and the nature of politics traps in EU negotiations. To gain a more nuanced insight into how the sufficiency conditions interact, and whether any of the conditions, which are not part of the solution term qualify as necessary, but insufficient, the next two chapters will analyse on the one hand, the Visegrad Group's cooperation in stalemating the Dublin reforms, and on the other hand, their cooperation in issues related to the European Green Deal.

5 A subregional "success story" – unpacking the Visegrad Group's role in orchestrating the Dublin deadlock

The Visegrad Group has attracted increased scholarly attention in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis. The two main topics, which dominate academic pieces with a Visegrad connotation either relate to the role of populist governments or the role of illiberalism in hindering the EU's response to the refugee crisis (Bedea & Kwadwo, 2020; Bauerová, 2018b; Braun, 2020; Duszczyk, Podgórska & Pszczółkowska, 2019; Koß & Séville, 2020; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023) or democratic backsliding in the territory of former top students in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) (Bakke & Sitter, 2022; Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Kazharski, 2017; Kazharski, 2020; Lorenz & Anders, 2021; Scott, 2022). While these pieces investigate relevant questions and arrive at important conclusions about contemporary political processes in Visegrad member states and the EU, almost none of them approach the topic from a broader angle, and investigate the actions of the Visegrad as an instance of effective actorship at subregional level. The few which do so (Bedea & Kwadwo, 2020; Duszczyk, Podgórska & Pszczółkowska, 2019; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023), remain solely focussed on the Visegrad's role in the refugee crisis as a case study, and does not reflect on the topic from a comparative approach. The uniqueness of this thesis lies in first identifying a wider phenomenon, namely subregional actorship and its possible causes, and then zooming into specific case studies to trace and analyse how the causes of subregional actorship manifest and interact. This complementary approach that encompasses a QCA and a case study element allows the researcher to propose limited generalisations to an explicit pool of cases, which are all instances of effective actorship. Meanwhile, it also provides opportunity for immersing in selected cases via performing a follow-up within-case analysis, for a deeper reflection on how the conditions interact, which were previously identified in the QCA Chapter.

Combining cross-case and within-case elements in a research design has been standard practice, in fact highly encouraged in the discipline of Political Science (Álamos-Concha et al., 2022; Gerring, 2008; Kahwati & Kane, 2020b; Lieberman, 2005). When QCA analysis is the first step in a set-theoretic multi-method research, the results of the QCA are then used for "systematic case selection for within-case analysis with the goal to improve the QCA model or to probe the causal status of that model" (Schneider, 2024:4). The following, case study part then can serve a plethora of purposes depending on which cases are picked based on the logic of set relations, such as specifying the concepts under investigation, accounting for occasional omitted conditions, probing further the validity of data, or affirming the relevance of causal and descriptive inferences (Schneider, 2024). Cases in a QCA analysis can be typical, deviant and irrelevant based on how they are calibrated concerning the conditions and the outcome, thus the set-membership of the cases (Schneider & Rohlfing, 2013; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). In crisp set arrangements, typical cases are members of the solution set and the outcome set too – in other words, coded as "1". Meanwhile, deviant cases are "not fully in line with the empirical findings", which can be expressed in two forms: either the case is part of the solution set, but not the outcome or it's part

of the outcome, but not the solution set (Kahwati & Kane, 2020b). Table 16 below illustrates whether the cases picked for analysis are categorised as typical, deviant or irrelevant based on the parameters defined by Kahwati & Kane, after performing QCA.

Table 16 – Typical and deviant cases based on QCA results following the definition of Kahwati & Kane, 2020b

	In solution set	**Not in Solution set**
In outcome set	**Typical** NewHansa_1, NewHansa_2, Frugal_1, Visegrad_1, Visegrad_3, Visegrad_4	**Deviant** Visegrad_2 (partially)
Not in outcome set	**Deviant**	**Irrelevant** Visegrad_5 Visegrad_6

Kahwati & Kane (2020b) also explain the purpose why typical, deviant or irrelevant cases should be picked for post-solution exploration in the form of detailed, case-study analysis. Typical cases may be useful to be chosen for post-solution or in other words post-QCA exploration, in order to unpack and shed light on how conditions interact, instead of simply identifying their presence or absence as it has already been done so during the QCA calibration. Whereas, delving into deviant cases could assist the researcher in "identifying missing sufficient conditions" (Kahwati & Kane 2020b:174). Irrelevant cases are often considered not interesting to be selected for within-case analysis, as they are much more useful for cross-case comparison. Since the activities of one particular subregion offers cases in three out of the four quadrants in Table 16, the second, case study part of this thesis will primarily focus on analysing the conditions thanks to which the Visegrad Group became effective actor. The Visegrad stalling the Dublin reforms is a typical case, whereas the EU Green Deal, the topic picked for Chapter 6, which encompasses both the Visegrad's partial opposition to the Fit-for-55 regime and their support of nuclear energy to be included in the green taxonomy, include both a typical and a deviant case. The final, concluding chapter will also briefly address the two irrelevant cases, to draw some descriptive inferences regarding how subregions fall apart, even though establishing a sufficiency pathway to negative cases fell outside the scope of the QCA analysis in Chapter 4.

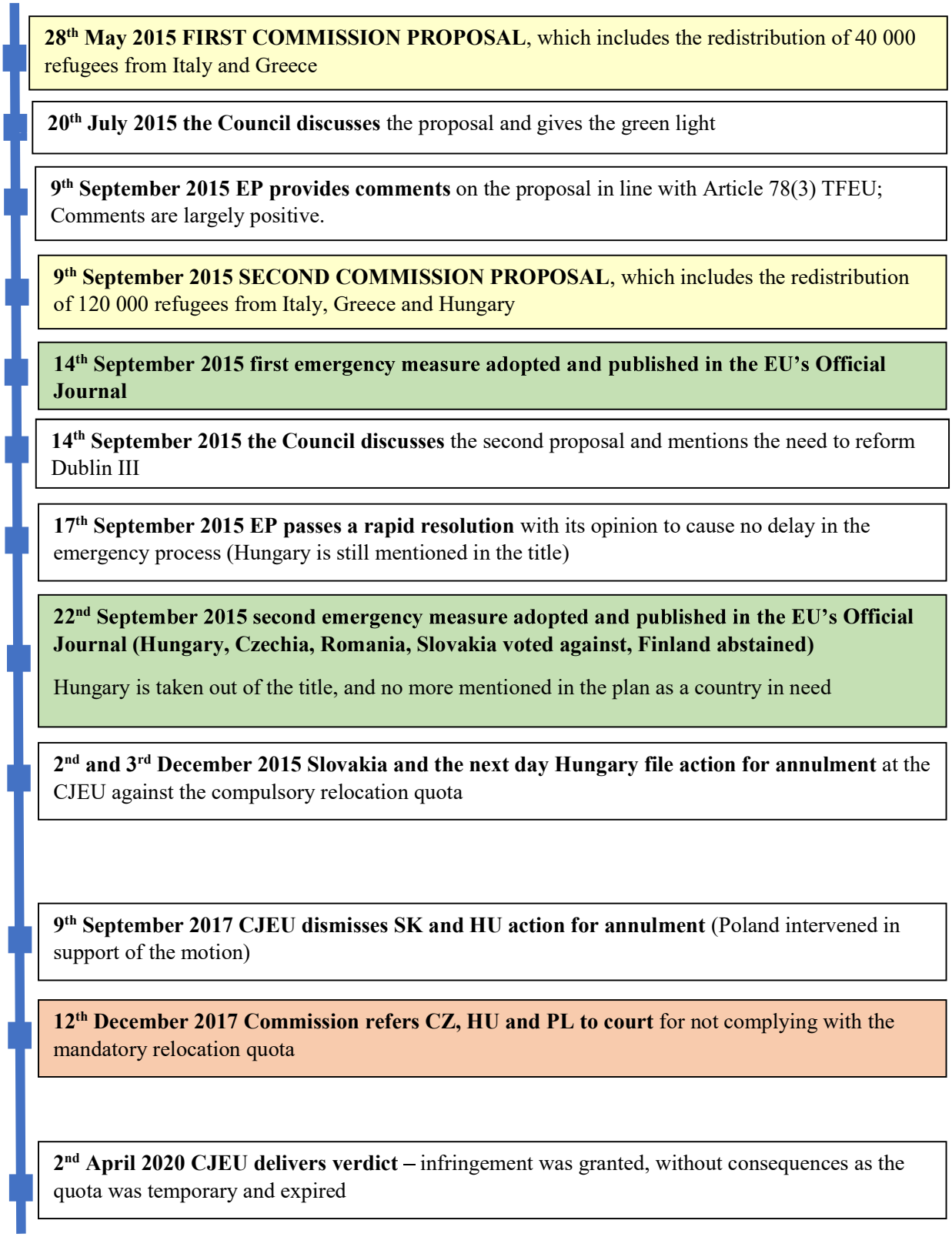
The cases in the QCA analysis were tied to a particular year, when the subregion under investigation became effective actor, to make sure that only those sufficient conditions are neatly delineated, which led to effective actorship at the first place. The complementary case study chapters instead will cover a longer time frame, to have a more holistic view on the stance and political conditions within subregional members before becoming effective actors, to see whether some conditions boosted their actorship at a later stage, to investigate if there were any conditions

that hindered their cooperation over time, and to uncover whether the QCA analysis omitted relevant sufficiency pathways. Concerning the Visegrad's actions to stall the Dublin IV reforms in the aftermath of the refugee crisis, the analysis will start from 2015, when the Commission proposed the relocation of 40 000 and then 120 000 refugees as rapid alleviation, in line with Article 78(3) TFEU. Then, it will move on to investigating the Visegrad Group's response to the Commission's reform package of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which was proposed in 2016 May and July. The analysis will end around mid-2019, when the Commission decided to abandon the reform package after various rounds of unsuccessful negotiations in the Council and the EP. It will be argued that the Visegrad became a flagship of foot-dragging (Börzel, 2002) in this particular policy field due to constraining dissensus emerging in the public opinion of all countries for the first time ever since joining the EU; due to politicians deepening polarisation to fish for votes; and due to the Franco-German motor pushing for extensive reforms. In contrast to the findings in the existing literature, it will be showcased that the presence of illiberalism in all 4 Visegrad states as a result of the 2015 Polish and 2017 Czech general elections was an ad-hoc catalysator in their cooperation, but not a primary cause of the Group's rise to effective actorship. Furthermore, it will be interesting to unravel that Visegrad leaders consistently applied a congruent sovereignist, even ethno-populist (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023) discourse in their policy proposals, despite the fact that the predisposition of lead governing parties were deeply unaligned on the GAL-TAN cultural ideology axis. The below paragraphs will start with the chronological account of the EU's response to the refugee crisis, then the examination will move on to dissecting the Visegrad's reaction to the EU's crisis management attampts both at a concerted subregional level and at individual, country level too. Afterwards, an extensive investigation will be presented regarding those conditions, which contributed to effective actorship according to the QCA table, and lastly regarding those, which ostensibly did not directly contribute to effective actorship at first place.

5.1 The EU's response to the refugee crisis – a chronological account

The seemingly never-ending series of polycrisis, from Brexit to COVID-19 and the invasion of Ukraine might have faded our memories of the dramatic pictures of the Keleti Train Station in Budapest, one of the largest train stations in Hungary, which had to be completely shut down for days due to the crowds of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, who were trying to flee to Europe to escape war, persecution and mistreatment (Nolan & Connolly, 2015). The Hungarian administration being unable to handle the pressure and unwilling to host so many refugees, put an end to the calamity by allowing refugees to proceed to Austria and Germany without visa, paper checks or handling their application for international protection, which upended the EU's refugee policies (European Parliament and the Council, 2013) under the aegis of the so-called Dublin III regulation (Graham-Harrison et al., 2015). The most critical part of the Dublin regulation was Article 13(1), which states that "an applicant (who) has irregularly crossed the border into a Member State by land, sea or air having come from a third country, the Member State thus entered shall be responsible for examining the application for international protection". Countries of first

Figure 2 - Timeline of EU's rapid response to alleviate migration crisis in 2015



Source: Author's own rendition based on official EU documents

entry – among them Greece, Italy and Hungary were the most critically affected – could not process in due course the unusually high number of claims for international protection as a consequence of the war in Syria, insurgences in Iraq due to the advances of the Islamic State and appalling human rights violations in Eritrea. Not only the Dublin system fell apart, but also 'the free movement of people' a basic pillar of the EU's founding principles, as Schengen countries including Germany, Austria, Denmark and Sweden as on 12 May 2016 the Council adopted a decision, which authorised these countries to continue internal border checks "on the basis of structural and serious deficiencies in the external border management system" in the EU and particularly in Greece (Guild et al., 2016).

The initial response of the EU to alleviate the pressure on frontier countries came from the Commission, which with reference to Article 78(3) TFEU proposed two rounds of a systematic relocation scheme. Article 78(3) TFEU guarantees that the Council on a proposal from the Commission, after consulting the EP can adopt provisional measures with QMV for the benefit of affected countries in case of a sudden influx of nationals from third countries. The second relocation quota also introduced a robust relocation key, which took into consideration the population, GDP, the average number of spontaneous asylum applications and the number of resettled refugees per 1 million inhabitants over the period 2010-2014, and the unemployment rate in every EU member state when designating their share of responsibility (Guild et al., 2017). Figure 2 above demonstrates the timeline of the EU's emergency response, starting with the Commission proposals, through the EP consultation and vote in the Council. The relocation schemes, after their publication in the EU's Official Journal, were shrouded in mishaps as Slovakia and Hungary filed a request for annulment at the CJEU with the argument that the relocation scheme has the character of a legislative act and hence should have been subject to ordinary legislative procedure or in other words Council EP co-decision (Hungary vs Council of the European Union; Slovak Republic vs Council of the European Union, 2015). On the other hand, in December 2017 the Commission also brought to court Czechia, Hungary and Poland within the framework of infringement procedures, as these countries did not comply with the EU's the emergency legislation and refused to accept their share of the mandatory, temporary quota. Slovakia, which as per the end of 2017 accepted a meagre portion of the country's share, more precisely 16 refugees, evaded the infringement after displaying a degree of willingness to host more refugees, although solely those, who admit to be Christians (Nguyen, 2017).

From the above timeline a number of intriguing conclusions can be made. First, the EP and Council pursued markedly different agendas, as the EP was intent on streamlining a rapid response to the crisis and not to halt the emergency process by withholding its opinion. Secondly, the 4 Visegrad states visibly belonged to those, who not only opposed, but also challenged the redistribution quota either via requesting annulment or via the outright rejection to accept their share of refugees. Most notably though, Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia were not equally subject to a disproportionate migratory pressure. In fact, in the second Commission proposal Hungary was

mentioned as a beneficiary of the quota system besides Greece and Italy in the title of the proposed decision, which reflects the unprecedented inflow of refugees to Hungary. Table 17 below demonstrates that the crisis did not achieve the same scale in any other Visegrad state, as Hungary received the second largest amount of applications in the entire EU, which if expressed relative to Hungary's small population was the highest share of applications in the EU. Thus, the functional pressure on Visegrad states was highly unequal, and eventually Hungary as one of the most affected states requested to be deleted from the title of the proposed decision. Lastly, it is also

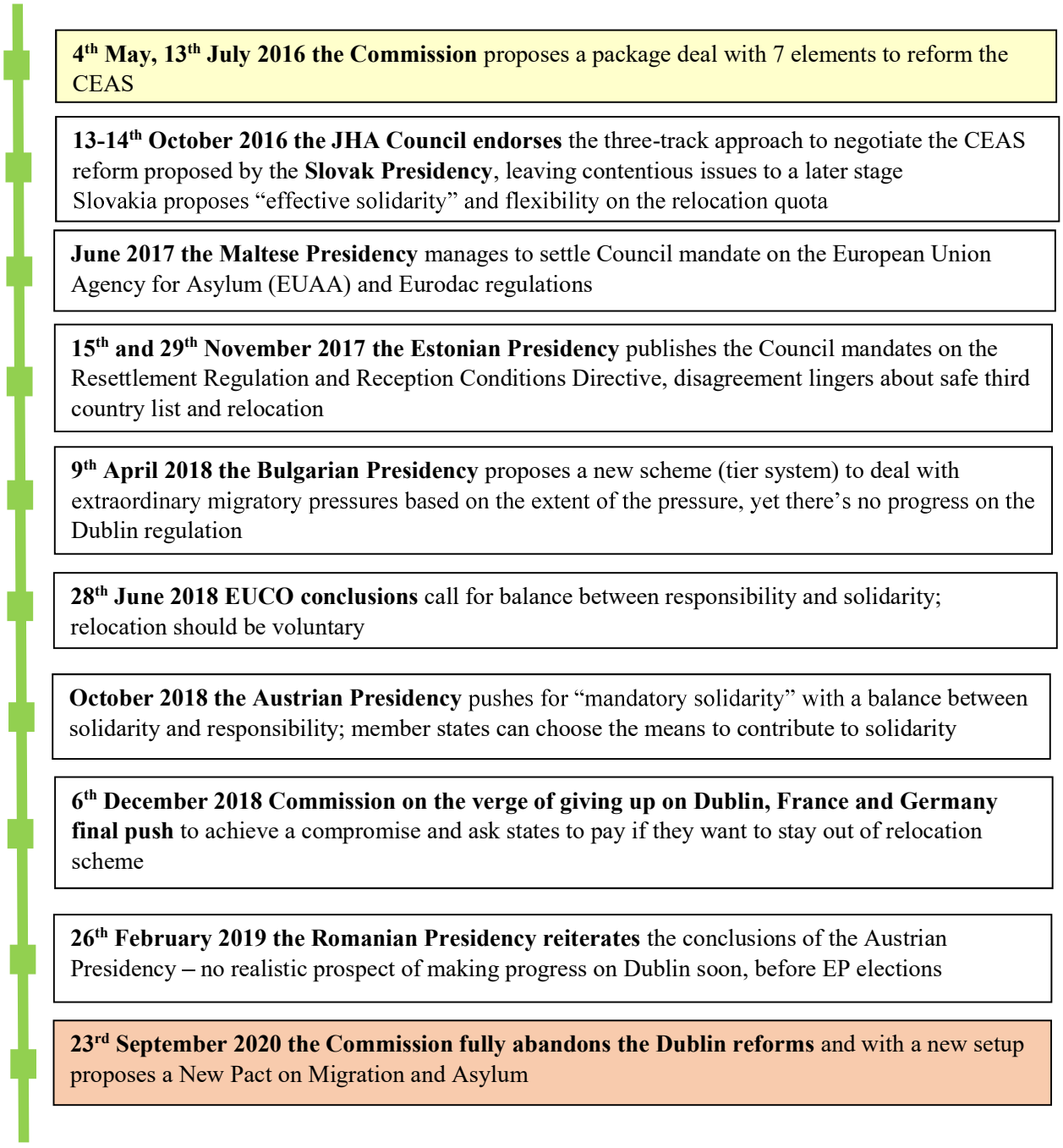
Table 17 – Number of asylum and first-time asylum applicants in 2015, EU-27*

Country	Total number	Per thousand persons
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	**1,282,690**	**2.74**
Germany	476,510	5.44
Hungary	177,135	**17.7**
Sweden	162,450	16.02
Austria	88,160	9.96
Italy	**83,540**	**1.36**
France	76,165	1.06
Netherlands	44,970	2.55
Belgium	44,665	3.47
Finland	32,345	5.88
Denmark	20,935	3.68
Bulgaria	20,390	2.8
Spain	14,780	0.31
Greece	**13,205**	**1.05**
Poland	12,190	0.27
Ireland	3,275	0.7
Luxembourg	2,505	4.19
Cyprus	2,265	2.49
Malta	1,845	3.85
Czechia	1,515	0.12
Romania	1,260	0.06
Portugal	895	0.08
Latvia	330	0.17
Slovakia	330	0.05
Lithuania	315	0.09
Slovenia	275	0.13
Estonia	230	0.17
Croatia	210	0.03

*Arranged in declining order based on total number of applicants

Source: Eurostat (2024a)

Figure 3 – Timeline of reforming the CEAS 2016 - 2020



Source: Author's own rendition based on official EU documents

evident that the Visegrad failed to become an effective actor in 2015 as the Polish government with Ewa Kopacz as PM, expressed only a lukewarm criticism towards the mandatory quota. At the end, Poland decided to vote positively for the second relocation scheme too owing to the

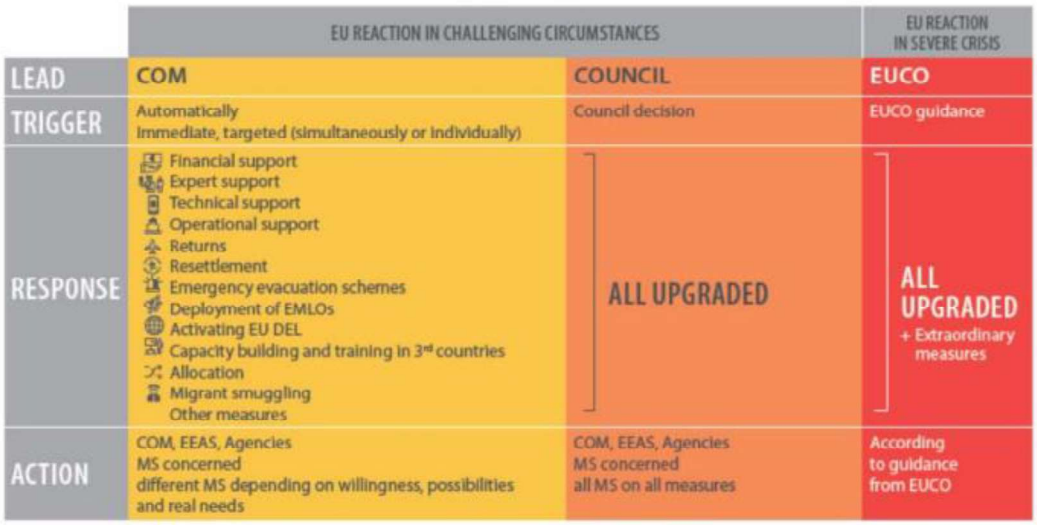
ostensible pressure of Donald Tusk EUCO President (The Economist, 2015), who gave up his prime ministership in Poland to acquire one of the EU's most prestigious political positions back in 2014. The below paragraphs will address in more details this circumstantial factor, which was not accounted for in the QCA analysis. Following the Polish general elections on 25 October 2015, which was largely dominated by the refugee crisis during the campaign season (Boyle, 2015; Krzyżanowski, 2018), the Law and Justice Party (Polish acronym PiS) managed to win overall majority and hence form a single party government in Poland. Subsequently, the sovereignist rhetoric surrounding the refugee crisis became prominent in Poland too, even though the public opinion was largely rejecting towards refugees well before PiS became the main governing party.Moving on to the EU's permanent reform attempt to revitalise and rectify the Common European Asylum System (CAES), the JHA Council conclusions of 14th September 2015 already hinted at the urgent need to introduce reforms to the so-called Dublin III regulation (see above Figure 2). However, due to the staunch resistance of some member states, the Commission introduced an extensive package deal as late as May and July 2016 (see Figure 3), which had 7 elements, including the Dublin regulation that aims at the faster and more efficient determination of member state responsibilities for examining asylum claims, as well as setting up a mandatory permanent relocation quota in case of an increased influx of people who apply for international protection. The other regulations and directives extended to defining reception conditions and also key terms such as "family members" or "guardian", while the asylum procedures regulation strove to delineate what a safe third country of arrival means. Lastly, the reform efforts also extended to Eurodac for the storing and comparison of biometric data, and the establishment of a European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), which would be the legal successor of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO).

Adversely, the first rotating presidency, which had to manage the negotiation of the asylum portfolio was the Slovak Presidency after the publication of the Commission proposal. At that time, Slovakia had an open case against the Council at the CJEU, that Hungary and Slovakia initiated to annul the relocation quota. Thus, politicians and civil servants in Brussels were not particularly enthusiastic about the country's first turn to hold the presidency since joining the EU. Comments anticipating a negative outcome to the presidency such as "I don't think anyone is very enthusiastic about the Slovak presidency" or "How are we going to be led by a country which will torpedo any plan on migration?" were reported in the media (La Baume, 2016). Slovakia managed to find a way out of the negotiation impasse without the need to condone the relocation scheme via proposing a three-tier negotiation scheme to the package deal, leaving the most contentious issues such as the definition of safe third countries and the relocation quota last (Council of the European Union, 2016). Despite the expectation that Slovakia should be an honest broker, it did not prevent the Interior Minister of Slovakia from joining a Visegrad initiative and signing the Group's first concerted declaration to oppose a mandatory solidarity mechanism (Visegrad Group, 2016b). Conversely, when some of the Green Deal tenets were under negotiation during the second half of 2022, it was Czechia's turn to take over the Council's rotating presidency, which affected

negatively Czechia's enthusiasm for the Visegrad cooperation (Interview 1, Interview 15). The issue will be discussed in more details in Chapter 6. Furthermore, the Slovak government in November 2016 also propose an alternative way forward on Dublin revisions under the aegis of "effective solidarity" that rhymed perfectly with "flexible solidarity" advocated by the Visegrad Group (Slovak Government, 2016). Practically, the counter-proposal torpedoed the Commission's plan, which prescribed an automatic corrective relocation mechanism once asylum applications exceed 150% of a member state's fair share calculated based on its GDP and population size (Rasche, 2019). Instead the Slovak proposal stated that "there are many ways how to make a contribution, from relocation of those who deserve our protection to financial support, support for protection of our external borders, sharing reception capacities or having stronger role in return operations" (Slovak Government, 2016; Barigazzi, 2016).

Following the Slovak presidency, the Maltese and Estonian Presidencies managed to seek a Council mandate for most of the regulations and directives that were part of the asylum reform package proposal. However, contentious tenets in the reform package still lingered, especially regarding the mandatory relocation quota in the Dublin IV Regulation: the threshold for triggering solidarity measures, the overall ceiling for allocations, the composition of the allocation pool…etc. (Council of the European Union, 2017). Provided all 7 regulations and directives were part of the same package deal, unless consensus was reached on every single one of them, none could pass and get published in the EU's Official Journal. On top of all this, the EU's informal consensus-seeking principle, which governs decision-making in the Council kept clogging the legislative process even longer (Heisenberg, 2005). Although the pillar system was cancelled and most issues within the competence of Justice and Home Affairs were ushered under QMV in the Lisbon Treaty, EU decision-makers still strive to attain unanimous approval before Council votes, especially

Figure 4 – The reform proposal of the Bulgarian Presidency



Source: Council of the European Union (2018a)

concerning sensitive topics.

As a consequence, the Bulgarian and Austrian Presidencies in the first and second half of 2018 both compiled various amendments to the Commission's original proposal to please the reticent Visegrad states (Interview 4). Strategically, the Bulgarian administration also set out to leave the discussion about the relocation quota to the final month of their assigned mandate (Euractiv, 2018a; Nielsen, 2018). In addition, the Bulgarian presidency set up four categories – normal circumstances, challenging circumstances sub-stage 1 and 2, and severe crisis – to classify the degree of migratory pressure on a member state, and the corresponding EU measures that should be activated to alleviate the crisis (Council of the European Union, 2018a). Figure 4 shows which institution should be in charge of the activation of response mechanisms in the two sub-stages of a "challenging situation", and in a "severe crisis". This proposal visibly remains vague regarding the relocation quota, which is described in more details in a later proposal of the Presidency, published at the very end of May 2018, almost at the conclusion of the Presidency (Council of the European Union, 2018b). The second proposal forges "targeted allocation primarily on a voluntary basis (…) as a measure of last resort, on the basis of a Council Implementing Decision as an effective guarantee of triggering allocation" (Council of the European Union, 2018b). Yet, accord between member states to foment an effective solution to the Dublin deadlock remained yet to be seen. As a last-ditch effort, the Austrian Presidency in late 2018 introduced a novel buzzword in the solidarity vocabulary. In a policy paper the Austrian Government, which was also highly critical of a mandatory relocation quota, described that "the core principle of responsibility-sharing shall be mandatory solidarity instead of mandatory relocation" (Government of Austria, 2018). Accordingly, all member state must contribute, but in different ways. Even though this vision corresponded largely to the demands of Visegrad countries, it stood in stark contrast to the Franco-German vision advocated at a pre-European Council summit, which practically reiterated the Commission proposal's original wording from 2016. The Franco-German initiative reiterated that countries unwilling to accept the redistribution system and hosting refugees should instead pay a compensatory fee (Euractiv, 2018b). As a consequence, the Romanian Presidency in the first half of 2019, the final one before the EP elections could simply underline that finding a solution to the Dublin deadlock is a Sisyphean task, and a compromise is not within foreseeable reach until the next EP election cycle (Council of the European Union, 2019).

5.2 The evolution of the Visegrad cooperation during the Dublin negotiations

Before turning to the analysis of the factors, which triggered effective actorship at subregional level among Visegrad countries, a few words will be dedicated to the means and ways Visegrad member states supported one another, and how their cooperation evolved over the years during the period of 2015 – 2019. This section will also highlight that two factors of the sufficiency pathway identified in the QCA chapter – opposition to the Franco-German axis; politicisation at public level – have been firmly present in 2015 too. However, a sovereignist discourse was not homogenously pursued by all Visegrad governments, especially the Polish government till the 2015 October

general elections. In fact, the first concerted Visegrad documents, which were published in reaction to the increased influx of refugees and the EU's temporary relocation quotas back in 2015 emphasise three tenets without mentioning sovereignty. First, solidarity with Hungary, the most affected country of the four member states was underlined (Visegrad Group, 2015a). Then, the need to resolve the root cause of migration outside the confines of the EU, and protecting the EU's external borders were also highlighted (Visegrad Group, 2015a, c). Lastly, early Visegrad statements in 2015 criticised the relocation quota for the ostensible pull-factor that it may create for irregular migrants (Visegrad Group, 2015b). It should be noted though that at member state level, sovereignist discourse was diffuse in the governing parties of Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia too, while in Poland the lead governing party, the Civic Platform with the leadership of Ewa Kopacz refrained from it. Although the campaign rhetoric of the main opposition party, PiS was largely determined evoking images of threat to national identity and sovereignty (Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018). After the change of government in Poland, Visegrad relations intensified further. The joint communiques of V4 Interior Ministers from November 2016 apply a much stronger language compared to earlier initiatives and describe "uncontrolled mixed migration movements" as "threat to the EU and member state security" (Visegrad Group, 2016b). Furthermore, joint papers from 2016 not only outright reject the possibility of introducing any refugee redistribution quota, but also coin the term "flexible solidarity", to provide alternative means for member states to participate in the EU's reformed CAES (Visegrad Group, 2016 a,b). 2016 was also the year when the Visegrad brand became widely discussed mostly with a negative connotation in the news media (The Economist, 2016; Haaselbach, 2016).

The staunch opposition of the Visegrad Group, despite the efforts of various Council rotating presidencies to reconcile member state interests, grew even stronger in the following years. Mutual support was expressed not only in joint papers and communiques, but also at individual member state level. Poland though first accepting, and voting positively on the 2015 temporary relocation regimes, supported wholeheartedly the Hungarian and Slovak request for annulment, which is visible from the Court document, where the Advocate General's opinion was published (Slovak Republic, Hungary vs Council of the European Union, 2017). The annulment requests of both Slovakia and Hungary underlined that quotas encroach the "sovereign right of each member state to decide freely on the admission of nationals of third countries to (enter) their territory"; and EU members should decide freely how they wish to contribute towards solidarity, and opt for those means that are "less harmful to their national sovereignty" (Slovak Republic, Hungary vs Council of the European Union, 2017). The Polish representative reiterated these claims with a supportive intervention saying that the relocation scheme is disproportionate and "interferes with the exercise of member states' responsibility to maintain law and order" (Slovak Republic, Hungary vs Council of the European Union, 2017). A similar, coordinated justification was pursued by the representatives of Czechia, Hungary and Poland when an infringement procedure was initiated against these countries for failing to comply with the quota system (European Commission vs Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, 2019). In a similar vein, in their joint communiques during

2017 and 2018, the Visegrad Group remained united and coherent in their concerted effort to torpedo the EU's reform attempts, applying an outright sovereignist discourse and the entrenched rejection even at subregional level of the mandatory relocation quota. "We believe that the countries of the European Union should seek to establish an asylum system that takes into account the real needs and capacities of our societies and the commitment of our countries to national sovereignty" – stated the Joint statement of Visegrad Interior Ministers in anticipation of the Austrian presidency, which took place during the second half of 2018 (Visegrad Group, 2018). In conclusion, the Visegrad Group since 2016 until the Commission's dropping of the asylum reform portfolio managed not only to sustain effective actorship, but also to amplify their voice and further align their position on flexible solidarity.

5.3 Unpacking the QCA sufficiency pathway

The sovereignist discourse was apparent also in the speeches and interviews of the prime ministers of the Visegrad 4, as well as other leading politicians. Furthermore, a Slovak civil servant from Brussels, who's long been familiar with the asylum and migration portfolio also identified political communication and public opinion as the main drivers behind the Visegrad becoming an effective actor (Interview 5). Even Ewa Kopacz, as the PM of Poland between 2014-2015 in the helm of the centre-right Civic Platform (PO) and Polish People's Party (PSL) coalition government, addressed the refugee crisis with an identity-based discourse. In mid-2015 Poland accepted 50 Christian families from Syria on which the PM commented the following way: "Today Christians who are being persecuted in abarbaric fashion in Syria deserve Christian countries like Poland to act fast to help them" (Kopacy in Foy, 2015). The coalition government was anyway in a delicate situation after the wiretapping scandal, which took place in June 2015. Four months before the general elections, top PO politicians were heard making scandalous comments in a leaked secret recording regarding private deals and US-Polish relations, which led to a round of resignations and the public apology of the PM to the Polish people (BBC, 2015a). Furthermore, in May the same year PiS triumphed at the Presidential elections, which also put a psychological pressure on the ruling coalition government (Wronski, 2015). Therefore, during the general elections campaign period, which also coincided with the first wave of the refugee crisis and the creation of the two temporary relocation quotas, the PM performed a fine rhetorical balancing act between appealing to voters and acting as a solidary European from a party, whose former PM is the European Council President. Thus, Ewa Kopacz did not fully indulge in an anti-migrant rhetoric (The Economist, 2015), which prevented the Visegrad from acting in full unison only a temporarily.

Nonetheless, she could not risk fully endorsing the relocation quota. For instance, when the government spokesperson, Cezary Tomaczyk was interviewed about the relocation mechanism, he tried to emphasised that the conditions set by the Polish diplomacy at EU negotiations are more important than number of refugees accepted. Such conditions included sealing the external borders of the EU, the separation of refugees from economic migrants and accepting only those emigrants, who do not imply any security threads and who are also authorised by the Polish government

(Rzeczpospolita, 2015). In contrast to this fine balancing act, already during the campaign in the leadup to the general elections, diffuse anti-refugee topoi and sovereignist claims dominated the communication of PiS, such as refugees bring in diseases, migrants provoke social unrest and tensions, and Poles will "stop feeling at home in their own country" due to Muslim migrants introducing Sharia law (Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018; Wyborcza.pl, 2015). Accordingly, when PiS garnered absolute majority and formed a single-party government in November 2015, the rhetoric of the Polish government also became markedly sovereignist, emphasising the safety and protection of the Polish people from the alleged crimes and uncertainty as a consequence of letting in illegal migrants imposed by Brussels. "Until procedures to verify the refugees are put in action, we cannot accept them." "The priority of the government is the safety of Poles … We understand the previous government … signed commitments which bind our country. We cannot allow a situation in which events taking place in the countries of Western Europe are carried over to the territory of Poland" – said Rafał Bochenek, a government spokesman for PiS in 2016 (Cienski, 2016).

In contrast, the rhetoric of the Hungarian and Slovak administrations had a sovereignist undertone right from the beginning. Even though after the 2016 general elections in Slovakia Robert Fico and his SMER party lost absolute majority, it did not prevent him from speaking up against refugees especially refugees of Islamic faith with an ever harsher, condescending rhetoric. In his first post-election interview with TASR (The News Agency of the Slovak Republic) he not only rejected obligatory quotas proposed by the Commission as a permanent feature of the CAES reform, he also claimed that multi-culturality goes against the very essence of Slovakia and letting in Muslims would change the face of the country (Fico in The Slovak Spectator, 2016). Fico was also extensively supported by some of his other fellow party members, such as Ľuboš Blaha – elected as MEP in 2024 – who described Fico as "brave and rightful" for defying the "acceptable discourse" regarding refuges (Lerner, 2016). Slovakia's nominally left-leaning main governing party SMER went as far as risking expulsion from its European Parliamentary Group, S&D, as the Italian MEP, then leader of the Group Gianni Pittella stated that Fico should be expelled for his extreme position on migrants and minorities (De La Baume, 2015). The staunchest resistance towards the Commission proposal, and harshest sovereignist narrative not only in the form of speech act, but also actual discriminative legislation came from Hungary. In 2018 the Hungarian Parliament passed the so-called "Stop Soros Bill" that introduced prison sentence for those NGOs, which allegedly assist or facilitate illegal migration, and hence undermine the sovereignty of states (Euractiv, 2018c).

Lastly, there was a degree of continuity in the sovereignist discourse of the Czech government too, which until 2017 was composed of a coalition of three parties (ČSSD – Czech Sovereignty of Social Democracy; ANO; KDU-ČSL – Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party) and had a nominally centre-left ideological categorisation, as ČSSD was the lead, senior coalition partner. Not only did the relatively moderate PM, Bohuslav Sobotka from the ranks of

ČSSD had a harsh stance on the Commission's quota proposal – he was quoted to claim that Czechia would like to help "on a basis of a sovereign state decision and not as a part of a compulsory system" (Robert et al., 2015) – but also, Czechia had a long-incumbent President, Miloš Zeman , who had particularly radical views on "Muslim migrants" (Tait, 2016). To illustrate the extent to which sovereignist discourse and public opinion are two sides of the same coin, and how the interaction of the two played a pivotal role in subregional actorship, as identified previously in the QCA analysis, some more attention should be dedicated to the change in the Czech government following the 2017 general elections. The anti-establishment, populist ANO party's election campaign was heavily marked by an anti-migrant discourse, with vigorous vows to resist the Commission's refugee quota (Tait, 2016). During the campaign in 2017, Babiš, chairman of the ANO movement presented a "Contract with Citizens", a quasi-manifesto, which encompassed a basic overview of the party's election promises. One tenet in the programme was the following: "We will never allow illegal migrants into our territory and we will never agree to the distribution of migrants according to mandatory quotas" (Babiš in Tvrdon, 2019). By means of this tactic, the ANO party attempted to mobilise Eurosceptic voters, and also appeal to the fears of the Czechs, who were largely unfamiliar with living together with immigrants, who look different from them, just like the other three Visegrad states. Furthermore, the Czech businessman turned politician also tried to cunningly conceal the EU subsidy scandal surrounding his business, a leisure and conference centre called Stork's Nest, which could not have qualified for grants dedicated for small and medium-size businesses as it was owned by Babiš's much larger Agrofert holding. Sobotka, the PM until 2017 was in a catch 22 situation, as he tried to act simultaneously in a responsible manner towards the EU regarding quotas, and still appeal to voters while "fending off his rising anti-migrant and increasingly Eurosceptic junior government partner" (Guasti & Mansfeldova, 2024:82). Eventually, Sobotka in May 2017 pleaded with President Zeman for dismissing Babiš from the coalition government due to his shady business operations. However, Zeman, who was overly sympathetic with the then Deputy PM's anti-migrant and Eurosceptic sentiments halted the process and he was only temporarily replaced by another ANO politician (Guasti & Mansfeldova, 2024). Eventually, ANO's promise to fight corruption, put an obstacle to deeper EU integration and prevent quotas for taking in refugees appealed to voters and the party acclaimed victory in the 2017 October general elections (The Guardian, 2017). To keep his appeal and reiterate his promise, Babiš commented on the 2018 June EUCO gathering the following way: "As I promised in my Contract with Citizens, on 29 June 2018, at four o'clock in the morning, together with my colleagues from the V4 and especially Viktor Orbán, we pushed for the cancellation of the quota for illegal migrants that Brussels wanted to dictate to us" (Babiš in Tvrdon, 2019).

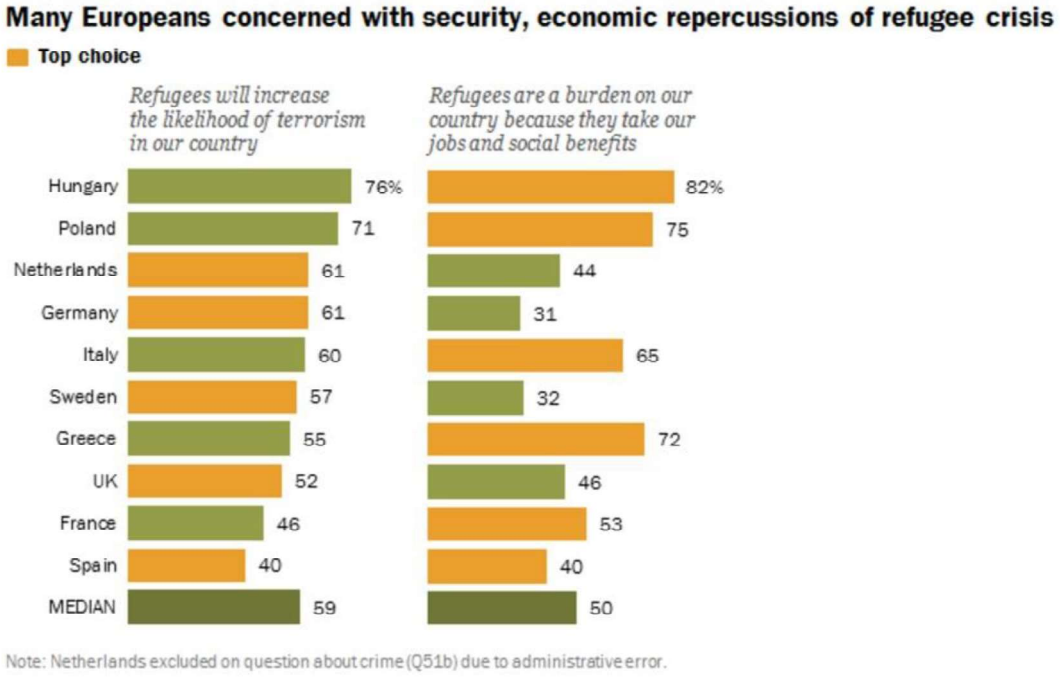
The Polish and Czech elections in 2015 and 2017 respectively have proven on the one hand that not only challenger parties with an anti-establishment, Eurosceptic leaning pursued a sovereignist, migration critical discourse, but also moderate incumbent parties, who feared losing votes to their radical rivals. On the other hand, it is also clear that the Visegrad label especially in the refugee

context was later used to foment the promises and legitimise the position of newly elected governments in Poland and Czechia (Interview 14). Similar inclinations were also observable in Hungary and Slovakia (Interview 14), where Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico even put aside their past political animosity due to the Slovak government curbing the rights of Hungarian minorities living in the territory of Slovakia, and posed together several times. Furthermore, Orbán and Fico also experienced pressure from far-right parties – Jobbik led by Gábor Vona and LSNS by Marian Kotleba respectively – who became at the first place with their anti-Roma policy goals, however, after the refugee crisis, a parallel Islamophobic and anti-refugee discourses quickly followed through (Cunningham, 2016). Consequently, the sovereignist rhetoric of Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovak lead politicians regarding migrants transposed to a concerted Visegrad tactic was an ultimate motor of subregional activism with the purpose of cementing and legitimising the position of the governments at home. Similar patterns were also identified in the QCA anlysis especially regarding the Frugal Four. The reason why the sovereignist discourse bore fruits at home and in EU negotiations too was due to its resonance with the voters. It has been underlined earlier that this thesis does not have the scope to identify whether public opinion shapes the actions of politicians or rather the other way around, the communication of politicians shapes the perception of the public regarding politicised issues. The aim here is to point out that both had a pivotal role in subregions becoming effective actors, and the two conditions can amplify one another.

As a reminder, polarisation in Chapter 3 was defined as "higher intensity of public debate, amplified saliency and polarisation" (De Wilde et al., 2015:6); while accordingly, Chapter 4 operationalised the condition the following way: "*Subregions become effective actors if an EU-related issue becomes widely salient and uniformly polarised in the society of subregional member states*". This thesis argues that subregions in their post-permissive consensus status become effective actors not due to ideological alignment among the governments of member states or due to functional alignment, but rather regional patterns of top-down (sovereignist discourse) and bottom-up (public opinion) politicisation. Politicised public opinion had an especially remarkable role during the refugee crisis in the rise of the Visegrad Group to effective actorship. Although the migratory pressure was uneven on Visegrad states and by 2018 it waned below the EU average in all of them – which will be discussed further below – migration was still an acutely politicised and deeply polarising topic in the public of all Visegrad states. It was also confirmed by a Czech civil servant in Brussels, who closely followed the migration portfolio, that public opinion shaped to a great extent the vocal stance of Visegrad governments (Interview 1). Various public opinion polls tried to decipher the phenomenon, and the most diffuse explanations encompassed fear from the unknown, fear from terrorism, and fear from the costs of maintaining migrants in economically less prosperous countries of Central Eastern Europe (Lerner, 2016; Leszczyński, 2015). Concerning the latter two explanations, the Pew Research Centre conducted a survey with the inclusion of Hungarian and Polish respondents. Out of those who were polled, 76% of Hungarians and 71% of Poles thought that refugees would increase the likelihood of terrorism; while 82% of the Hungarian and 75% of Polish respondents were convinced that refugees were a burden on their

countries because they took away their jobs and social benefits (Wike, Stokes & Simmons, 2016). The poll was conducted in 10 EU countries among which the Hungarian and Polish participants showcased the most sceptical attitudes towards refugees (see Figure 5).
Despite the staunch reservations of citizens in Visegrad states, even the most recent Eurostat demographic data reveals that Visegrad members have the lowest rate of diversity as expressed in

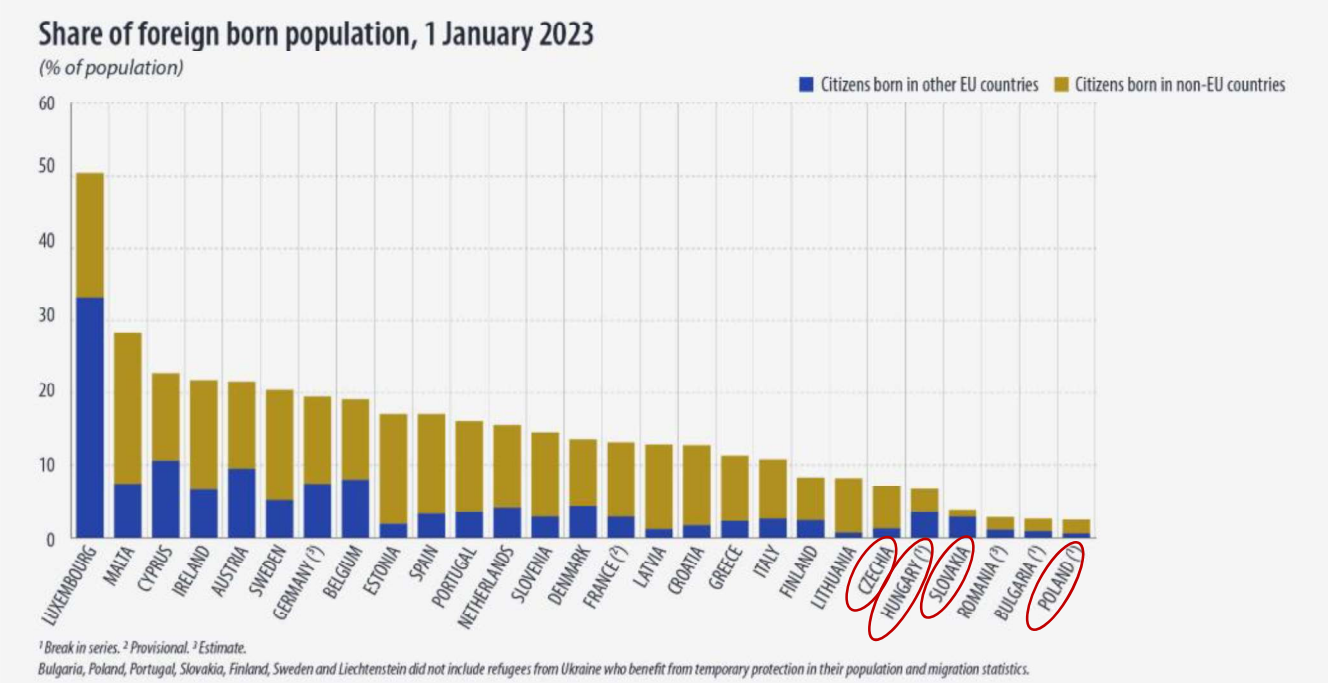
Figure 5 – Attitude towards refugees in 10 European countries



Source: pew.org, Wike, Stokes & Simmons, 2016

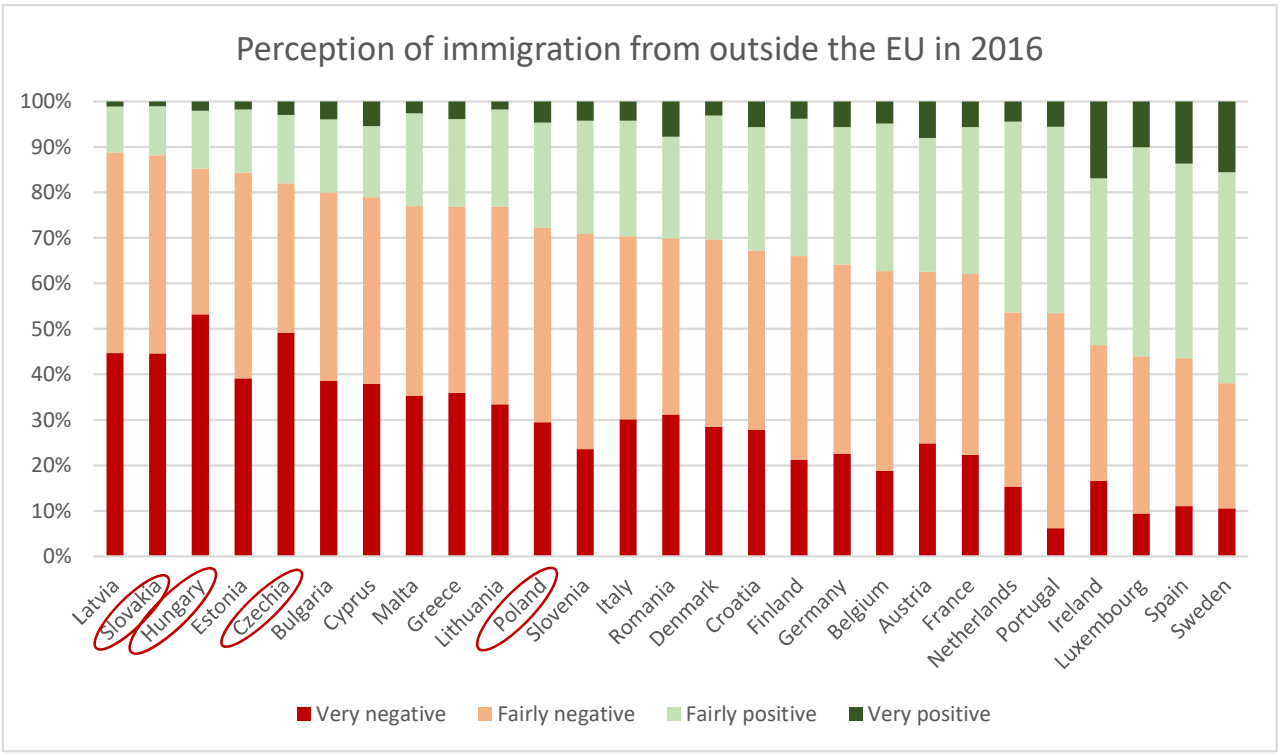
the percentage of foreign-born population vis-à-vis the overall population. Figure 6 showcases that the Visegrad countries together with Romania and Bulgaria rank lowest, with the smallest portion of foreign-born population in the EU. Furthermore, the population of Visegrad states except Czechia and Hungary, which have a more significant, but still proportionally tiny Vietnamese and Chinese communities, are largely unfamiliar with immigration from outside the EU. Yet, even before the refugee crisis a study in 2013 by the Centre for Research on Prejudice of the University of Warsaw found that 69% of Poles do not want non-white people living in their country (Leszczyński, 2015). Similarly dismissive attitudes were identified in Slovakia, where right before the 2016 general elections a national poll in March exposed that 80% of the respondents were against accepting any migrants (Lerner, 2016). National surveys in Czechia and Hungary confirmed the same pattern of negative polarisation. According to CVVM three-fifths (62%) of those surveyed in 2016 believe that Czechia should not accept refugees at all, only 30% of the respondents are in favour of accepting refugees for a limited time, until they are able to return to their country of origin (CVVM, 2016). Lastly, TÁRKI a scientific polling institute in Hungary found that between 2010-2016 xenophobia had been steadily on the increase, and in 2016 those

Figure 6 – Share of foreign-born population in EU countries



Source: Eurostat (2024b)

Figure 7 – Perception of immigration from outside the EU in 2016



Source: Eurobarometer 85.2, 2016 GESIS

who would not welcome any refugees in Hungary became the majority (TÁRKI, 2016). In line with the above observations, an Economist article published in 2018 found that racial diversity explains 22% of change in pro-migrant sentiments across the EU, which implies that the lack of racial diversity correlates with anti-migrant sentiments (The Economist, 2018a). Based on the above data, migration was not only a highly salient topic among the public of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia as it has been demonstrated in Chapter 4, but also, polarisation was uniformly negative in every single Visegrad member state. Moreover, polarisation also showcased consistent regional patterns in 2016, at the time when the Visegrad Group became an effective actor. Figure 7 disseminates the responses to a Eurobarometer survey question regarding EU citizens' perception of migration from outside the EU, where participants could choose from four options (very negative, fairly negative, fairly positive and very positive). Countries are organised in a decreasing order based on the sum of very and fairly negative responses. Slovakia, Hungary and Czechia are mong the 5 most critical EU member states towards migrants form outside the EU, while Polish respondents showcased a somewhat more gingerly attitude, which most probably can be explained with the fact that Poland received Ukrainian refugees in the aftermath of the 2014 military conflict in Eastern Ukraine instigated by Russia. The Polish population is much more solidary towards Ukrainians due to their shared struggle against Russia, which became clear in the aftermath of Ukraine's full-scale invasion by Russia in 2022. Although the stastical data presented above have some limitations, such as data collection was conducted in different years, by various institutes using non-standardised methodology, it is still visible that uniformly polarised public opinion could play a significant role in the Visegrad becoming an effective subregional actor. High-ranking politicians could tactfully apply sovereignist discourse and use the Visegrad brand to solidify their position (Interview 14) and legitimise their actions due to the high propensity in the public to perceive anti-migrant policies with great support.

The final condition in the sufficiency pathway, which was pinpointed in the QCA anlysis is resistance towards the Franco-German hegemons. The Visegrad Group in this particular case did not directly frame its stance as a reactionary move against the Franco-German position. It was more so the case when the Frugal Four and the New Hansa rose to effective actorship, via formulating openly challenging joint statements or policy papers prompted by an earlier agreement between France and Germany. Nevertheless, the pro-redistribution, pro-solidarity stance of the French and German leadership, which was adamant to sustain the mandatory nature of the refugee relocation mechanism, contributed to the policy deadlock, and the unwavering resistance of Visegrad states. Schramm and Krotz found that policymakers and civil servants involved in negotiating the EU's response to the refugee crisis described the relocation quota as a consensus-building project pursued by France and Germany (Schramm & Krotz, 2024:1166). The French President, François Hollande and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed to publish a joint statement in 2015 underlining that "binding quotas for refugees must be introduced in the European Union" (Federal Government of Germany, 2015). Although it should be noted that Germany was more enthusiastic to solve the refugee crisis with an internal, intra-EU policy

solution in principle, whereas critical voices rose in the ranks of the French government, including the then Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, who initially supported only a temporary relocation mechanism and was quoted to say that "Europe cannot accommodate any more refugees" (BBC, 2015b).

When Emmanuel Macron got elected as President, the Franco-German motor demanding a swift agreement on the Dublin reforms was reinvigorated. With the EP elections looming in 2019, both in the prelude to the 2018 June and December European Council (EUCO), considerable efforts were made to seal a deal. On 24 June 2018 a mini summit was called primarily by Germany to smooth out any remaining disagreements regarding the Dublin reform before the next EUCO a few days later. At the mini summit Macron and Merkel demanded a rapid solution even if that required bypassing reticent EU members. Echoing Merkel, Macron urged a common, European solution, provided "Europe's values of human rights and solidarity were at stake", and he even suggested that a solution should prevail regardless whether "cooperation among 28 or among several countries that decide to move forward together" would be forged (The Strait Times, 2018). The Visegrad countries concertedly boycotted the event. Viktor Orbán suspected internal political turmoil in Germany and France as the reason for the two countries advocating a swift solution, and underlined that "the Prime Ministers of the V4 agreed that they would not go" to the mini summit (Orbán in France24, 2018). Mateusz Morawiecki also communicated on behalf of the V4 as a whole, saying that "we looked at the documents that the European Commission sent us about the Sunday mini summit. We have concluded that they are warmed-up, past proposals which we neither understand nor accept" (Morawiecki in France24, 2018). Since no agreement was concluded at the 2018 June EUCO either – see above the comments of the Czech PM – as a last-ditch effort France and Germany proposed on 6 December 2018 that those who refuse to host refugees should pay a compensation (Euractiv, 2018b). By that time though, the prospect of striking a deal before the next EP elections was quite bleak. It should be noted that the dynamics of the Dublin reform negotiations were more nuanced than simply Visegrad states standing against the Franco-German axis. Although the Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz attended the mini summit on 24 June, he was also wholeheartedly against the quota, and advocated for strengthening the external dimensions of the EU's asylum policy, eradicating pull factors that would encourage migration, and even supporting safe third countries to host migrants (Interview 4). Similarly, other Eastern European states such as Bulgaria and Romania belonged to the relocation critical group of member states. Furthermore, despite supporting the relocation quota, Germany was also one of the main orchestrators of the EU-Turkey Statement, which attempted to alleviate the crisis via a fortress Europe type of solution (Lehner, 2019). In conclusion, it would be an oversimplification to state that the Dublin reform struggles were all about the Visegrad vs the Franco-German coalition. However, when it comes to the relocation mechanism, the Visegrad Group was the most vocal subregional actor to oppose the scheme, often in reaction to the Franco-German push.

5.4 Conditions outside the sufficiency pathway

The results of the QCA chapter showed that in the examined period between 2014 – 2024 EU member states joined forces in subregional aggregates to make their voice heard almost in all cases as a foot-dragging tactic against the French and/ or German initiatives of altering the status quo, and as a result of uniform politicisation both among the public and at the level of the political elite. The above sections have investigated in a case-study fashion these three conditions, which were identified as part of the sufficiency pathway. So far, this research supported and provided further evidence for the findings of cutting-edge research, which claims that politicisation within and between member states govern politics traps in the EU (Eihmanis, 2024; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024; Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan, 2019), many of which have been fuelled by the rise of subregions to effective actorship. The flipside of the same coin is that the European political system moved much less towards normalising ideological cleavages, thus this thesis also argues that the political dynamics of coalition building is much less determined by the left-right or even GAL-TAN axis. This section will analyse in detail the impact or the lack of impact of those conditions, which were deemed insufficient to trigger subregional actorship at the first place. It will be demonstrated that in line with the findings of the QCA analysis, neither shared exposure to negative externalities due to functional alignment, nor ideological alignment among the governments of Visegrad states were sufficient conditions at first place to boost effective subregional actorship. The closer inspection of typical cases in a case-study, mixed method design serves the better understanding of the previously identified sufficiency pathway, even with detailed descriptive inferences regarding those conditions, which were not part of the solution term (Kahwati & Kane, 2020b).

In the previous chapter functional alignment was operationalised as “the subregional unit is composed of solely old or new EU member states” and “the subregional unit is composed of solely net-contributor or net-beneficiary member states”. These two specific operationalisations are proxies for similar economic conditions in Visegrad states, as well as shared historical experiences between them. Provided in all examined cases, including negative cases when the Visegrad cooperation fell apart, its members were unanimously net-beneficiary, new EU member states, both conditions were excluded from the sufficiency pathway. It is true though, that all Visegrad states having a much lower real GDP per capita compared to the EU average, could bolster fear in citizens and government officials of accommodating a large wave of economically deprived refugees in need. Table 18 demonstrates the real per capita GDP of Visegrad states compared to the EU average, which is also often used to measure economic activity and living standards in countries. However, it should be noted that in and of itself more modest living standards cannot justify the negative politicisation of refugees. Neither does it deem functional alignment as a necessary, but insufficient condition to promote subregional actorship, especially because the discourse about refugees largely centred around identity-related questions. Furthermore, in Southern European countries, such as Portugal, with equally unfavourable economic conditions at

that time, the public and the political elite showcased much greater willingness to receive asylum seekers (see Figure 7 above).

Table 18 – Real GDP per capita in Eur between 2015 – 2020

TIME	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	26,200	26,660	27,360	27,870	28,340	26,790
Czechia	16,440	16,860	17,720	18,200	18,820	17,900
Hungary	11,280	11,600	12,110	12,820	13,490	12,930
Poland	11,090	11,440	12,020	12,780	13,370	13,370
Slovakia	14,360	14,620	15,020	15,610	15,940	15,510

Source: Eurostat (2024a)

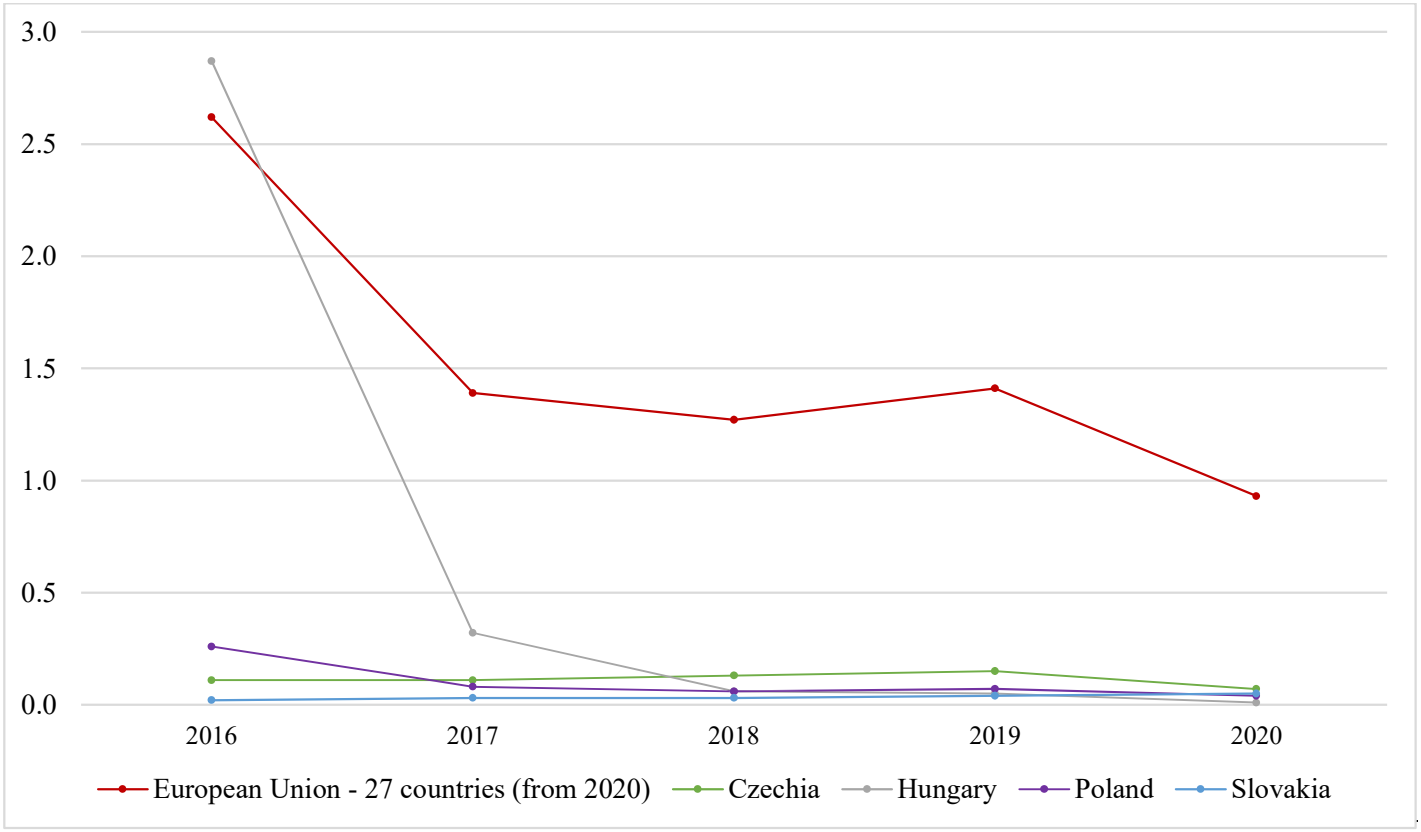
While the above operationalisations are nested in set theoretic considerations, they may not fully encompass exposure to negative externalities in specific cases. Therefore, to corroborate the QCA findings, alternative operationalisations have been discovered. For instance, to operationalise migratory pressure, the number of first asylum applicants per year per a thousand people could be a representative indicator. This indicator illustrates neatly the degree of the pressure, as it takes into consideration not only the influx of refugees, but also their proportion to the native population. Table 17 above demonstrated that in 2015, the peak year of the crisis, Hungary was exposed to a much more overwhelming pressure compared to the other three Visegrad states, which had to process a way smaller rate of first-time applicants, well below the EU average. According to Dublin III rules the first country of entry, when a refugee enters the territory of the EU must be responsible for processing asylum applications. Therefore, presumably, a solidarity mechanism especially over 2015-16 could have been in the interest of Hungary, but not the other three Visegrad states, which were way less exposed to migratory pressures. Table 19 and Figure 8 demonstrate that after 2016 the migratory pressure on all Visegrad states fell well below the EU average, from which two conclusions can be inferred. First, Visegrad states were unanimously against the relocation quota regardless of the degree of the pressure that the four countries experienced (highly uneven in 2015 and 2016, and equally low over the course of the following years). Secondly, except Hungary, none of the other Visegrad states experienced above EU average migratory pressures, which implies that fear of the economic implications of a high influx of refugees existed at the level of politicisation in Visegrad states, instead of a real-life experience. Lastly, it should be also noted that Hungary was not the primary destination of asylum seekers as many of them sought to leave the country and exercise secondary movement within the EU towards Western Europe, specifically Germany, Sweden and Austria. These logically contradictory observations suggest that being exposed to similar negative externalities due to shared functional pressures cannot be deemed either as a necessary or sufficient condition after the careful examination of Visegrad states during the refugee crisis.

Table 19 – Number of asylum and first-time asylum applicants per a thousand people 2016 – 2020 in V4 member states

TIME	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	2.62	1.39	1.27	1.41	0.93
Czechia	0.11	0.11	0.13	0.15	0.07
Hungary	2.87	0.32	0.06	0.05	0.01
Poland	0.26	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.04
Slovakia	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.05

Source: Eurostat (2024a)

Figure 8 - Number of asylum and first-time asylum applicants per a thousand people 2016 – 2020 in V4 member states



Source: Eurostat (2024a)

The final section of this chapter will dissect ideological intertwining and non-alignment between the main governing parties of V4 states at the time when the group became an effective actor. Ideology was operationalised in four different ways through the left-right, GAL-TAN, and pro-

contra EU ideological axes, while illiberalism as a thin-centred ideology was also taken into consideration. To calibrate the first three for QCA analysis, the Chapel Hill dataset was scrutinised. Since the refugee crisis and migration was mostly framed not solely as an economic problem, but more so as an issue related to identity and sovereignty, it can be expected that governing parties' positioning on the GAL-TAN cultural axis might determine their stance on the issue (Hooghe et al., 2002). However, as it has also been pointed out in the previous chapter, V4 main governing parties were never aligned ideologically in this specific aspect, which will be addressed in more details here. The Chapel Hill codebook defines the GAL-TAN axis the following way: "'Libertarian' or 'postmaterialist' (GAL) parties favor expanded personal freedoms, for example, abortion rights, divorce, and same-sex marriage. While 'traditional' or 'authoritarian' (TAN) parties reject these ideas in favor of order, tradition, and stability, believing that the government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues" (Seth, 2022).

The schism between the ultra-conservative Polish and Hungarian flank of the group, vis-à-vis the much more moderate, Slovak and especially Czech governments was palpable – see also Table 20 below. I will illustrate the differences via how LGBT rights have been handled in V4 states. Already in its 2015 election manifesto PiS, – soon to be elected with absolute majority – promised to "put up barriers to the spread of gender ideology" and "other cultural and moral transformations we are facing in Europe today", which also mean a "threat to the family" (Lehmann et al, 2024). Later on, Poland became infamous for its LGBT-free zones, which were established by PiS sympathisers in rural Poland in reaction of the LGBT Declaration signed by the Mayor of Warsaw in 2019, which was dedicated to shield the rights of the community (The Office of the Mayor of Warsaw, 2019). Similarly, Viktor Orbán's government pursued an anti-LGBT rhetoric, well before the introduction of the infamous anti-LGBT law, which ambiguously conflated paedophilia and homosexuality, and compelled bookshops to put an extra binding on those books that allegedly promote homosexuality. In contrast, the Fico government did not have a strong agenda on the issue, even though some members in his nominally left-leaning SMER party openly engaged in hate speech against Roma people (Lerner, 2016). Thus, the Slovak government was in the middle ground, representing a mixture of TAN and GAL inclinations. Lastly, the government of Andrej Babiš, which demanded a much stricter stance on migrants compared to its predecessor, at the same time advocated strongly GAL-leaning policies. In 2018, 46 members of the lower house of the Czech Parliament, among them ANO affiliates too, supported a draft bill, which would allow same-sex couples to get married (irozhlas, 2018). The government also gave the green light in the same year on 22 June (Reuters, 2018). Although, after far-right parties in Czechia increasingly attempted to capitalise votes on politicising same sex marriages, the government backed down and delayed the legislative process (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023). In conclusion, the above example supports the findings based on the Chapel Hill expert dataset, according to which the GAL-TAN position of V4 governments were not aligned and hence was not important in triggering the group's rise to effective actorship.

Table 20 – Governing coalitions, PMs and Presidents in V4 countries between 2015 – 2020 (during the Dublin reform negotiations)

Country	Cabinet term time	Election year/ start date of new govt	Party(ies)	Affiliation	PM	President
HU	2014 06 15 - 2018 04 05	2014	**FIDESZ** – **KDNP** Christian Democrats	Right-wing, Christian, Conservative	Viktor Orbán FIDESZ	János Áder FIDESZ – elected by Parliament
	2018 05 18 - 2022 05 24	2018	**FIDESZ** – **KDNP** Christian Democrats			
PL	2014 09 22 - 2015 11 16	2014 Tusk is nominated as President of the European Council	**PO** Civic Platform – **PSL** Polish People's Party - same as Polish Peasants' Party	Centre-right with liberal econ policy	Ewa Kopacz PO	Bronisław Komorowski. PO until 2015 08 06; Andrzej Duda PIS – 2 round popular vote
	2015 11 16 - 2017 12 10	2015	**PIS** Law and Justice	Right-wing, Christian, Conservative	Beata Szydło PIS	Andrzej Duda. PIS
	2017 12 11 - 2019 10 12	2017 Szydło easily wins a no-confidence vote, yet has to resign	**PIS**		Mateusz Morawiecki PIS	
	2019 11 15 - 2023 12 12	2019	**PIS** (with smaller coalition partners as part of United Right alliance)			
CZ	2014 01 29 - 2017 10 21	2013 early elections	**ČSSD** Czech Social Democratic Party - **ANO** - **KDU-ČSL** Christian and Democratic Union - Czechoslovak People's Party	Centre-left	Bohuslav Sobotka ČSSD	Miloš Zeman, SPO Party of Civic Rights – 2 round popular vote
	2017 12 13 - 2018 06 26	2017	**ANO** minority government	Liberal, anti-corruption platform with centre-right elements	Andrej Babiš ANO	
	2018 06 27 - 2021 12 17	2018 ANO single party minority govt. loses vote of no confidence	**ANO** - **ČSSD** minority with external support from Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia **KSČM**			

SK	2012 04 04 - 2016 03 05	2012 early elections March (due to former PM Iveta Radičová losing no confidence vote)	**Smer-SD** Social Democracy absolute majoriy with the support of independents	Nominally centre-left	Robert Fico Smer-SD	2014 March Andrej Kiska, Independent – 2 round popular vote
	2016 03 23 - 2016 08 30	2016	**Smer-SD** - **SNS** The Slovak National Party - **Most–Híd** Inter ethnic party from the Slovak and Hungarian words for 'bridge' - **Siet'** Network Party centre-right - later called SKS, Slovak Conservative Party	Nominally centre-left, mix of centre-left centre-right		
	2016 08 31 - 2018 03 15	2016 08 16 Siet' quits the coalition	**Smer-SD** - **SNS** - **Most–Híd** - **Siet** external support			
	2018 03 23 - 2020 02 29	2018 03 15 Robert Fico resigns after the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak	**Smer-SD** - **SNS** - **Most–Híd**		Peter Pellegrini Smer-SD	2019 March Zuzana Čaputová, Progressive Slovakia

Source: Author's own rendition based on Casal Bértoa, F. (2021). Database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond, PSGo. Available at: whogoverns.eu

The QCA analysis also confirmed that neither the left-right nor the pro-contra EU position of lead governing parties could qualify as part of the sufficiency pathway. Indeed, after the 2017 Czech elections, between the period of 2017 – 2020 all main governing parties of Visegrad states were affiliated with four different EP Groups (Fidesz – European People's Party, PiS – European Conservatives and Reformists, ANO – Renew, Smer – European Socialists and Democrats). Yet, a Polish MEP assistant from the ECR Group (Interview 23), who was familiar with the Dublin negotiations confirmed that the main incumbent parties of the Visegrad Group increased their cooperation after 2017 to the extent that they forged coalitions not only along party political convictions and within their own

parliamentary groups, but also between each other, across EP groups, despite EP negotiations being overwhelmingly dominated by party politics instead of national interests (Interview, 23). The intensification of the Visegrad cooperation was also attested by other two interviewees, an Austrian and Slovak civil servant in Brussels (Interview 4, 5). A possible reason for this could be the upsurge of illiberal trends in all Visegrad governments, and the increasingly consistent illiberal framing of the refugee crisis. Illiberalism is a thin-centred ideology, propelled by ideological reaction against hegemonic liberalism that can have a variety of expressions depending on the country, temporal context and even policy area (Waller, 2024:372; Laruelle, 2022). Accordingly, an illiberal framing of the refugee crisis and the migration policy reform would challenge the liberal open-door policy of the so-called West, which was echoed above in the 2015 PiS party manifesto. Similarly, Viktor Orbán besides advocating for the repatriation of policy competences from 'bureaucrats in Brussels' to nation states when it comes to dealing with migration, he also often pinpointed migration as an ideological battleground between liberals in Western Europe and illiberals in Eastern Central Europe, of course the former group being on the losing end (Mészáros, 2016; Orbán, 2019). Meanwhile, Robert Fico outright labelled multiculturalism as a fiction, and stated that liberal Western states, who "bombed Libya and created problems in the Middle East" should be responsible for dealing with Muslim migrants (Fico in Tharoor, 2016). All main governing parties in Visegrad states engaged in adopting this rhetoric, even Andrej Babiš, who has often been described as the most moderate compared to his fellow Visegrad counterparts (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018). Thus, it can be concluded that illiberalism in this specific case functioned as an extra glue, a proxy for increased sympathies between Visegrad leaders and boosted effective actorship, even though illiberalism did not play a role at first place in the Visegrad becoming an effective actor. Indeed, due to the context dependent nature of illiberalism it is difficult to draw generalisations regarding its impact based on this one example. Illiberalism has different varieties even within the Visegrad 4. Notwithstanding the fact that it amplified the voice of the Group during the Dublin negotiations, illiberalism equally led to the end of the Polish-Hungarian friendship after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Thus, illiberalism may only contribute towards fostering an opportunistic policy-specific alliance between members of a subregion.

5.5 Conclusions

This chapter set out to analyse in detail, in a case-study fashion one of the cases, which were identified in the QCA as a typical case, for the better understanding of the sufficiency pathway, and to uncover more rigorously the mechanism, which triggers subregions to become effective actors. While the QCA analysis attached to cases a specific point in time, namely, when the subregion first became an effective actor, this chapter investigated an extended timeline, the entirety of the Dublin reform negotiations, starting with the first two temporary relocation mechanisms in 2015, and ending in 2019, when the Commission fully abandoned the first Dublin reform attempt. Owing to this more global, extended view on the Dublin process, it was possible to trace the evolution of the cooperation between Visegrad states, the longevity of their alliance during the negotiations and different dynamics between them, even before the group became an

effective actor. Accordingly, the chapter started with the careful mapping of the Dublin negotiations and previous the introduction of the temporary relocation quotas, and then proceeded on to scrutinise the various manifestations of the support between Visegrad states. Subsequently, the 3 conditions which were pinpointed as part of the sufficiency pathway were unpacked, and then those were reflected on which were not part of the solution term.

It has been demonstrated that the Visegrad became effective actor in 2016, and cooperation incrementally strengthened over time, and at the end eventually was part of the core reasons for the EU dropping the Dublin reforms altogether. Some political parties, such as the Polish PiS and the Czech ANO pursued a sovereignist discourse even before becoming the main incumbent party. Thus later, once they became the lead party in government, resistance to any type of refugee quota and a sovereignist approach to the asylum policies of the EU became a legitimising tactic. The reason why sovereignist rhetoric resonated so profoundly with voters was the fundamental symbiosis between political discoruse and public opinion. The political elite instead of educating the public tapped into their fears of the unknown and possible fears of economic hardship. Consequently, sovereignism functioned not only as a legitimising tactic for newly incumbent governments, but also for those who have been in power before the refugee crisis. Lastly, power politics and competition between those countries which were in favour of the quota system, versus those, who were against it was also palpable. Politicians after a European Council meeting or other milestones during the Dublin negotiations had to communicate victory to their voters, hence neither the outright acceptance nor the cancellation of the quota system was feasible, which resulted in a prolonged deadlock (Interview 5). Even though a wider coalition of countries stood on the two opposing sides of the negotiation table, reflecting clear regional patterns and an East-West division, the motor of the pro-quota group was the Franco-German axis, while the loudest advocates of the anti-relocation group was the Visegrad Group. Consequently, the conditions that were picked out as part of the solution term in the QCA analysis not only contributed to the Visegrad's rise to effective actorship, but also to the Group's prolonged foot-dragging stance throughout the entirety of the first attempt of reforming the Dublin system.

Moving on to analysing those factors, which were not part of the solution term, functional alignment in the analytical framework chapter was operationalised as "the subregional unit is composed of solely old or new EU member states" and "the subregional unit is composed of solely net-contributor or net-beneficiary member states". It has been pointed out that fear of accommodating refugees in Central Eastern European countries with much more modest economic conditions compared to Western Europe could have played a role in torpedoing the refugee quota, though the rhetoric, which targeted refugees centred way more around questions regarding identity, sovereignty, and "threat to our way of living". Not to mention the fact that in some Southern European countries, such as Portugal, where economic conditions were equally unfavourable, people and the political elite demonstrated a much greater openness towards asylum seekers. It was recognised thought that the above operationalisations may not encompass all

aspects of functional pressure, thus to corroborate the results of the QCA analysis a new operationalisation was also discovered, expressed as the number of refugees per a thousand people. Visegrad states experienced an uneven influx in proportion to their population during the first 2 years of the crisis, that extended to 2016, when the Visegrad first became an effective actor. Hungary based on the Dublin III logic, which required country of first arrival to register and process the application of asylum seekers was especially exposed to pressure and the overwhelming of its bureaucratic capacities. Thus, according to the Dublin logic Hungary should have joined the group of pro-quota countries, and indeed was even included in the title of the Commission proposal for second relocation scheme in 2015. Yet, Visegrad states presented a reticent united front already in 2016. Afterwards, the influx of refugees abated significantly and fell below the EU average in all Visegrad states. Nevertheless, the political elite opted for scaremongering, and fomenting fear in the public of a large-scale refugee wave (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023). Due to these controversies and ambiguities, it was concluded that functional pressures had no consistent role in elevating the Visegrad Group to effective actorship.

Lastly, to address the subdued impact of ideology, it has been revealed that the main governing parties of Visegrad states held scattered, non-aligned views concerning the GAL-TAN ideological axis, which is the primary predictor of a party's stance on questions related to migration. Ideological non-alignment was apparent not only at the time when the Group became an effective actor, but also later on when cooperation intensified between group members. In contrast with the QCA findings though, it was also exposed, that it would be premature to adhere no role to ideology and political games when analysing subregional actorship. Even though public opinion was largely negative in Poland on receiving migrants and refugees already in 2013, PO (Civic Platform) in government did not dare to engage in a full-fledged sovereignist discourse, provided the former PM of Poland has just been nominated as President of the European Council. As a consequence, in 2015, the Visegrad could not qualify as a robust subregional actor, with a united voice. Moreover, it was also pointed out that illiberal trends in all Visegrad governments following the 2017 Czech general elections functioned as an ad-hoc amplifier to cooperation between member states. All in all, it can be concluded that Visegrad states acted much more as 'occasional bedfellows' vying for political gains rather than long-term allies, which proves that subregional actorship is fuelled mainly by post-functional politicisation rather than functional or ideological alignment.

6 A short stint flareup of subregional activism: the Visegrad Group's impact on the EU Green Deal

The final empirical chapter of the thesis, before turning to the concluding remarks will analyse the role of the Visegrad Four in two tightly related policy processes, namely negotiating some elements of the fit for 55 package, and the EU's green investment taxonomy. Fit for 55 is a package of several regulations and directives, which support the accomplishment of the intermediary goal of the EU's Climate Law. The Climate Law, also popularly referred to as the EU's Green Deal is a piece of legislation, which made legally binding for all EU member states to reach climate neutrality by 2050, and the reduction of net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. "Becoming climate neutral means reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and at the same time compensating any remaining emissions through absorbing, or removing carbon form the atmosphere via carbon sequestration", so that the net emission balance would be close to zero (Council of the European Union, 2024). To this end, the intermediary goal is referred to in EU jargon as fit for 55, which embraces 15 different regulatory policy areas, such as the reform of the EU's Emission Trading System (ETS), the Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR), the modification of CO2 emission standards for cars and vans, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the Renewable Energy Directive and the Regulation on Land Use, Forestry, and Agriculture (LULUCF)…etc. (European Commission, 2024b). The package deal seeks to achieve climate neutrality – and till 2030 the reduction of greenhouse gases by 55% – in a sustainable, socially just manner. Hence, the fit for 55 package deal also established and reformed a number of novel and existing funding pools, to support those countries and regions of Europe along the path of transition, which are economically less prosperous and more dependent on fossil fuel energy production, and would need to endure a higher financial burden as a consequence. Three funding sources should be highlighted: the Modernisation Fund financed as a product of ETS revenues, the Social Climate Fund, which will be financed via the ETS2, and the Just Transition Fund, which is part of the Cohesion Funds. The Visegrad Group expressed both a general criticism towards the overly ambitious goals of the fit for 55 package, as well as specific demands concerning concrete policy measures, like the ETS, the ESR, the Modernisation Fund and the Social Climate Fund.

The green taxonomy also speaks inherently to the policy package that tries to tackle the climate crisis through reducing greenhouse gas emission levels. However, it was subject to a different policy-making regime compared to the tenets of fit for 55. The above-mentioned regulations and directives were all forged through the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP) (Council EP co-decision), whereas the taxonomy was determined in a Commission delegated regulation, as an auxiliary to Articles 8(4), 10(3) and 11(3) of Regulation (EU) 2020/852 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a framework to facilitate sustainable investment, and amending Regulation (EU) 2019/2088 published on18 June 2020 (European Commission, 2022). Delegated acts are supposed to be supplementary in nature without the scope

to change the essential elements of the actual legislation that calls for the delegated act to be established. Concerning the legislative process, the Commission prepares and adopts such acts following a thorough consultation with expert groups, called the comitology. The green taxonomy establishes a list of environmentally sustainable activities, and pinpoints which energy generation technologies may receive funding under the aegis of achieving carbon neutrality in the EU. Even though delegated acts tend to deal with nitty-gritty technical questions, which scarcely receive media attention, the green taxonomy stands out as an exception. Especially in the aftermath of the Commission updating the Climate Law proposal with a new, stricter intermediary target in September 2020 (see Figure 9), countries with a large portion of nuclear and natural gas-based energy profile started to grow increasingly anxious about the contents of the taxonomy, including the Visegrad Group. In conclusion, the fit for 55 package and the green taxonomy are deeply interconnected, however they were part of two different policy processes, decision-making regimes and the Visegrad Group also expressed its concerted goals most often in separate policy papers regarding these two elements of the green transition (see Figure 9 below). Therefore, in the QCA table these policy processes were considered as two distinct instances of effective actorship, although, due to the interrelated nature of these two policies content-wise, which will be addressed in more details below, it was decided to discuss these two negotiation processes in the same chapter.

The above introductory paragraphs justified the reason why the negotiation of fit for 55 and the green taxonomy were considered as two separate instances of effective actorship in the QCA table, and yet they are discussed together in the second, case study part of the thesis. Before moving on to the case study analysis, further attention should be dedicated to the methodological validation of why these two policy areas were picked for in depth investigation. Revisiting Table 16 below, it can be seen that effective Visegrad actorship during the negotiation of fit for 55 (Visegrad_3) qualifies as a typical case, while the green taxonomy (Visegrad_2) as a deviant case. The latter was listed as partially deviant because it was not fully part of the solution term expressed as (Publicop) ∗ (Sovereign) ∗ (FR_GR) → Effective actorships. Concerning the use and expansion

Table 16 revisited – Typical and deviant cases based on QCA results following the definition of Kahwati & Kane, 2020b

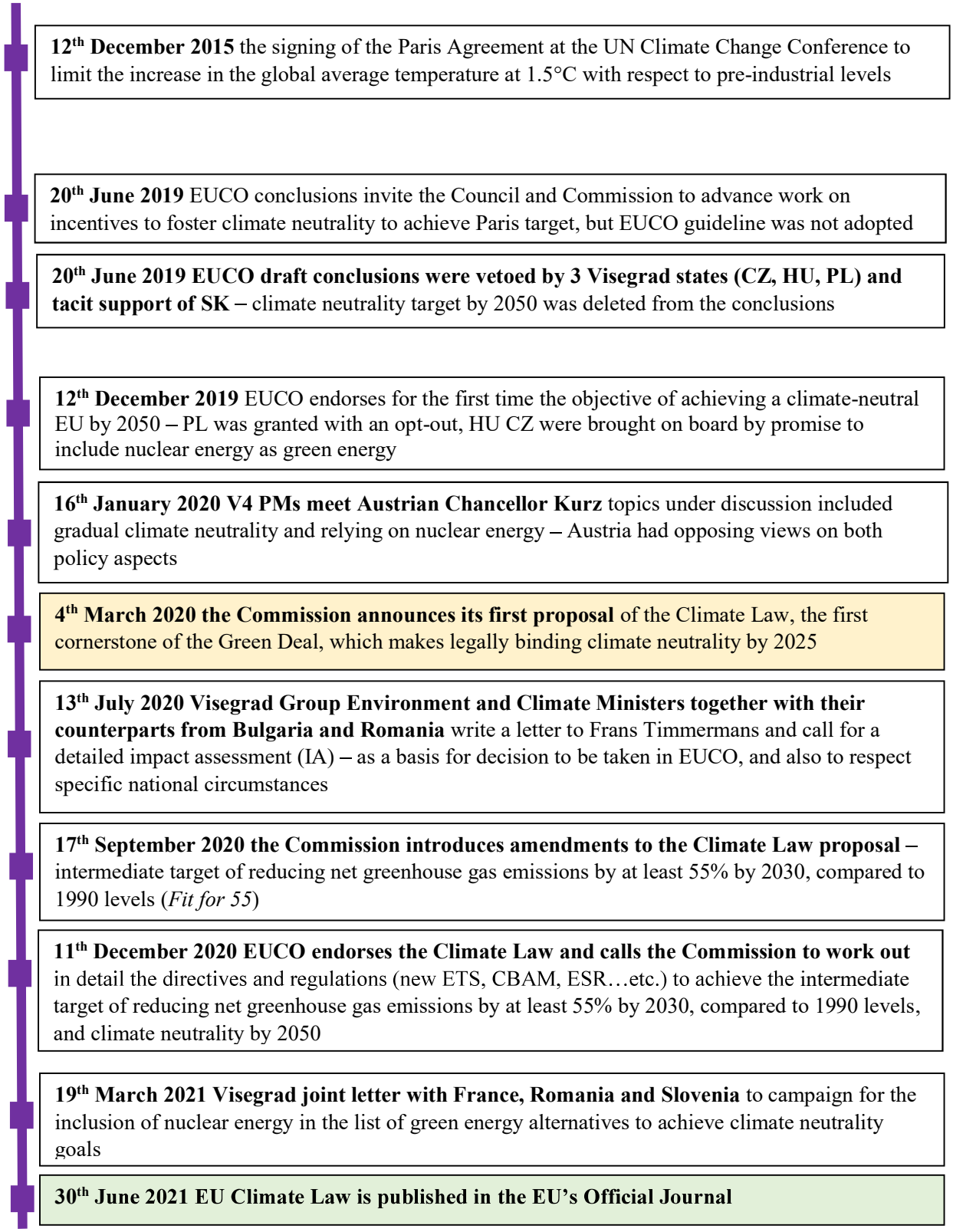
	In solution set	**Not in Solution set**
In outcome set	**Typical** NewHansa_1, NewHansa_2, Frugal_1, Visegrad_1, Visegrad_3, Visegrad_4	**Deviant** Visegrad_2 (partially)
Not in outcome set	**Deviant**	**Irrelevant** Visegrad_5 Visegrad_6

of nuclear energy and nuclear power plants, public opinion in Visegrad countries was not uniformly politicised in the same direction. Comparing typical and deviant cases may shed light on possible omitted conditions or special circumstances which remained unaccounted for in the QCA table (Kahwati & Kane, 2020a, b; Schneider, 2024). Therefore, it was methodologically advisable to choose Visegrad_2 and a related typical case Visegrad_3 for detailed investigation. In addition, Visegrad actorship in neither policy areas received much scholarly attention, unlike Visegrad actorship during the refugee crisis. The Group in the context of the green transition has been the topic of several academic papers, yet none of them examine its role during the negotiation process of the fit for 55 policy package or the green taxonomy. Almost the entirety of the academic literature trace or contemplate about the possibility of implementing green transition targets in CEE countries, and the V4 specifically (Balounová & Snopková, 2024; Dzikuć, Wyrobek & Popławski, 2021; Kochanek, 2021; Riepl & Zavarská, 2023), with a notable exception (Mišík & Oravcová, 2024). Thus, this chapter could serve as an important contribution to cover this empirical gap in the literature. Lastly, the case study chapters of this thesis seek to analyse not solely the precise point in time when the subregion under consideration rose to effective actorship, but the dynamics of the entire negotiation process that resulted in novel pieces of legislation. During the refugee crisis, cooperation between Visegrad member states demonstrated an upward trajectory, and their alliance grew stronger over time; in contrast, the fit for 55 and green taxonomy cases showcase the opposite. The visibility of the group at the dawn of the policy processes was way more palpable, which did not last till the end. Therefore, this chapter could offer an interesting contrast to the previous one. For easier comprehension though, this chapter will follow the same structural organisation as Chapter 5.

6.1 The EU's response to the climate crisis – a chronological account

The chain of polycrisis that the EU had to endure, including the financial crisis, the refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, all had a tangible starting point and a palpable, universal impact – to a smaller or greater degree – on all EU member states. In contrast, it is much harder to pinpoint the starting event of the climate crisis, and despite some extreme weather events (flash floods, wildfires, extreme drought, unseasonably cold or warm periods …etc.) which became more ubiquitous in the past decade all around Europe, its impact as of now is less universally perceived. Thus, other crises triggered almost immediate, rapid responses at the highest political level, while it took much longer for governments and non-governmental actors to acknowledge the climate crisis and respond appropriately. EU-wide and global consciousness of extreme weather events, which might be locally confined in nature, but are part of the same chain of events, grew sharply with the spread of social media and mushrooming protest movements, such as Fridays for the Future and Extinction Rebellion. The climate crisis encompasses all those social and environmental challenges and sometimes even catastrophic events, which are triggered by climate change, which is best measured by the increase in global average temperature levels. In a recent interview with meteorologist Celeste Saulo, who leads the UN's global weather agency,

Figure 9 - Timeline of legislation aiming at achieving climate neutrality targets



9th July 2021 Visegrad PMs foreshadowing the soon to be published Commission package proposal express concrete demands concerning the ETS and Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR), the Modernisation Fund, and the inclusion of nuclear energy to achieve climate neutrality

14th July 2021 the Commission publishes a series of 9 proposals (regulations and directives) to back up targets in climate law, more specifically fit for 55

18th November 2021 – Visegrad ministers with relevant portfolio meet at Paks (city where Hungary's only nuclear power plant is located) and issue a joint statement to call for the inclusion of nuclear energy and crucial role of natural gas in the green taxonomy for investment purposes

13th December 2021 – statement of the V4 Presidency after PMs' meeting expresses specific demands concerning the ETS market, Social Climate Fund, Modernisation Fund, nuclear energy and transitional role of natural gas

24th February 2022 – Invasion of Ukraine by Russia, subsequent silence of the Visegrad Group on all policy areas and inactive website for the next 2 years speak volumes

31st May 2022 – Leaders agree on the EU's oil embargo on Russia – CZ HU SK receive exemptions due to dependence on Russian energy, V4 countries had similar interests, but refrained from coordinating in V4 formats or communicate demands under V4 banner

1st July 2022 Czechia takes over Council rotating presidency – new government tries to legitimise its position by showcasing its ability to be an honest broker

15th July 2022 – the green taxonomy is published in the EU's Official Journal (delegated regulation)

22nd February 2023 – Czech-led coalition of 7 countries (including HU, PL, SK) oppose the Commission's proposal on new Euro7 emission targets, but the V4 is not mentioned, unlike the previous instances, when the group participated in larger protest coalitions

March – October 2023 the Council votes on the climate package deal, including ETS, ESR, Social Climate Fund, CBAM, Renewable Energy Directive (RED), CO2 emission of cars and vans…etc. Poland is left alone in protest negative vote or abstaining in almost all policy areas, many of the previous Visegrad demands though are reflected in the final, published policy versions

Source: Author's own rendition based on official EU documents, V4 communiques and the news media

the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), she highlighted that 2023 has been the hottest year on record and already in August, 2024 was in close reach to beat the previous year. "The climate is changing . . . These records are another demonstration that the warming is here. It is a part of our daily lives. This is a red alert for all of us." (Saulo in Mooney, 2024). The 2021 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – a UN body dedicated to assessing the science related to climate change – claimed that "a rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions would be necessary to limit warming to close to 1.5°C or even 2°C" compared to pre-industrial levels (IPCC, 2021). In conclusion, scientists and experts still keep ringing the alarm bells, despite the fact that the above benchmark – limiting the rise of global average temperature to 2°C – has been laid down as a legally binding commitment in the so-called Paris Agreement. The Agreement is an international treaty signed on 12 December 2015 in Paris at the 21st Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21). Years later, the treaty also became the linchpin of the EU's endeavours to limit greenhouse gas emissions in its member states and to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 on the entire territory of the Union, which were all considered important stepping stones towards implementing the Paris commitments. In fact, the Climate Law, the first of its kind, which made climate neutrality legally binding to all EU members, starts with the following preamble:
"*The Union is committed to stepping up efforts to tackle climate change and to delivering on the implementation of the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (the 'Paris Agreement') (4), guided by its principles and on the basis of the best available scientific knowledge, in the context of the long-term temperature goal of the Paris Agreement*" (European Parliament and the Council, 2021).

However, as Figure 9 showcases above, it was not until the inauguration of the first von der Leyen Commission (late 2019) that the EU started to formulate appropriate legislation to accomplish the Paris Agreement. The massive delay is a testament to the politically contentious nature of some policies, which are necessary to mitigate the climate crisis. Already in her inaugural speech, President-elect von der Leyen emphasised not only the existential threat that climate change may pose to Europe "if there is one area where the world needs our leadership, it is on protecting our climate. This is an existential issue for Europe – and for the world" (European Commission, 2019); but at the same time, she also highlighted the possible repercussions that the transition to climate neutrality might entail "transition must be just and inclusive – or it will not happen at all" (European Commission, 2019). All Visegrad attempts to influence the Green Deal – more specifically the fit for 55 package and the green taxonomy – were instances of foot-dragging, trying to slow down the pace of the transition or holding on to the status quo, under the aegis of a more balanced, just transition process that "respects the different starting positions" of EU member states (Visegrad Group, 2021b). Thus, the Commission President was right to emphasise form the get go that inclusivity and a socially just transition should be important themes in making the EU's economy less carbon dependent. Table 9 also demonstrates that the Visegrad Group rose periodically to effective actorship, at times when EU leaders attempted to make considerable

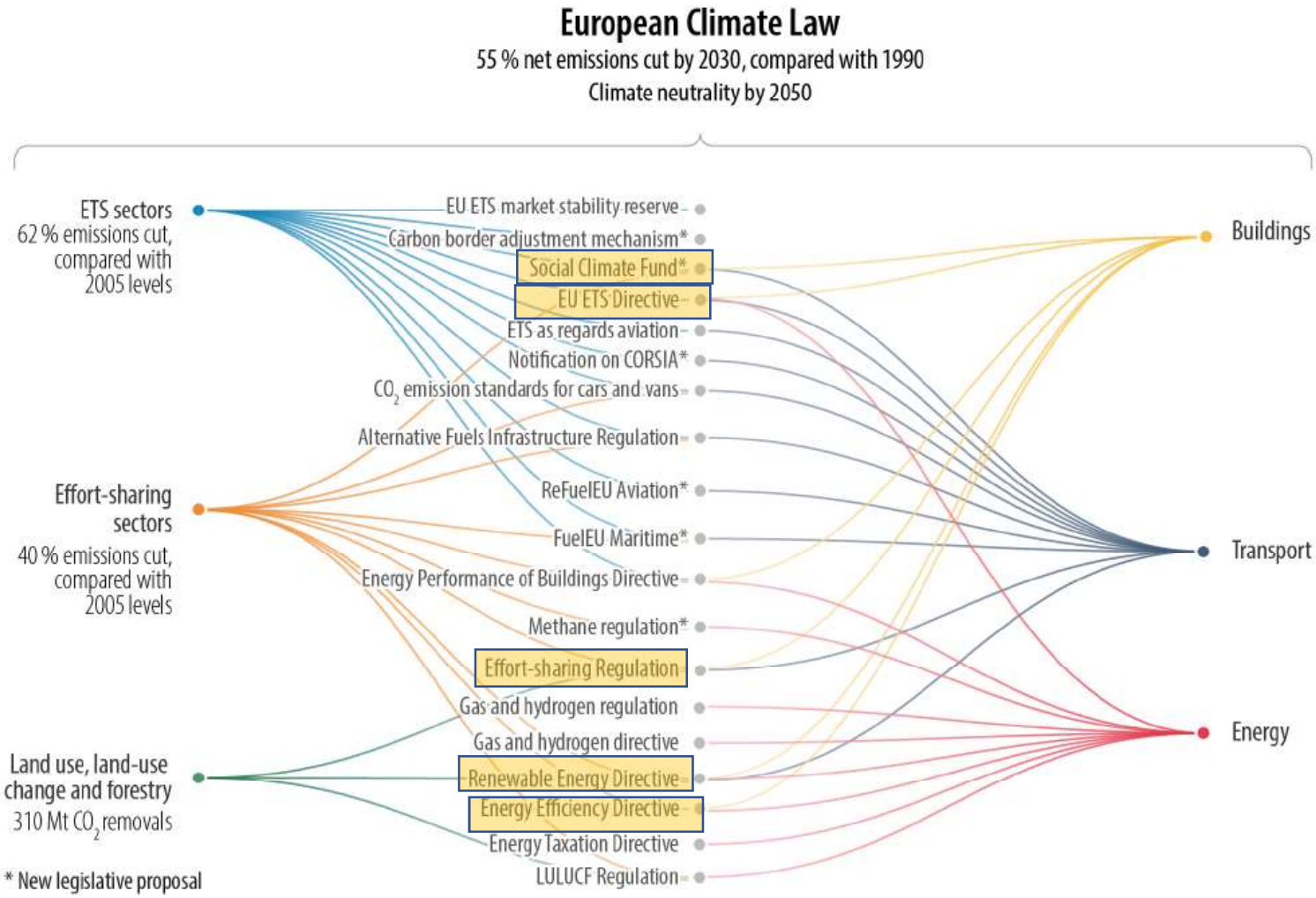
advances on Green Deal related legislation. Visegrad actorship was the most tangible during the following instances: in 2019, when the Group vetoed the EUCO conclusions; in 2020 January before the publication of the Commission's proposal of the Climate Law; in 2020 July, before the publication of the stricter 2030 targets; and in 2021 July, right before the Commission published a series of legislative proposals to guide the implementation of the intermediary 55% greenhouse gas reduction target.

Still, the Visegrad Group could not play a similarly vocal role in the policy process as it did so during the first 2015-2020 reform attempt of the Dublin system, provided the Dublin reforms were altogether dropped at the end, while the Climate Law passed in the Council and the Parliament too in line with the OLP. Furthermore, the initial Commission proposal in March 2020 advocated to "explore options for a new 2030 target of 50 to 55% emission reductions compared to 1990" (European Commission, 2020b), while the final version of the legislation commits firmly to the strictest, 55% reduction level, in line with the Commission's 2020 September modifications (European Commission, 2020c) – see Figure 9. Notwithstanding the above, the Visegrad Group achieved to delay the legislative process, and in many of the follow-up regulations and directives that set out the implementation of the intermediary 2030 target, Visegrad demands are often reflected. It is important to note though that this thesis proposes a behavioural definition of effective actorship, which focuses more on the action and interaction between member states of a subregion, as opposed to the results of their actions expressed as policy outcomes. Therefore, in the next paragraphs less emphasis will be placed on policy results. A Slovak and a Hungarian civil servant working in Brussels, who were familiar with the Green Deal portfolio acknowledged that the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine put a significant strain on the Visegrad cooperation as Hungary insisted on a gingerly approach towards Russia, which affected cooperation in all policy areas, even on a technical level (Interview 10, Interview 28). Coordination was minimised, and by 2023 when most fit for 55 policies reached voting stage in the Council, Poland remained the only one, occasionally with Hungary to cast a negative protest vote on some elements of the policy package, which of course was not enough to accomplish a veto under OLP and QMV arrangements.

6.2 The evolution of the Visegrad cooperation during the Green Deal negotiations

The below paragraphs will demonstrate the demands of the Visegrad Group, which were put forward concertedly to influence the fit for 55 package deal as well as the green taxonomy. Starting with the former, Figure 10 below illustrates all elements of this extremely complex policy package. The regulations and directives, which are framed with a yellow rectangle are the ones, on which the Visegrad Group expressed shared demands. The exact requests are detailed in Table 20, which

Figure 10 – Elements of the fit for 55 package deal – underlined policy areas represent those, where Visegrad demands were expressed



Source: European Parliamentary Research Service, Erbach & Jensen, 2024

also outlines the year and document where the demands were formulated (joint communiques, statements, rotating presidency programme). Some common positions stipulate more general wishes, while others offer concrete, issue-specific suggestions. Despite their varying nature and specificity, all concerted demands point towards the same direction: trying to diminish the speed of the green transition and the introduction of carbon neutrality to protect the citizens from high energy prices, and "energy poverty" (Guibourgé-Czetwertyński in cire.pl, 2021), and to mitigate other social costs in the population, such as unemployment. Examples concerning general goals include advocating for "a thorough impact assessment by the Commission to evaluate all social, environmental and economic costs of the transition" (Visegrad Group, 2020), and making sure that

Table 20 – The demands of the Visegrad Group as expressed in concerted policy papers regarding the fit for 55 package deal and the green deal

V4 demand	Policy area	When? What type of source?
Increase in Just Transition Fund financed from ETS	**ETS, ETS reform**	2019 December, interview with Czech PM
Demand for a thorough impact assessment by the Commission to evaluate all social, environmental and economic costs of the transition	**Fit for 55 general goal and climate neutrality by 2050**	2020 July V4 joint letter to Frans Timmermans Exec VP with Bulgaria and Romania
Include nuclear energy in the green taxonomy, as it guarantees the continued renewable deployment of carbon neutral energy	**Green taxonomy***	2021 March joint letter to the President of the Commisison and 3 Commissioners by the V4, France, Romania and Slovenia
Calling the Commission to deliver a package proposal that respects the principles of fairness and solidarity and reflect different starting positions, and right of m states to decide on energy mix	**Fit for 55 general goal and climate neutrality by 2050** **Green taxonomy**	2021 July Joint statement by Visegrad PMs
The same methodology and reference levels shall continue to be applied as agreed previously, with efforts distributed on the basis of relative GDP per capita taking into consideration fairness and early achievements as well.	**ESR (Effort Sharing Regulation)**	
The Emissions Trading System (ETS) Directive shall only be extended to include the maritime sector with a revision of the aviation sector, while the scope of the ESR should remain unchanged by 2030.	**ETS, ESR**	
The Modernization Fund should be increased to 6% of total allowances of ETS in the 'Fit for 55'package. The scope of the Modernisation Fund should also be revised to respect the transitional role of natural gas while also allowing investments in generation and use of heat from renewable sources as priority investments.	**Modernisation Fund, ETS**	
Nuclear energy should be recognised for its transitional role	**Green taxonomy**	

Respecting sovereign right of m states to determine their energy mix, urgent call for the EU to establish supportive framework for all investments and technologies capable of reduding greenhouse has emissions – such as nuclear energy and natural gas	**Green taxonomy**	2021 November joint statement of V4 at Paks
Eliminate speculation on the EU ETS market and for reinforcing existing safeguards against excessive increase in the price of allowances New emissions trading system for the building and road transport sector is not supported by impact assessment, EU-wide uniform carbon price in the building and road transport sectors would disproportionally burden the lower-income Member States.	**ETS, ETS2**	2021 December statement from the rotating presidency of the Visegrad Group after gathering of PMs
Need for a robust compensation measure, Social Climate Fund as proposed by the Commission fails to adequately address concerns	**Social Climate Fund, ETS2**	
V4 expressed concern about the proposal to completely exclude support from the Modernisation Fund to energy generation facilities that use fossil fuels, including natural gas.	**Modernisation Fund, ETS**	
Energy Efficiency Directive and the Directive on Renewables, V4 leaders spoke out against the "one-size-fits-all" approach of the Commission and called for more flexibility	**EED, Directive on Renewables**	
Nuclear energy should be included in the green taxonomy	**Green taxonomy**	

***Sections highlighted in grey refer to specific policy proposals, while sections without the highlight refer to general policy proposals**
Source: Author's own rendition based on V4 documents

the package proposal put forward by the Commission "respects the principles of fairness and solidarity and reflects different starting positions" (Visegrad Group, 2021b). Whereas, precise, more detailed proposals concentrate mostly on the ETS, the legally interrelated Modernisation Fund, the ESR and the green taxonomy. Unsurprisingly, putting forward a more rounded, more elaborate stance

also meant increased coordination and collaboration between Visegrad members in such policy areas, as it's been confirmed by several interviewees, who were involved in the negotiations – two Czech, a Slovak civil servant working for the Council in Brussels, and a civil servant from DG ENER (Interview 1, 15, 10, 12).

The dynamics of the Visegrad actorship was also inherently determined by the course of the policy negotiations, as it's already been mentioned in the previous section. Back in June 2019, when the group first became an effective actor by denying the inclusion of the 2050 carbon neutrality target in the EUCO conclusions, the Green Deal package had to attain an initial, political endorsement before the discussion of nitty-gritty details. At that stage, Visegrad member states also resorted to expressing their criticism in more general terms. The primary concern of Visegrad delegations back then was the lack of impact assessments. "We couldn't commit to something without knowing the costs. No one was able to present economic calculations supporting this idea" – was cited by Euractiv as a primary worry of a delegate from one of the Visegrad states (Euractiv, 2019c). Eventually, a few months later, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland the last ones to drop their opposition, were persuaded to back the inclusion of the 2050 climate neutrality target in the EUCO conclusions of December 2019, thanks to paragraph 1 and 6 (European Council, 2019). The former guaranteed a nominal, temporary opt-out for Poland from committing to the 2050 deadline, and the latter reassured member states of their continued autonomy to "decide on their energy mix and to choose the most appropriate technologies (…) including nuclear energy as part of their national energy mix" (European Council, 2019).

Visegrad actorship reached its zenith both concerning the fit for 55 package and the green taxonomy, when the negotiations entered the proposal stage in OLP settings (see Figure 9). In the prelude to the Commission's publication of the fit for 55 package deal, Visegrad PMs published their most detailed common stance on several policy tenets, which were expected to be part of the subsequent Commission proposal. For instance, the Commission strove to update the 2018 Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR), which set out "national targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emission by 2030" in the sectors of domestic transport (excluding aviation), buildings, agriculture, small industry and waste (European Commission, 2023a). Visegrad states not only campaigned for maintaining the methodology to determine national targets based on relative GDP per capita, but also expressed their wish not to increase reference levels, neither to widen the scope of the ESR to new sectors.

Another cornerstone of various joint communiques was the reform of the EU's Emission Trading System (ETS) and the establishment of ETS 2. The ETS functions based on a "cap and trade" mechanism. In practice, it means that installations and operators within the scope of the system[3]

[3] The scope of the EU's ETS entails electricity and heat generation, industrial manufacturing, aviation and after the 2023 reforms the maritime transport sector too (European Commission, 2023b)

are allocated with a greenhouse gas emission cap, expressed in emission allowances, issued over a certain period, which are "primarily auctioned by member states on a joint EU platform and procurement procedure, while some are allocated for free to avoid carbon leakage" (European Commission, 2023b). One allowance permits the holder to emit one tonne of CO_2 or another equivalent greenhouse gas. This way, polluting sectors are incentivised to reduce greenhouse gas emission levels in three ways. First, companies should avoid paying a penalty for excess emissions above the cap. Second, the cap and hence allowances available for auction are gradually reduced every year. Lastly, operators and entities, which emit less than expected can sell their surplus allowances to another company, which creates lucrative financial incentives for greener solutions. Visegrad states expressed deep concerns with speculative trading on the allowance markets, and the possibility that end-users will suffer the most if the scope of uniform carbon pricing is extended to the road transport and building sectors (Visegrad Group, 2021b).

Finally, it should be mentioned that a fraction of the income generated by auctioned allowances contributes to a common pool of funding, the Modernisation Fund, whose greatest beneficiaries are member states with a disadvantaged, more CO_2 based energy production system. Even though ETS2 is still not operational, a similar fund, the Social Climate Fund was envisaged from the revenues generated by the second carbon market of the EU, which should entail road transport, buildings and other additional sectors. Visegrad states not only expressed a fierce criticism of ETS2, but also demanded that "the Modernisation Fund should be increased to 6% of total allowances of the ETS" (Visegrad Group, 2021b). In addition, they also found the Social Climate Fund inadequate to alleviate their concerns in the form as originally proposed by the Commission. Furthermore, Visegrad Group members criticised that the Commission proposal would have completely excluded support from the Modernisation Fund to be spent on energy generation facilities that use fossil fuels, including natural gas (Visegrad Group, 2021d). Hence, it was rather unsurprising that Visegrad states were equally vocal advocates of keeping natural gas as well as nuclear energy labelled as green, clean energy sources in the EU's green taxonomy. The EU Sustainable Finance Taxonomy also dubbed as green taxonomy fundamentally determines which facilities and projects may be granted with funding under the aegis of the green transition. Even though Poland has no nuclear power plants (see Figure 13 and Table 21 below), an interviewee from DG ENER confirmed that the Visegrad 4 was a forceful motor of what they called "the boys of France" on the corridors of the Commission: six Eastern Central European countries, which campaigned on the side of France to keep nuclear energy in the taxonomy (Interview 12). Thus, in this case the Visegrad was part of a larger coalition, yet its member states kept campaigning for the inclusion of nuclear energy in the green taxonomy under the Visegrad banner. Visegrad Ministers and PMs were adamant to underline their "sovereign right to determine the energy mix of their countries" (Visegrad Group, 2021a, c) and keep using nuclear energy at various occasions. A joint letter written by the V4 together with France, Romania and Slovenia in March 2021; as

well as a joint communique that resulted from a meeting between V4 Ministers at Paks[4], are both a testament to the intense cooperation and visible actorship of member states.

Following the peak of actorship in 2021 though, the Visegrad group experienced a rapid decline in being a force to reckon with. Cracks on the friendship already manifested in late 2020 during the negotiation of the new cycle of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (Interview 16, Interview 20), and more specifically the general regime of conditionality, which will be discussed in greater details in the next chapter. However, disagreement on the Rule of Law mechanism did not prevent the group members from sustaining amicable relations, and forging cooperation in technical, less sensitive policy areas (Interview 10). In stark contrast, Hungary's gingerly approach towards Russia in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine brought a temporary halt to all Visegrad meetings. Visegrad states apparently shared similar views on the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the reform of CO_2 emission standards for cars and vans (Euro 7 standards), yet they failed to issue a common policy stance, partly because the Polish representative refused to attend ministerial and COREPER meetings (Interview 28), and the Slovak and Czech governments actively attempted to dissociate their countries from the Visegrad Group, which became a nuisance for them (Interview 15, Interview 25).

The invasion also forged additional fears in member states reliant on Russian oil and gas concerning energy security, to which the Visegrad 4 due to its history and interconnectedness with Russia, were increasingly exposed. Even though protecting citizens form high energy prices was the shared basis of Visegrad criticism towards the Green Deal, this narrative failed to usher the group members together at the time when opt-outs from the oil embargo on Russia or the possibility of a gas embargo were discussed in the EU. The Slovak and Czech governments wished to see a temporary opt-out period, whereas their Hungarian counterpart did not want to codify an exact end date to the oil import exemption. In direct opposition to all this, in Poland there was a general consensus among all political parties both in government and in opposition that oil imports form Russia must come to an immediate halt. The final wording of the Council regulation of 3 June 2022 that introduced the oil embargo apparently reflects the wishes of Hungary "the import prohibitions on crude oil from Russia should temporarily not apply, until the Council decides otherwise" (Council of the European Union, 2022). Although Slovakia and Czechia were also key beneficiaries of the opt-out, a Slovak interviewee working in Brussels in Council settings confirmed that the regulation was not exactly in line with what the Slovak and Czech governments attempted to achieve, who were committed to phase out Russian oil with a specific cutoff deadline (Interview 10). In conclusion, by the time Green Deal tenets reached voting stage in the Council throughout the course of 2023, Visegrad actorship vanished, and Poland remained the only country voting against most fit for 55 package items among Visegrad states. Therefore, the Green Deal negotiations, where effective actorship declined over time, project an interesting contrast to the previously discussed Dublin reforms, where actorship was gradually rectified.

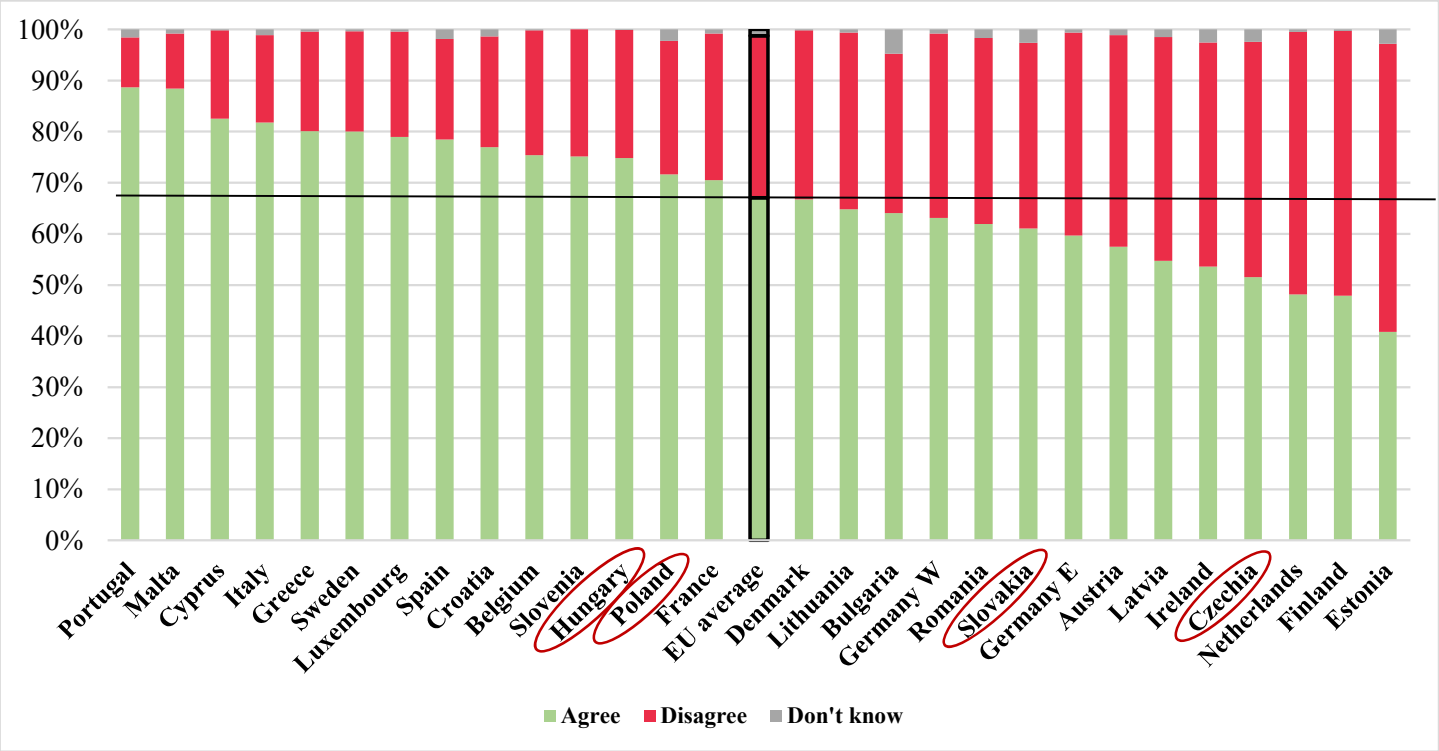
[4] Hungarian city, where Hungary's only nuclear power plant is situated

6.3 Unpacking the QCA sufficiency pathway

After meticulously discussing above how Visegrad actorship evolved during the negotiations of the Green Deal, more specifically the fit for 55 package, as well as the green taxonomy, this section will turn towards unpacking the sufficiency pathway, which was identified in Chapter 4. The WCA soluton term claimed that subregions become effective actors when in all member states public opinion is uniformly politicised, governing elites pursue a congruent sovereignist rhetoric and the stance of the subregion is in stark contrast with the one represented by France and/or Germany. Increased attention will be dedicated to the green taxonomy case and deciphering the reason why the Visegrad rose to effective actorship despite varying public opinion views on nuclear energy.

Traditionally Scandinavian states together with the Netherlands are considered to be the most environmentally conscious, politically innovative, and committed members of the EU when it comes to fighting climate change (Elgström et al., 2001). However, according a recent Eurobarometer poll published in 2022, when respondents were asked whether climate change frightens them, no clear East-West divide emerged (see Figure 11 below). In fact, a higher

Figure 11 – To what extent to you agree with the following statement: Climate change is something that frightens you?

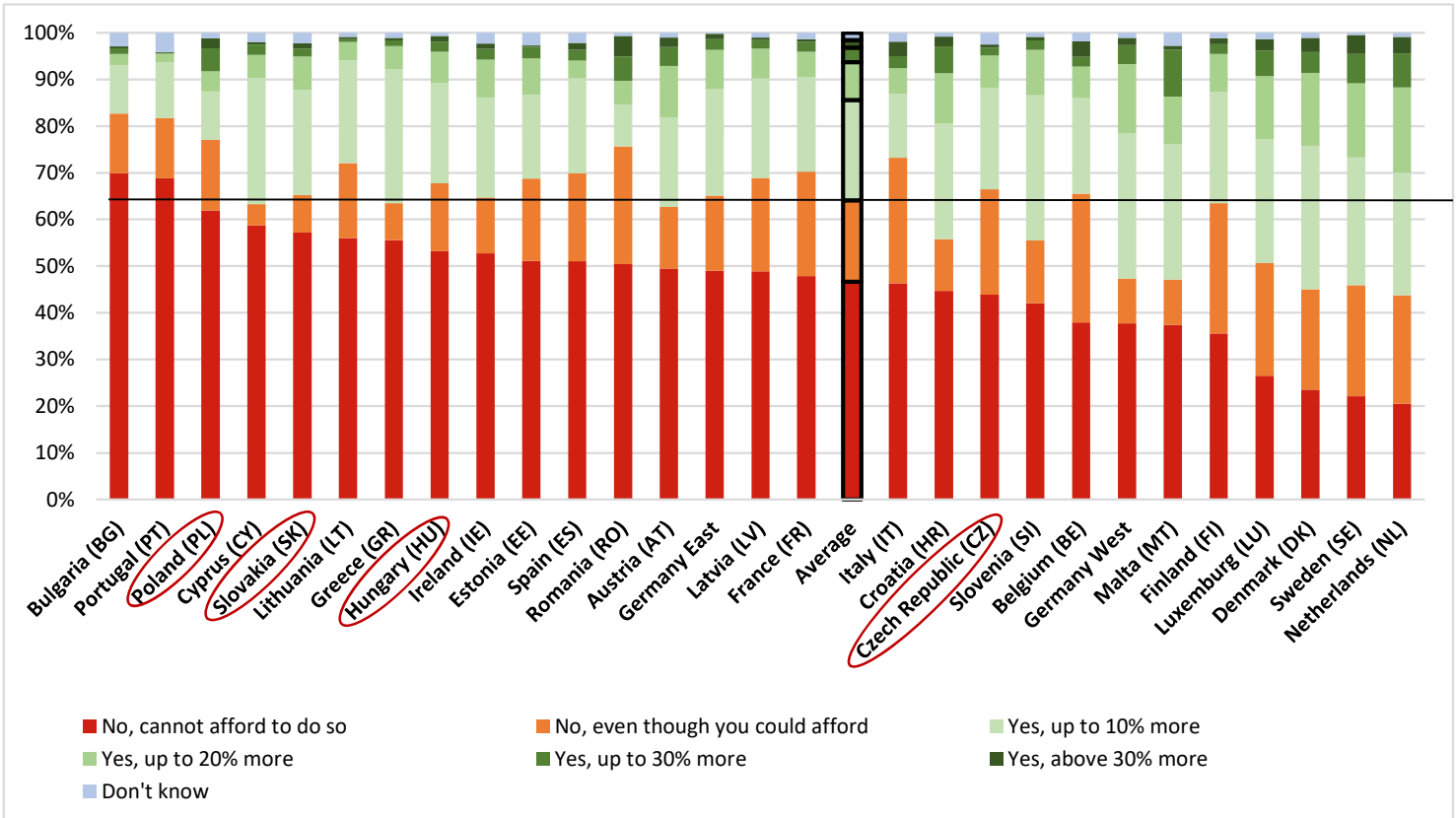


Source: Eurobarometer 2022, 97.4, GESIS

proportion of respondents chose 'totally agree' or 'tend to agree' (see the green portion of each column) in Hungary and Poland than the EU average. This thesis acknowledges that a variety of

causes could fuel fears of climate change, such as government inaction or nonchalance, being increasingly exposed to adverse climate events…etc. and the above table does not provide data for pinpointing the roots of fear in EU states. Yet, Figure 11 is a clear proof of climate awareness being widespread in the whole of Europe, including CEE states. This notwithstanding, when the same respondents were inquired whether they would be committed to spend more on energy if that would speed up the green transition, a much more pronounced Southern, Eastern-Central vs North-Western geographical divide could be detected. Figure 12 below ranks countries in a decreasing order based on the % of respondents, who chose that they could not afford spending more on energy prices for the sake of a quicker green transition. Whereas, the orange section signifies those, who are not willing to spend more, even though they could. The general trend across Europe shows that the majority of people are not willing or able to spend more on energy prices, with a handful of exceptions such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark the Western part of Germany, and Belgium, where those who are committed to spend more to speed up the green transition are in majority. When it comes to Visegrad countries, Polish, Slovakian and Hungarian respondents perform worse than the EU average if the % of those who are unable to spend more is assessed (red section). Furthermore, a similarly negative approach can be detected in Bulgaria and Romania,

Figure 12 – Would you be willing to pay higher energy prices if that helps to speed up the green transition?



Source: Eurobarometer 2022, 97.4, GESIS

which many times joined Visegrad initiatives and acted as external support to the Group. When the added number of those who are unable and unwilling to spend more on energy prices to promote carbon neutrality is assessed (red and orange section together), it can be concluded that all Visegrad countries, including the relatively well-off Czechia perform way worse than the EU average, with over 65% of the respondents refusing to commit extra financial means to climate neutrality. Thus, when policies to fight climate change are framed based on their possible immediate impact on household spending, a congruent, negative politicisation trend can be observed in the public of all Visegrad countries, which is also duly reflected in the discourse of political actors.

Concerning the public approval of nuclear energy as a means to achieve carbon neutrality, there are no standardised public opinion polls that would cover in a representative manner the entirety of the EU. National surveys, which are conducted with different survey methodologies, questionnaires, selection criteria and respondent pool might not be a suitable basis of comparison between member states, but could serve as a general indication of public sentiments concerning nuclear energy. Reviewing the most recent national polls regarding the topic, it can be seen that support for nuclear energy in all Visegrad states except Czechia has increased compared to past years. However, the positive take does not form a majority, even in those Visegrad states, where positive conviction is on the rise. CVVM, a prestigious public opinion centre in Czechia found in a survey conducted between August-September 2023 that two-fifths (41%) of the citizens believe that the portion of nuclear power should increase in electricity generation; while a similarly high 39% think that it should remain the same. Meanwhile, 13% of the respondents wish to see the decrease of the share of nuclear energy generation. For comparison, in 2021 solely 32%, while in 2022 an astonishing 56% of the respondents wished to see an increase in the share of nuclear energy (CVVM, 2023). Most likely, two important factors played a significant role in the public opinion peak of 2022. First, in 2022 European energy prices also reached their pinnacle as a consequence of the war in Ukraine and the sudden reignition of economic activities following the Covid-19 lockdowns. Secondly, the poll was conducted over September-November in opposition to the previous years, when data collection happened over late spring or the summer, and hence people had to worry less about energy prices. Thus supposedly, increased worries about energy prices can bolster the approval rates of the relatively cheap nuclear solution.

Support in Slovakia more or less corresponds with the Czech trend, even though Slovakia has much more nuclear power plants. Over 60% of its energy consumption is covered by nuclear power (see Figure 14), and nuclear power plays a pivotal role in the country's clean, carbon-free energy generation. According to the survey of ACRC, a Slovak analytical, research and consulting company, in 2022 as many as 35% of the respondents stated that nuclear power plants should be sustained and 34.1% would give the green light to the construction of new ones. However, when the same pool of people were asked which energy generation means they prefer to reduce green house gas emissions, 38% chose solar power plants, followed by nuclear energy solely at 17%

(ACRC, 2022). The ACRC analysis equally observes, that the Slovak population considers important the fight against climate change, but at the same time, is not committed to make it way too expensive. Accordingly, Slovaks might prefer to reduce green house gas emission levels with the assistance of renewable energy means, as long as it provides an economic solution.

In 2022 end of March, Greenpeace Hungary commissioned a public opinion survey with the assistance of Policy Solutions and Závecz Research, which was quite similar in nature to the above Slovak study. Participants in response to the question "What energy sources do you think Hungary should rely on in the future?" had to rank on a scale 1-5 energy generation sources (coal, oil, nuclear, gas, renewables), where 1 stands for 'not at all' and 5 stands for 'absolutely'. Nuclear energy finished third place, with 36% of the respondents assigning 4 or 5 to this energy source, whereas renewables finished first with an overwhelming majority, 80% of the respondents assigning 4 or 5 to renewable solutions. Lastly, Poland is a peculiar case, provided Poland has no nuclear power plants (see Figure 13) unlike the rest of the Visegrad Group. In Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia: countries with nuclear reactors, it was easy to see why governments decided to campaign for the inclusion of nuclear power in the green taxonomy, despite the fluctuating, incongruent public opinion trends. Yet, according to the survey and analysis of CBOS in 2022, as high as 54% of the Polish respondents would support the construction of a nuclear power plant even close to their residence and only 34% would oppose to it (CBOS, 2022). The comparably positive take of Poles on the construction of power plants was one of the reasons why the Polish government decided to promote the inclusion of nuclear energy in the green taxonomy. Moreover, as an interviewee from the Czech Permanent Representation confirmed, the Polish government expected to receive reciprocal support from their V4 counterparts in its Green Deal related endeavours (Interview 15). Thus, even if public opinion was not unanimously politicised in the same direction in all Visegrad states concerning nuclear energy, the group became an effective actor in promoting the inclusion of nuclear power in the green taxonomy for two reasons. First, if nuclear power was not classified as green energy, climate neutrality by 2050 would have been more expensive for countries with existing nuclear facilities, which based on the above opinion polls would have provoked public outrage. Secondly, due to the above-mentioned bargain and positive public approval, despite not having any nuclear facilities, Poland also approved the concerted Visegrad stance.

The second element of the sufficiency pathway is 'sovereignist discourse', which was especially pertinent in the green taxonomy case. When the Group reached the zenith of its actorship in 2021, all Visegrad communiques in relation to the topic underlined the importance of respecting member state's sovereign right to determine their own energy mix as recognised in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), in order to protect citizens from energy poverty (Visegrad Group, 2021 a, b, c). Similarly, sovereignist rhetoric concerning the tenets of the fit for 55 package and the green transition revolved around sustainable prices, and the right of sovereign governments to protect their citizens. However, it should be noted that the intensity of the discourse

applied by Visegrad governments varied greatly. For instance, in Slovakia, there was a change of government in late March 2020 (see Table 22), which resulted in a less Eurocritical coalition taking over the leadership. Furthermore, the President of Slovakia till 2024 June was Zuzana Čaputová, a progressive, former green activist. The government change though did not shatter the unity of the group, but resulted in Slovakia becoming a softer critic of the fit for 55 package. The most vocal critics of fit for 55 and especially the ETS and the ETS2 were the Polish and Hungarian governments. Mateusz Morawiecki Polish Prime Minister in the aftermath of the 2021 December EUCO meeting pledged that "Poland will defend its citizens and our economy" not only from speculators, who make emission trading volatile and unpredictable, but also the European Commission if EU policies will not do enough to fix the problem with the green taxonomy and the ETS market (Government of Poland, 2021). In a similar vein, Viktor Orbán Hungarian PM also blamed partly the ETS and hence "bureaucrats in Brussels" for higher energy prices at a press conference at the end of 2021, and expressed his hopes that a coalition of CEE countries would block the extension of the ETS, which is attempted to be imposed on poorer countries by Brussels (Orbán, 2021). Lastly, in Czechia PM Babiš also voiced repeatedly that "emission allowances were the main factor responsible for current energy price hikes, especially speculative capital from buying ETS allowances" (Zachová, 2021). Although in the news media it's been widely discussed that a more blatant cause stood in the background of his accusations, namely, the unfavourable impact of the ETS on Agrofert holding, formerly owned by the Czech PM (Zachová, 2021). At the same time, he also campaigned for "maintaining an independent energy mix" like his Visegrad counterparts, and described the Commission's fit for 55 package as "significantly more radical than expected, that will have a fundamentally negative impact on our industry and the employment of our people" (Babiš in Euractiv, 2021). In conclusion, the sovereignist discourse regarding the green taxonomy and the fit for 55 package were very much intertwined, and emphasised less so the repatriation of competences back to the remit of member states. Instead, Visegrad politicians demanded the continuation of member state rights to their energy sovereignty, in order to protect people from energy price peaks.

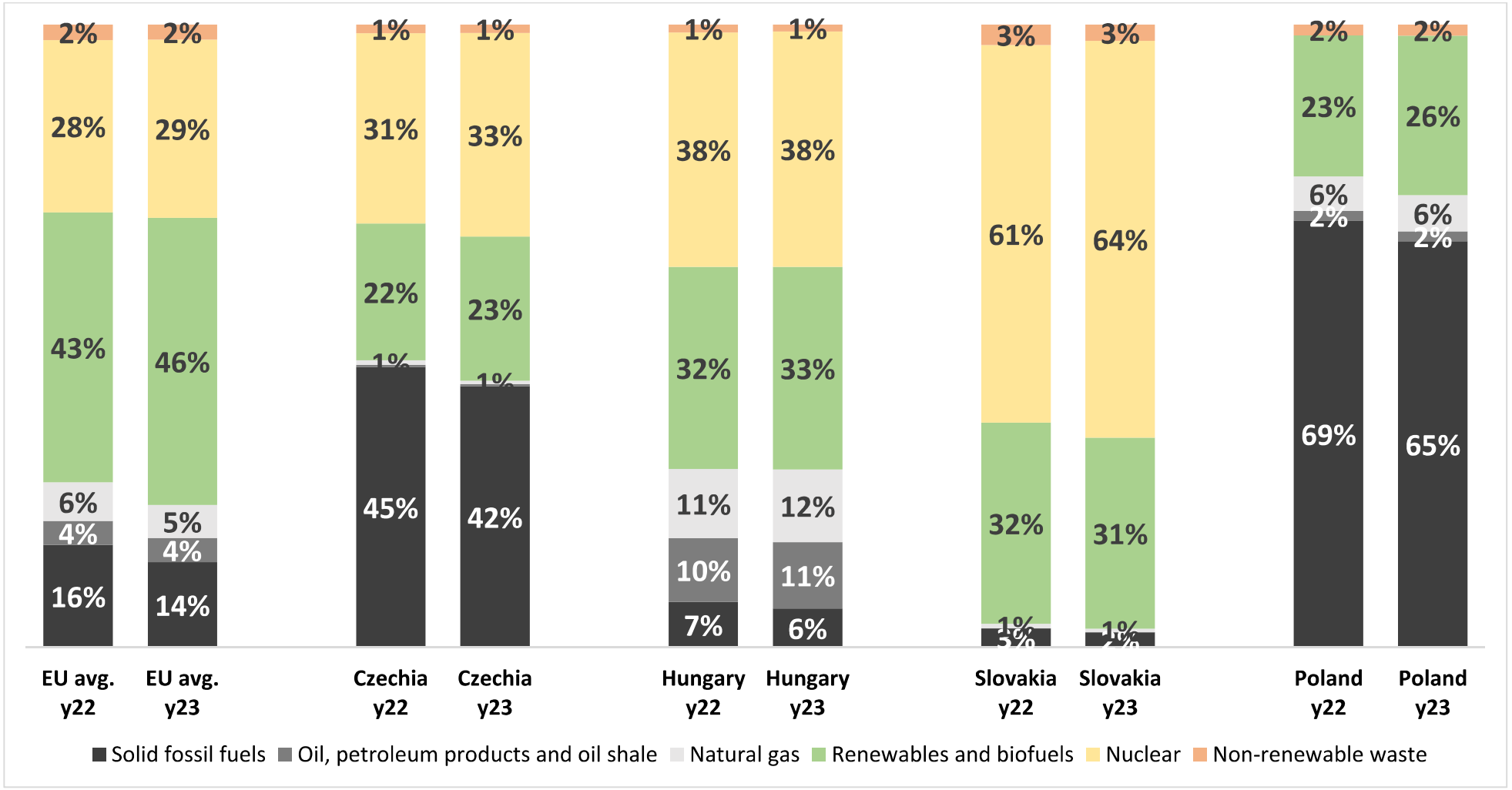
The final element of the sufficiency pathway is 'opposition to the French and/or German hegemons', which deserves a more in-depth discussion in the Green Deal context, provided the two countries, which are traditionally considered to be the motors of change and integration in the EU, were united in achieving climate neutrality by 2050, but held differing opinions on the means to achieve this target. More specifically, France envisaged nuclear energy as a cornerstone of decarbonisation, whereas the German Bundestag passed on 30 June 2011 a piece of legislation to completely and incrementally phase out nuclear energy. The first sign of France and Germany being in support of changing the status quo and setting up a long-term carbon neutrality strategy for the EU, arrived in 2018 with the Meseberg Declaration (Présidence de la République Française, 2018). The two signatory countries mentioned that carbon neutrality is "not only necessary, but also an economic opportunity". Subsequently, the declaration paved the way to several high-level ministerial working group discussions on climate change between German and French

counterparts that they labelled as the "Meseberg Climate Working Group". The bilateral discussions served the purpose of establishing closer cooperation on working out "how each economic sector can contribute to achieving medium and long-term climate goals, and how to use financial instruments such as the EU's budget for this purpose effectively" (BMUV, 2018). Even though initially German politicians showcased a degree of scepticism towards the feasibility of climate goals, the country eventually threw its weight behind an EU-wide target to cut net carbon dioxide emissions to zero by 2050 in June 2019. Purportedly, the Meseberg Working Group discussions played a significant role in German politicians' change of heart (Toplensky & Hook, 2019). Though, on 20 June 2019 Visegrad states blocked the inclusion of the climate neutrality target in the EUCO conclusions, which delayed political authorisation for a Commission proposal. Subsequently, on 16 October 2019 France and Germany issued the so-called French-German Declaration of Toulouse, the culmination of the Meseberg discussions, which not only coined the duo's wholehearted support of the EU reaching carbon neutrality by 2050, but also declared that "France and Germany advocate a rapid adoption of the European Green Deal to be proposed by President-elect Ursula von der Leyen" (BMUV, 2019).

Notwithstanding the fact that Visegrad states recognised the threat of climate change and the necessity to tackle global warming, their position was still closer to the status quo compared to the Franco-German proposition. Hence, Visegrad states pursued a foot-dragging tactic (Verdun, 2022) during the negotiation of the EU's Climate Law and the fit for 55 package. The French and German stance converged regarding a variety of fit for 55 tenets, and already in the Toulouse Declaration, the two countries pledged to reform and extend the ETS (BMUV, 2019). The Franco-German convergence had a significant implication for the Visegrad Group: even their closer ally and top trading partner, Germany was not on "their side". Due to the significant power asymmetry between the Franco-German axis and the subregion, the Visegrad Group rarely engaged in bilateral talks, and turned to the tactic of bypassing the hegemons, including Germany, via presenting alternative policy proposals, and the initial veto at the 2019 June EUCO. These findings support the proposition of Verdun (2022), who claimed that in case power asymmetry is deep between a hegemon and surrounding small states, then small states will resort to bypassing the local hegemon and instead will bargain with other like-minded neighbours. When it comes to the green taxonomy, power asymmetry was more moderate between Germany and the Visegrad states, provided France was a staunch advocate of labelling nuclear power as a clean source of energy. Accordingly, Visegrad states were more prone to invite German and even Austrian high-ranking politicians to multilateral talks in order to persuade them (see Figure 9, also irozhlas, 2020). Austria, which shares a border with all Visegrad states except Poland is bound by a national legislation to remain free of nuclear energy, and was a loyal ally of Germany during the negotiations. Eventually, after some failed attempts to persuade Germany, the Visegrad Group yet again resorted to bypassing, and together with other like-minded states, loudly campaigned for recognising nuclear power as green.

6.4 Conditions outside the sufficiency pathway

Figure 13 – The energy profile of V4 member states, and the EU average



Source: Author's own rendition based on Eurostat (2023)

Table 21 – The energy profile of V4 member states, and the EU average

	Solid fossil fuels	Oil, petroleum products and oil shale	Natural gas	Renewables and biofuels	Nuclear	Non-renewable waste
EU average y22	16%	4%	6%	43%	28%	2%
EU average y23	14%	4%	5%	46%	29%	2%
Czechia y22	45%	0%	1%	22%	31%	1%
Czechia y23	42%	0%	1%	23%	33%	1%
Hungary y22	7%	10%	11%	32%	38%	1%
Hungary y23	6%	11%	12%	33%	38%	1%
Slovakia y22	3%	0%	1%	32%	61%	3%
Slovakia y23	2%	0%	1%	31%	64%	3%
Poland y22	69%	2%	6%	23%	0%	2%
Poland y23	65%	2%	6%	26%	0%	2%

Source: Author's own rendition based on Eurostat (2023)

The final section of this chapter will discuss those conditions, which in Chapter 4 were identified as insufficient to render the Visegrad an effective actor. It should be noted though that in case a condition falls outside the solution term, it does not mean that the condition has no impact on the outcome. Conditions could be necessary, but insufficient too. The second, case study element of this thesis serves the purpose (among others) of analysing whether any of the conditions that did not form part of the solution term could be a necessary, but insufficient condition to trigger effective actorship. The previous chapter, Chapter 5, which unpacked the dynamics of the Visegrad cooperation during the EU's first attempt to reform the Dublin system remained inconclusive about the role of functional alignment, even after various alternative operationalisations were contemplated.

In contrast, Figure 13 and the corresponding Table 21 above demonstrate that functional alignment had a pivotal role in the formation of common a Visegrad stance. At first sight, Visegrad members showcase a palette of strikingly diverse energy mixes. Slovakia is a top student with a staggering over 90% CO_2-free energy mix, whereas Poland has a heavily coal and fossil fuel-based energy mix. Taking a closer look though will showcase certain synergies between V4 states. For instance, Hungary and Czechia too have a significant portion of fossil fuel-based energy production as a legacy of the Soviet past, which are dwarfed when juxtaposed by the Polish figures, yet it would cause considerable headaches to both countries to phase out immediately their fossil fuel operated power stations. In addition, almost carbon-free Slovakia has huge discrepancies between its poorest Eastern regions and the areas around the capital. Reliance on fossil fuel and less green solutions are more wide-spread in poorer areas, and for this reason the Slovak government also favoured a more incremental green transition (Interview 10). Thus, it can be concluded that all Visegrad countries could suffer from the negative externalities of a green transition, which does not take into consideration different starting points or does not respect the principle of solidarity.

Meanwhile, nuclear energy as a carbon-free alternative already plays an important role in all Visegrad states except Poland. At least one third of the energy consumed in Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia too is produced by nuclear power stations. Consequently, in case nuclear power is labelled as a clean, CO_2-free source of energy, the above countries need to devote less efforts to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 and could use EU investments to foster and sustain their existing nuclear facilities. Thus, three of the four Visegrad countries had a fundamental, functional interest in campaigning for a green taxonomy, that enlists nuclear energy too. Whereas Poland despite not having any existing nuclear power plants also vouched for the same goal, partly because nuclear energy is cheap and the construction of nuclear power plants is widely approved in the general population (see the section 6.3 above). Furthermore, Poland also expected reciprocal assistance from its Visegrad allies during the negotiation of policy elements that form the fit for 55 package. Hence, the Polish government was delighted to throw its weight behind nuclear energy, hoping that the heavily coal-reliant country could cajole allies behind slowing down the green transition (Interview 15).

Lastly, the negotiations related to the Green Deal is an interesting case when it comes to analysing the impact of ideological alignment between governments. Government change happened both in Slovakia and Czechia, in March 2020 and late December 2021 respectively (see Table 22 below). Thus, change in the country's leadership in Slovakia happened during the time when Visegrad actorship peaked, whereas in Czechia change happened after the peak. The inauguration of the new Slovak government led by Igor Matovič and the anti-corruption, right-leaning OLANO party at its helm did not trigger significant changes in terms of ideological alignment between Visegrad governments based on the CHES-Europe dataset. Nonetheless, Slovak interviewees highlighted that despite the populist appeals of OLANO, the lead governing party was deeply critical of the illiberal inclinations of the previous government (Interview 5, Interview 7, Interview 10, Interview 18, Interview 25). Furthermore, as a consequence, cooperation with the Visegrad Group was also increasingly perceived as undesirable (Interview 5, Interview 25). Nonetheless, since the policy package of the fit for 55 and the green taxonomy were rather technical, the Slovak administration remained on board with the rest of the group, and participated especially in those initiatives that demanded nuclear energy to be part of the green taxonomy (Interview 10). Fractures on the Visegrad unity started to gradually manifest though already in 2020 when more sensitive policy areas, such as the rule of law were at stake, at the time when the general regime of conditionality was negotiated (see Chapter 7).

The change in the Czech government (December 2021) happened only a few months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine (February 2022) and Czechia taking over the rotating presidency of the Council (July 2022) (see also Figure 9 above). The CHES dataset yet again showcased no deep ideological schism between Viasgrad governments as a result of the Czech general elections, and a new 5-party government attaining governing majority, with the SPOLU centre-right electoral coalition in its helm. Moreover, in the electoral manifesto of SPOLU on page 55, where foreign policy goals are listed, it is clearly stated that if the group rises to power, it "will continue strategic

Table 22 – Governing coalitions, PMs and Presidents in V4 countries between 2019 – 2023 (during the Green Deal negotiations)

Country	Cabinet term time	Election year/ start date of new govt	Party(ies)	Affiliation	PM	President
HU	2018 05 18 - 2022 05 24	2018	**FIDESZ** Alliance of Young Democrats – **KDNP** Christian Democrats	Right-wing, Christian, Conservative	Viktor Orbán FIDESZ	János Áder FIDESZ – elected by Parliament
	2022 05 24	2022	**FIDESZ – KDNP**			2022 05 10 onwards Katalin Novák FIDESZ till the presidential pardon scandal 2024 02 26
PL	2017 12 11 - 2019 10 12	2017 Szydło easily wins a no-confidence vote, yet has to resign	**PIS** Law and Justice Party	Right-wing, Christian, Conservative	Mateusz Morawiecki PIS	2020 07 12 Andrzej Duda. PIS re-elected for a second term
	2019 11 15 - 2023 12 12	2019	**PIS** (with smaller coalition partners as part of United Right alliance)			
CZ	2018 06 27 - 2021 12 17	2018 ANO single party minority govt. loses vote of no confidence	**ANO – ČSSD** Czech Social Democrats minority with external support from Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia **KSČM**	Liberal, anti-corruption platform with centre-right elements	Andrej Babiš ANO	Miloš Zeman, SPO Party of Civic Rights – 2 round popular vote
	2021 12 17 – today	2021 October (lengthy coalition talks with CEE standards)	Five party coalition made of a centre-right branch **ODS** Civic Democratic Party -**KDU-ČSL** Christian and Democratic Union - Czechoslovak People's Party and **TOP9** Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09 (also known as ***SPOLU*** electoral alliance), and a two-party anti-corruption platform **CPS** Czech Pirate Party – **STAN** Mayors and Independents	Centre-right	Petr Fiala ODS	2023 03 09 Petr Pavel independent supported by SPOLU

SK	2018 03 23 - 2020 03 20	2018 03 15 Robert Fico resigns after the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak	**Smer-SD** Direction-Social Democracy – **SNS** Slovak National Party - **Most–Híd** Inter ethnic party from the Slovak and Hungarian words for 'bridge'	Nominally centre-left, mix of centre-left centre-right	Peter Pellegrini Smer-SD	2019 06 15 (2-round popular elections in March) Zuzana Čaputová, Progressive Slovakia
	2020 03 20 – 2021 03 30	2020	Four-party coalition **OLANO Ordinary** People and Independent Personalities **SME Rodina** We Are Family **SAS** Freedom and Solidarity **ZL** For the People	OLANO is a populist, anti-corruption platform, the coalition govt had right-leaning affiliation	Igor Matovič OLANO	
	2021 04 01 – 2023 05 24	Matovič had to resign due to vaccine scandal and swapped seats with Finance Minister	**OLANO – SME Rodina – SAS – ZL**		Eduard Heger OLANO	
	2023 05 25 – 2023 09 30	After various scandals (EU-funds related, non-resignation of Heger) a number of ministers left the govt, and the PM also had to resign	**Caretaker government, experts**	N/A	Lajos Ódor	
	2023 10 23 - today	2023 early elections	**Smer-SD – HLAS-SD** Voice-Social Democracy	Nominally centre-left	Robert Fico Smer-SD	Zuzana Čaputová, 2024 06 15 Peter Pellegrini HLAS-SD assumed office

Source: Author's own rendition based on Casal Bértoa, F. (2023). Database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond, PSGo. Available at: whogoverns.eu

cooperation as part of the Visegrad Group" (ODS, 2021). Yet, Czech interviewees also confirmed that the new government was deeply critical not only of the actions of the previous Babiš administration, but also the illiberal Polish-Hungarian flank of the Visegrad Group. Therefore, the new government was interested in sustaining solely strategic partnership and was not keen on pursuing deeper, political

cooperation (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 15). Furthermore, the first point of the SPOLU manifesto under foreign policy goals emphasises that the electoral coalition wishes to “renew the tradition of "Havel" diplomacy[5]: and will support democracy, human rights, civil society and the transfer of transformation know-how to Ukraine, Belarus, Cuba, the Balkans, Georgia...” (ODS, 2021). Therefore, when the Russian invasion happened, Czechia also grew increasingly suspicious of Hungary and perceived participation in the Visegrad as undesirable, for some time even on a technical level. Later on, when in the second half of 2022 Czechia took over the Council rotating presidency and became responsible for smoothing out disagreements and closing various tenets of fit for 55 legislative package, a Czech civil servant familiar with the portfolio confirmed that the rotating presidency expected assistance and solidarity from Visegrad partners to facilitate the conclusions. (Interview 15). However, due to the growing animosity between the Hungarian and Polish governments, even technical coordination remained unfeasible during the second half of 2022 (Interview 15).

It is difficult to predict with counterfactuals whether the Visegrad Group could have remained an effective actor in the Green Deal negotiations if it was not for the war in Ukraine. It can be observed though that illiberalism had a more muted impact on their cooperation concerning technical, less sensitive policy fields. Slovakia remained committed to Visegrad initiatives even after the government change, and the Czech SPOLU perceived technical cooperation with the Visegrad as desirable, despite the fact that the new governments in both countries were critical of the illiberal inclinations of the other two Visegrad partners. However, when red lines were crossed and sensitive policies were at stake, illiberalism became a source of calamities between Visegrad members. Furthermore, it is important to note that illiberalism is a thin-centred ideology and a government can pursue illiberal politics at home, while still being committed to a liberal foreign policy. Therefore, the role of illiberal alignment or misalignment between members of a subregion when it comes to meso-level actorship should be examined separately in these two policy realms. As a final conclusion, it can be deduced that ideological alignment between members of a subregion is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient requirement to bolster subregional actorship. However, illiberalism may function as an extra glue (see Chapter 5) or a source of schism (see this chapter) between group members depending on the degree of alignment between governments in a given policy field.

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter aimed at assessing the dynamics of Visegrad actorship during the negotiations of the fit for 55 package and the green taxonomy, two policy processes, which ultimately relate to the EU’s Green Deal and green transition. After performing the QCA analysis, these cases were chosen for further case study investigation for two reasons. First, the green taxonomy case as opposed to

[5] See Chapter 2 for further information on what Havel diplomacy means. The expression is namesake to Václav Havel, first President of Czechia after the change of regime and establishing member of the renaissance of the Visegrad Group.

the migration and fit for 55 cases, is a deviant case, provided public opinion did not converge in Visegrad states regarding the use of nuclear power. Secondly, the previous chapter investigated a typical case, where actorship strengthened over time, whereas in this chapter both cases showcased the opposite dynamics, provided after the 2021 peak, Visegrad actorship withered away.

It has been observed that climate awareness and fear of climate change is pertinent in CEE countries too, and no sharp East-West divide could be identified when looking at public opinion poll results. Yet, when climate policies are formulated in a narrative of spending, a tangible South East-Central vs North-West divide emerges. The population of countries in CEE, not just in members of the Visegrad Group, but in Romania and Bulgaria too, are the least willing or least capable of spending more to speed up the green transition. Accordingly, the sovereignist narrative both in the speeches of lead Visegrad politicians and in concerted Visegrad communiques focussed on protecting citizens from high energy prices and energy poverty, which is imposed on the region by speculators and bureaucrats in Brussels. It's also been pointed out that Visegrad states were much more prone to engage in tactics of persuasion and invite Germany (and Austria) to bilateral talks about the green taxonomy, when power asymmetries were perceived as less severe, provided the French and German point of view did not align. Whereas, concerning the ETS, ETS2, the Modernisation Fund, and the ESR, Visegrad states pursued the tactic of bypassing the hegemons with alternative propositions and policy proposals, provided power asymmetry was perceived as more unequal.

Lastly, this chapter demonstrated the crucial importance of intertwining functional similarities. Even though functional conditions were not part of the solution term in the QCA analysis, which means they did not form part of the sufficiency pathway, this chapter concluded that the energy mix of Visegrad states inherited from the Soviet past played an important role in the V4 becoming an effective actor. Thus, functional alignment could be a necessary, but insufficient condition to trigger subregional actorship. However, further analysis would be required to ascertain such conclusions. In contrast, ideological alignment was proven to be neither necessary nor sufficient to bolster subregional actorship. Although, illiberalism could jeopardise cooperation between subregional member states in case not all of them pursue illiberal policy goals in a given policy area.

7 The end of the beginning or the beginning of the end?

7.1 Descriptive inferences of two negative cases

Before summarising the findings of this thesis and turning to the concluding remarks, the next paragraphs will present two negative cases, when the Visegrad group fell apart. Revisiting the definition of negative cases as a reminder, it should be noted that in the QCA table those instances of actorship were marked with a "0" on the outcome, when subregional members openly challenged one another; external actors recognised the fallout between subregional members; and autonomous policy channels, which were routinely used (rotating presidency, pre-Council meetings) in the past were reduced to a lower, technical level, or even sabotaged. Inactivity or simply the lack of coordination in a policy field was not classified as a negative case. This research project acknowledges that pathways of sufficiency that lead to positive and negative cases are not the exact mirror image of one another, and the QCA methodology allows the researcher to identify both (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). However, it fell outside the scope of this thesis to establish a sufficiency pathway to negative cases too. Therefore, the below paragraphs will strive to draw some descriptive inferences of the two negative cases, which were identified in Chapter 4. First, the actions of Visegrad member states during the negotiation of the general regime of conditionality, also dubbed as the Rule of Law (RoL) conditionality will be investigated, followed by the most significant rupture in the modern history of the Group since 1989, the falling apart of the Visegrad as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It should equally be recognised that the two negative cases are somewhat different in nature. Rifts between the Slovak and to some extent the Czech flank of the group versus the Polish-Hungarian tandem clearly manifested during the RoL conditionality negotiations; however, it did not prevent the group from becoming an effective meso-level actor in more technical policy areas. In fact, Visegrad actorship during the negotiation of the fit for 55 package and the green taxonomy peaked in 2021. Whereas, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Hungary's protest to carry out sanctions unanimously and support Ukraine with financial and military assistance stirred up such animosity between group members, that the Polish and Czech delegation routinely refused to attend high-level meetings, and at times also gatherings for technical coordination (Interview 28; Euronews, 2022b). Furthermore, in the year of 2022 solely four documents have been published on the V4's website, of which 3 predates the height of the calamities surrounding the negotiations of energy sanctions and assistance to Ukraine – end of March 2022. Whereas, in 2023 the Group remained inactive and published no joint communiques or position papers at all. A faint sign of activity resurfaced in July 2024, when Poland took over the one-year rotating presidency of the Group for the seventh time, and the Tusk government published its programme with a motto of "V4: Back to the Basics", which evokes the "foundations of the Visegrad cooperation such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law". It was the first and only publication on the group's website after 2022, as of the submission of the first draft of the thesis.

The below paragraphs will be structured as it follows: first, the RoL conditionality mechanism will be discussed, including the negotiation timeline, how V4 fallout evolved and the possible factors that contributed to disagreements. Then, using the same course of presentation, the EU's response to the war in Ukraine will be touched upon. Afterwards, the summary of the research project and the key findings of this thesis will be discussed. Finally, the closing paragraphs will summarise the theoretical and empirical take-aways of the thesis and its implications on future research concerning EU integration and EU decision-making. Even though ideological alignment was identified as neither necessary nor sufficient to trigger effective actorship at meso-level, the next two sections on negative cases will argue that illiberal misalignment between members of a subregion could be the primary cause of subregional actorship withering away.

7.1.1 The Visegrad and the Rule of Law conditionality mechanism

The European Commission after some repeated calls from the European Parliament to establish a new EU mechanism on the protection of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights (European Parliament, 2016), proposed a novel regulation on 2nd May 2018 (European Commission, 2018). The proposal attracted subdued attention till 2020, when discussions regarding the MFF cycle of 2021-27 gave a new impetus to the so-called Rule of Law (RoL) conditionality mechanism. Particularly the Frugal Four, together with other net-contributor states such as Finland campaigned for attaching extra guarantees to the EU budget, to protect EU funds from misuse and corruption (Interview 21). On 5th November 2020 the EP and the Council struck a deal on the RoL conditionality mechanism, which indicated that both institutions gave the green light to finalise the legislative process. The compromise contained significant changes compared to the Commission's original proposal. For instance, the original triggering mechanism to initiate the RoL tool would have entailed a reverse qualified majority vote (QMV) in the Council. In case the consultative phase, when the Commission engages in a thorough consultation with the member state that was notified about RoL violations, did not bear any results, the Commission could have proposed appropriate punitive measures, which should have been accepted or rejected in the Council based on reverse QMV arrangements (Zalan, 2020; Hegedus & Christiansen, 2024). Reverse QMV means that unless a qualified majority of Council members reject the punitive measures proposed by the Commission, the member state in question would need to bear the negative consequences. In contrast, the 5th November EP-Council compromise prescribed simple QMV in the Council to accept the punitive Commission proposal. EP members from the Renew, Greens/EFA and S&D Groups were disappointed at cancelling reverse QMV, which they deemed more robust than simple QMV, as it puts the burden of proof on the member state under investigation. However, for the sake of reaching a compromise and finalising the new RoL mechanism they dropped their opposition (Interview 8, Interview 21). Other alterations in the 5th November compromise included the renaming of the regulation and removing "generalised deficiencies as regards the rule of law" from the title; as well as emphasising with extra wording the need to establish a sufficient link between RoL violations and the budget in order to enact the tool (European Parliament, 2020).

Despite the fact that an agreement between the Council and the EP under OLP foreshadows the successful conclusion of the legislative process, Poland and Hungary due to an issue linkage between the MFF, the own resources regulation and the general regime of conditionality, managed to impose an overall veto on the package, provided the former two were subject to unanimity vote in the Council. The veto inflicted emergency talks in the European Council at the end of 2020. The EUCO conclusions granted further concessions to the two reticent member states. For instance, the conclusions establish a so-called emergency brake, which is a final lifeline for member states under investigation. Furthermore, the conclusions state, that the conditionality is applicable only to the new MFF cycle (Interview 20; European Council, 2020). Neither of these were part of the EP-Council agreement, hence legal experts as well as MEPs heavily criticised the EUCO for performing a legislative function, which is prohibited by Article 15(1) TEU (Interview 8, Interview 20, Interview 21). Lastly, the EUCO conclusions also gave room for delaying the implementation of the RoL mechanism, yet again as a concession to Poland and Hungary, as Paragraph 2c pointed out that the "Commission will not propose measures under the Regulation" unless the judgement of the Court of Justice is finalised and the Commission publishes a detailed implementation guideline (European Council, 2020). It should be noted that member states and EU institutions are free to initiate action for annulment against any piece of legislation within 2 months of the publication of a contested measure. However, setting out implementing conditions as requested in the December Conclusions was a debatable move, since they were neither debated by the EU's legislative bodies, nor were they mentioned in the 5th November compromise or the final version of Regulation 2020/2092 published on 16th December 2020 (European Parliament and the Council, 2020).

Several civil servants, who were involved in the negotiations confirmed that Visegrad member states had some coinciding interests during the negotiations of the RoL conditionality mechanism, however, none of them were advocated concertedly under the Visegrad banner (Interview 3, Interview 22). For instance, Slovakia, Czechia as well as other countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and even Italy wished to remove reverse QMV arrangements and stick to simple QMV in the triggering mechanism; and they were also keen to emphasise the financial rather than the RoL element in the instrument (Interview 18, Interview 20, Interview 22, Interview 25). Yet, the Visegrad label was scarcely mentioned, when it did emerge, a Slovak civil servant underlined that in his opinion Hungary tried to use the Group as a vehicle for pursuing its interests, that Slovakia and even Czechia could not tolerate (Interview 25). In fact, Czech and Slovak interviewees when asked about the RoL mechanism negotiations attempted to illustrate the administration of their countries as pragmatic and EU-realists instead of EU-critical (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 7, Interview 25). It was also confirmed by Commission representatives working at DG JUST and DG BUDG and a member of the Council Legal Services that the Slovak and Czech delegations were apparently contented with the 5th November compromise, they always saw the value of the RoL mechanism, and condemned the Polish-Hungarian veto (Interview 20 Interview 22, Interview 26). Lastly, Czechia and Slovakia unlike in the Dublin case, did not intervene on the side of

Hungary and Poland during the court proceedings of the request for annulment. In the Court judgement, which was published on 16 February 2022 interventions are listed at the end from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Spain, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden in support of the EP and the Council (Hungary v European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2022). Moreover, a Polish interviewee from the Council attempted to emphasise that the Court judgement was a beneficiary and necessary step for everyone to delineate the scope of the general regime of conditionality regulation (Interview 6), his Czech and Slovak counterparts did not deem the request for annulment as necessary.

In the previous chapters, especially in the green taxonomy and fit for 55 cases the Visegrad Group kept referencing to its concerted demands under the Visegrad banner even if other member states supported their stance, and even when the Visegrad tried to cajole additional like-minded states to a policy coalition. Whereas, in the RoL case, Slovakia and Czechia preferred to represent their interests solely on national terms, as part of an ad-hoc, invisible, non-politicised policy coalition together with Bulgaria, Romania and even Italy, without mentioning the Visegrad label. Accordingly, the actions of the Visegrad in the RoL case confirm the findings of the previous chapters: functional alignment in and of itself indeed is not conductive to effective actorship, hence, this condition falls outside the sufficiency pathway.

In search for why disagreement grew between the Czech-Slovak and Polish-Hungarian parts of the Group, interviewees gave a unanimous answer. Many of them, including Slovak, Czech and Hungarian civil servants, as well as EU officials highlighted that the government change in Slovakia in March 2020 resulted in an administration, which was deeply critical of the illiberal tendencies of the previous Fico and Pellegrini governments (Interview 1, Interview 16, Interview 22, Interview 25). An EU official from DG JUST described the government change both in Slovakia and later Czechia as ground-breaking in terms of cooperation on respecting the RoL (Interview 22). However, it is quintessential to note that the government change in Czechia happened only in December 2021, a year after the RoL conditionality regulation was published in the EU's Official Journal. Consequently, the Babiš government did not perceive itself as a RoL violator (Interview 19), and deemed cooperation with the Visegrad undesirable, despite the illiberal trends identified by academics in Czechia (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Guasti & Mansfeldova, 2024; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Havlík & Hloušek, 2021), and the presence of oligarch among top Czech politicians. Thus, the blocking of the RoL regulation through a veto on 19 November 2020 was entirely the project of the Polish-Hungarian cooperation without the tacit support of Slovakia and Czechia. Furthermore, interviewees also confirmed that removing from the title as well as the text of the regulation any reference to "generalised deficiency as regards the rule of law", was entirely orchestrated by Poland and Hungary, meanwhile, Slovak and Czech negotiation partners did not advocate for this alteration (Interview 3, Interview 9, Interview 16).

Notwithstanding the rift between the Czech-Slovak and the Polish-Hungarian flanks of the Visegrad in 2020, Slovakia as well as Czechia kept cooperating in the Visegrad format on technical policy areas, as it's been discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, the general regime of conditionality was politically sensitive enough to forge disagreement between the group members, but did not break the group. Whereas, after the invasion of Ukraine, interviewees have confirmed that Slovak, Czech and Polish politicians were vying to discover alternative formations and subregional units to represent their interests. Slovak and Czech civil servants at the Permanent Representation emphasised that the Slavkov Triangle, a cooperation between Czechia, Slovakia and Austria has a growing importance for both countries (Interview 2, Interview 15, Interview 25). Whereas, Polish interviewees highlighted the Polish-Baltics cooperation and the Three Seas Initiative (Interview 13, Interview 27). Thus, from the above analysis it can be concluded that ideology may not be a necessary or sufficient condition to bolster effective actorship (see Chapter 5 and 6), however, it might be a key driver of disagreement between subregional members. To arrive at this conclusion with certainty, further analysis is required though. Illiberalism is a thin-centred ideology, which may manifest differently in degree and intensity even within the same administration across various policy fields. Therefore, perhaps operationalising the illiberalism variable as fuzzy set QCA (fsQCA) instead of csQCA, which can also account for various degrees instead of the 0-1 coding, could be an improvement on this thesis, and an important take-away for those who wish to research the topic in the future.

7.1.2 The Visegrad and the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

So far, the case study part of this thesis focussed solely on policy areas, which relate to the internal affairs of EU member states. Two cases though, the Visegrad cooperation concerning the Balkan enlargement (a positive case), and the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (a negative case) both relate to foreign policy. The former would also be an interesting case for deeper analysis for two reasons. First, the sufficiency pathway identified in the QCA chapter works seamlessly even on the Balkan case. However, when accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia were a hot topic at the end of 2019, the Visegrad pursued a pace-setting agenda, instead of foot-dragging. Apparently, foot-dragging was represented by France (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, the sovereignist rhetoric of the group revolved around European security instead of repatriation of powers to national control. Thus, Visegrad cooperation on the Balkan issue is an exception, as in all the other cases the Visegrad Group acted as foot-dragger and demanded the repatriation of competences, or keeping competences at national instead of EU level. Interviewees also attested that Visegrad member states had different motivations for supporting the Balkan accession. The Fico and Pellegrini administrations in Slovakia, and the Orbán government in Hungary perceived Balkan accession as an opportunity to push the external borders of the EU even further to intercept the Balkan migratory rout. Whereas, the Babiš and Morawiecki administrations of Czechia and Poland respectively, urged the accession of Balkan states to minimise the risk of Balkan countries seeking assistance from Russia or China in the lack of EU support (Interview 16, Interview 24).

Even more interestingly, the Russia-friendly approach of Hungary was already obvious in 2014, which did not prevent its Russia-critical Visegrad allies from cooperating with Hungary on other foreign-policy and defence related issues. As a proof of Hungary's amicable relations to Russia, a month before the annexation of Crimea, Orbán and Putin sealed a deal on extending the Paks nuclear power station (the only nuclear power station of Hungary) with Russian assistance and technology. Nonetheless, not only did the Balkan cooperation flourish, but also Visegrad countries participated concertedly in the rotating EU Battlegroup format, under the banner of "Visegrad Battlegroup" (Interview 13, Interview 27). Although neither EU – hence nor Visegrad – Battlegroups have ever been deployed, two Polish interviewees, one from the Permanent Representation and the other from the EEAS described V4 cooperation on Battlegroups as plentiful and important (Interview 13, Interview 27). Furthermore, at the time when the European Peace Facility – in hindsight the tool that guaranteed the channelling of military support to Ukraine – was negotiated in 2018-2020, the Visegrad Group cooperated closely on influencing the governance mechanism of the tool, reducing the Commission's role, and keeping a geographical balance, so that EPF funds would be available to assist the Eastern neighbourhood, as well as the Balkans (Interview 16, Interview 27). However, it must be also noted that Visegrad cooperation on the EPF went under the radar, and was carried out on a more technical level, instead of coordination of high-politics, as no concerted position papers were issued, neither did high profile politicians communicate about common Visegrad interests regarding the EPF. In any case, it can be concluded that the illiberal foreign policy of Hungary did not jeopardise cooperation between Visegrad members until the Russian invasion in 2022, despite the fact that Hungary's gingerly approach towards Russia had been clearly recognised well before. These observations prove that subregions are opportunistic platforms of cooperation, and unless a significant cut-off point is reached, such as the invasion of Ukraine, technical cooperation persists. Lastly, the historic bond especially between Hungary and Poland (see Chapter 2) might have also played a role in the Polish government giving a blind eye to Orbán's friendliness towards Putin.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine thus indicated a novel chapter in the history of the Visegrad, as open animosity between member states to the extent that even technical cooperation is suspended and high-level meetings are repeatedly boycotted, has not happened ever before. V4 interests apparently converged on some policy issues, such as energy sanctions. One of the corner stones of the EU's response to the Russian invasion were financial and energy sanctions levied on Russian industries and individuals. The ban on importing crude oil and refined petroleum products form Russia was a significant tenet of the 6th sanction package (Council of the European Union, 2022). As heavily reliant countries on Russian crude oil through the Druzhba or Friendship pipeline, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary campaigned for exemptions. The Czech Finance Minister Zbyněk Stanjura described the total ban on trade with Russia proposed by the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki as 'not realistic'; meanwhile, Petr Fiala, Czech PM emphasised that "we are ready to support this decision (on sanctions including oil), given the Czech Republic will have some postponement" (Radio Prague International, 2022; Reuters, 2022a). Similarly, the Slovak

Economy Ministry during the negotiation of the 6th sanction package communicated that "if it comes to an approved embargo of Russian oil as part of a further package of sanctions against Russia, then Slovakia will request an exemption" (Reuters, 2022b). Yet neither Slovakia, nor Czechia wanted to be mentioned on the same platform as Hungary, which not only demanded a blanc check exemption from the oil ban without an end date, but also inflicted a last-minute veto on the 6th sanction package, due to a Russian patriarch, Patriarch Kirill being included on the sanction list of individuals (Euractiv, 2022). Meanwhile, concerning military support to Ukraine, a Hungary vs the rest of the Visegrad approach manifested. In the initial months of the war, back in April 2022, Czechia was the first to send Ukraine a dozen Soviet-made T-72 tanks (Bienvenu, 2023). In addition, in August 2022 Slovakia sent its S-300 air defence system to Ukraine, and in cooperation with Poland also handed over all of its 13 MiG-29 fighter jets that the country had (Muller, 2022; Reuters, 2023), during which air patrols over Slovakia were jointly performed by Czech and Polish forces (Interview 13).

It is easy to pinpoint the reason why the Visegrad cooperation fell apart as a consequence of the invasion of Ukraine: the Hungarian administration was the only one, which pursued a distinctly illiberal foreign policy. The Hungarian government challenged liberal democracy not only at home, but also foreign policy cooperation in a North-Atlantic frame. As a reminder, illiberalism was defined in Chapter 3 as "a distinct form of ideological reaction against hegemonic liberalism by those actors, who operate in countries, which experienced liberalism in the past three decades either internally or through foreign dependence" (Waller, 2024:372). However, it is difficult to single out a specific cause why illiberal trends and rhetoric emerge in one policy area, but fails to manifest in foreign policy, like in Poland. Ivan Krastev in a Financial Times article blames the legacy of empires, and the fact that Slovaks and Hungarians (just like people living in the territory of Bulgaria and Romania) never had to endure Russian occupation prior to the conclusion of the Second Word War (see Chapter 2), whereas those countries, which suffered a lengthy Russian occupation, such as Poland and the Baltics are "among the most ardent supporters of Ukraine" (Krastev, 2023; see also Chapter 2). Apparently, denouncing Russia is one of the few common denominators across all parties in Poland. Meanwhile, an opinion poll conducted by globsec in mid-2023 attests the general scepticism of Slovaks, Hungarians and Bulgarians towards supporting Ukrainian, surprisingly with Slovakia in the lead among sceptics (Globsec, 2023). In fact, the 2023 Slovak general elections resulted in Robert Fico's Smer party gaining majority, and forming a much more Russophile government compared to its predecessor. However, Krastev's shadow of empires theory cannot be generalised to Czechia or Romania, and the Heger administration in Slovakia. Therefore, an interesting topic for future research could be investigating the reasons why illiberalism becomes pertinent in some policy areas, and rejected in others by the same administration, in the same political environment.

7.2 Summary of the research design and key findings

This thesis set out to investigate the drivers of subregional actorship in EU decision-making processes. Subregions have always been important determinants of EU integration, and initially served as the precursor (BeNeLux) or stepping stone to integration (Baltic Assembly, Visegrad Group). However, as permissive consensus faded away, the existing literature that explains subregional actorship in the subregion-EU integration nexus, became outdated and unable to model subregional actorship. Over the past decade, subregions – both old and newly established ones – have played an increasingly protest role in policy processes, and employed foot-dragging tactics to slow down or altogether halt integration. To investigate the novel empirical dynamics of subregional activism, and to cover the theoretical gap in the literature, this thesis aimed at answering the following research question: "Under what circumstances do subregions become effective actors in EU-level negotiations?" via a mixed method research design. The first empirical section presented the findings of a csQCA investigation, where competing theories were tested based on set theoretic principles. After the careful theoretical delineation of what 'subregion' and 'effective actorship' mean, the QCA table was populated with 7 positive and 9 negative cases. The cases encompassed the actions of 3 subregions – namely, the New Hanseatic League, the Frugal Four, and the Visegrad Group – in relation to specific policy processes tied to a precise point in time, when the group first became an effective actor. Then, based on the results of the QCA, three cases, the Visegrad Group's role in the first round of Dublin reforms, in negotiating the fit for 55 package, and in compiling the green taxonomy were selected for in-depth case study analysis. The case study part of the thesis extended the analysis to the entire course of the legislative process, not just the precise point in time when the V4 became an effective actor, to unpack the dynamics of cooperation between Visegrad member states throughout the entire negotiation process.

The competing theories for QCA testing were formulated based on the coalition formation literature, and the post-functionalist literature in the discipline of EU studies. On the one hand, scholars have hypothesised that inter-state cooperation is embedded in systematic functional or ideological division lines, while, on the other hand a recent strand in the literature pinpointed that novel interacting cleavages induced by crises produce unstable, opportunistic coalitions, labelled as 'strange bedfellows' (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019; Eihmanis, 2024). This thesis represents a middle ground between the two, and hypothesised in line with the observations of Kriesi, that subregions are opportunistic platforms for EU member states to pursue their policy interests, however, cooperation between subregional member states is not entirely ad-hoc as some scholars have suggested (Eihmanis, 2024; Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024; Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019), rather, subregional fragmentation follows regional patterns of politicisation (Kriesi, 2016). The QCA analysis confirmed the hypothesis to be true, as the sufficiency term that results in effective actorship was determined as: (Publicop) ∗ (Sovereign) ∗ (FR_GR) → Effective actorships. More precisely, subregions became effective actors, if the policy under consideration was uniformly politicised in all member states, the political elite pursued a congruent sovereignist discourse in

relation to it, and the subregion's point of view was in opposition to the French (and/or) German stance.

The follow-up case study part also sought to determine whether any of the conditions mentioned in the analytical frame chapter, which did not make it to the sufficiency term, could qualify as necessary. It has been concluded that functional alignment was important during the Green Deal negotiations, as the energy mix of Visegrad states ultimately determined their policy stance. Fossil fuel-based energy production is significant in Czechia, Hungary and especially Poland, whereas in almost Co_2-free Slovakia, its much poorer Eastern region is particularly exposed to energy poverty. Thus, it was in the functional interest of all V4 countries to prevent too radical climate neutrality goals. In addition, nuclear power also plays a pivotal role in the energy mix of Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia. Poland as the only country without any nuclear power station was ready to support Visegrad initiatives on the green taxonomy, hoping in return reciprocal support when it comes slowing down the phaseout of fossil fuels. In contrast, no uniform patterns were discernible either concerning functional alignment or ideological alignment between Visegrad member states concerning the Dublin negotiations.

The only ideological factor, which had an impact on subregional actorship was 'illiberalism', a thin-centred ideology. Illiberalism was determined as neither necessary nor sufficient for triggering effective meso-level actorship at first place. Nonetheless, in case the governing parties of all member states pursued a counter-hegemonic narrative in a policy area, illiberalism could function as an extra glue between subregional member states, and as an amplifier of actorship. On the other hand, when some member states aligned with a liberal policy stance, and others refused it, animosity grew between them (see examples related to the negotiation of the Rule of Law conditionality mechanism and the EU's assistance to Ukraine). It should be noted though, that it fell outside the scope of this thesis to establish a sufficiency solution term for negative cases too. Lastly, case studies also shed light on case-specific idiosyncratic factors, which influenced actorship: such as the nomination of the Polish PM as EUCO President just before the outbreak of the refugee crisis, and the role of Czechia taking over the rotating Council presidency after a contested general election in the midst of negotiating the EU Green Deal.

As a final conclusion it can be stated, that this thesis provided novel empirical evidence and theoretical backing to the observations of Kriesi (2016). In addition, it also promulgated important observations regarding the nature of subregional activism, once permissive consensus ended. Thus, EU member states choose to make their voice heard as part of a vocal and visible subregional formation during EU policy negotiations in most cases to slow down or halt the advance of integration fuelled by the Franco-German motor; and in order to legitimise the stance of their governments at home via pleasing and shaping the public opinion through a sovereignist discourse. Broadly speaking, the politicisaiton of policy areas, in which subregions rose to effective actorship indeed reflected regionally embedded conflict structures (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019) between old,

more economically well off, open EU members vs new, economically disadvantaged, closed EU member states.

7.3 Theoretical and empirical implications, take-aways for the future

The main empirical achievement of this thesis was pinpointing and defining novel, meso-level actors in EU decision-making, namely the presence of subregions. Classic EU integration theories such as liberal intergovernmentalism and neo-functionalism fail to recognise the importance of meso-level actors and consider solely member states or supranational EU institutions as the sole defining players of where the EU should be heading. It has been observed that subregions differ from simple ad-hoc policy coalitions, as they showcase geographical coherence, cooperate on several policy-initiatives, not just a single policy item, and they are largely recognised by other actors too. The formation of policy coalitions between member states is the bread and butter of negotiations in Council settings, however, such coalitions are scarcely discussed in the media, or become widely visible. This thesis also presented a solid theory-based framework for defining actorship and when subregions can be considered as effective actors in policy negotiations. It is expected that meso-level actors will keep defining EU integration at such moments when an issue becomes politicised along regionally embedded conflict structures. Therefore, this thesis could be an anchor for future research on subregionalism and subregional actorship.

Furthermore, all cases presented in the QCA table refer to instances of foot-dragging (Börzel, 2002), which had important policy implications – in some cases more profound (New Hansa and Frugal Four cooperation on averting fiscal integration, Visegrad cooperation on migration policies) while in others less significant (Visegrad cooperation on Green Deal). Although it is hard to outright claim that all policy changes were a result of subregional activism, clear congruences can be observed between subregional demands and final, EU-level policy outcomes. The strengthening of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and avoiding new supranational instruments to deal with the consequences of the Financial Crisis were among the demands of the New Hanseatic League, which duly manifested in the EU's policy solutions. Similarly, the Frugal Four was a key player in resisting the introduction of Eurobonds in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and downgrading the portion of grants in the RRF instrument. As the most tangible policy-related result of effective subregional actorship, the Visegrad Group managed to delay the Dublin reforms for over 6 years. The Group on the side of France also demanded the inclusion of nuclear energy in the green taxonomy – a less ambitious step towards protecting the environment – which duly emerged in the Commission's delegated act published on 15th July 2022. On the other hand, the only concession that the Group managed to achieve concerning the Fit-for-55 package was the increase of the Modernisation and the Social Climate Funds, as the invasion of Ukraine put a temporary end to amicable relations between Visegrad states. Although it is an important observation that subregional actorship in the period of 2015-2023 aimed at slowing down progress, future research should go into the nitty-gritty details whether policy changes were indeed the result of subregional activism. While research, that clearly connects the failure of the Dublin reforms to

Visegrad activism is available (Zaun, 2018; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023), the policy implications of all the other cases of subreginal activism remain under-researched. The policy-oriented approach could be a fitting complementary take on the topic of subregionalism, as this thesis focussed on a rather procedural, tactical formulation of subregional activism.

Theoretically, this research project has demonstrated that effective subregional actorship is the product of vanishing permissive consensus in EU member states. Thus, it also supports the work of those, who challenged that the European political system would move towards a normalisation of left-right dynamics at EU-level (Bokhorst & Schoeller, 2024; Eihmanis, 2024; Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024; Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019). However, as opposed to the above scholars, who argue that postfunctional coalitions are ad-hoc and cajole together occasional bedfellows, this thesis argued that in line with the observations of Kriesi (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Kriesi, 2016), politicisation both at the level of public opinion and political discourse may follow regionally embedded patterns. This thesis simply pointed at the presence of congruent politicisation along regional divisions, and did not investigate the root cause of such divisions, which could be an important topic of future research. Furthermore, it is quintessential to note that this research focussed on interaction between member states in Council settings, and hence recognises that ideological affiliation might still be the dominant coalition building principle in other institutions, such as the European Parliament.

As a potential limitation and improvement on this thesis, it is recognised that the csQCA operationalisation of the illiberalism variable might not be the most suitable approach. Illiberalism as a thin-centred ideology could manifest to different degrees and intensity depending on the policy area in question. Therefore, a fuzzy set (fsQCA) operationalisation might be more appropriate. The coding of variables is ultimately determined by the literature, which provide cues for where certain thresholds may lie. Yet, it is a general criticism towards the QCA methodology in general (both fuzzy and crisp set coding) that such thresholds are determined in a somewhat arbitrary manner (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009). The binary coding of all conditions, including illiberalism was still practically useful for a number of reasons. First, in this thesis, the coding of conditions referred to subregions and how governemnts of subregional member states converge along ideological, political, and other lines. If illiberalism was operationalised on a scale, it would have been harder and perhaps even more arbitrary to determine whether and how members of a subregion converge on the illiberalism condition. Therefore, theis thesis embarked upon the binary coding of 1 if all members of a subregion showcased illiberal trends and 0 if there was no convergence on illiberalism. If the coding would have referred to singular governments, and the extent to which they are illiberal, fuzzy-set coding would have been an imperative.

Secondly, due to time limitation and technical obstacles, it would have been difficult to combine crisp and fuzzy set coded conditions in the same QCA table. Essentially, if one variable was coded as fuzzy set, it would have inflicted the coding of all other variables too as fuzzy set, which again

propel issues regarding cues in the literature and finding appropriate thresholds. Thus, it is recognised that the thesis limited illiberalism to a thin-centred ideology manifested in a counter-hegemonic narrative vis-à-vis the EU (Laurelle, 2022), which was the lowest common denominator between all governments with illiberal tendencies. It should be noted though, that illiberalism has varying faces. For instance, the rise of illiberal leaders through elections in Hungary and Poland led to oligarchical concentrations of economic power, whereas, it was the other way around in Czechia, oligarchical concentrations of economic power helped the victory of the Babiš government, that operated with illiberal undertones (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018). In addition, differences exist even between Hungary and Poland, which are often mentioned on the same page as reticent, illiberal sates. Madlovics and Bálint deem the Polish PiS governemnt much more ideologically coherent and less focussed on personal connections, economic benefits and political gains – see the abortion case – compared to the Orbán-led Fidesz government in Hungary, which prioritise personal economic gains, and electoral victory above ideological missions (Madlovics Bálint, 2023). Such detailed analysis though fell outside the scope of this thesis.

As another limitation, it should be emphasised that the Visegrad Group in the Balkan accession case acted as pace-setter, instead of challenging the advance of integration, which should deserve more attention to offer a possible explanation. Lastly, this project focussed solely on identifying the circumstances, which prompt effective subregional actorship, while it failed to determine the sufficiency pathway to subregional members becoming hostile towards one another, or staying inactive in a policy area. Therefore, future research perhaps should operationalise the outcome as a three-way street (effective actorship, inactive actprship, failed actorship) instead of a binary 0-1 coding.

List of interviews		
Numbering	**Interviewee**	**Time and location**
Interview 1	Czech civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 05 05 11.00, online
Interview 2	Czech civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 05 10 15.00, telephone call
Interview 3	Former German civil servant, legal advisor	2023 05 16 14.00, online
Interview 4	Austrian civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 05 22 11.45, online
Interview 5	Slovak civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 05 22 15.00, online
Interview 6	Polish civil servant from the Council of Ministers, Legal Adviser	2023 05 25 13.00, in person, Brussels
Interview 7	Slovak civil servant from the Council of Ministers, Legal Adviser	2023 05 26 14.30, online
Interview 8	Legal Adviser at the Greens/EFA	2023 05 30 11.00, online
Interview 9	German civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 05 31 15.30, online
Interview 10	Slovak civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 06 01 9.00, in person, Brussels
Interview 11	MEP, GUE/NGL	2023 06 01, answered questions via e-mail
Interview 12	Civil servant working at DG ENER	2023 06 02 9.00, in person, Brussels
Interview 13	Polish civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 06 02 10.30, online
Interview 14	MEP, S&D	2023 06 02 12,10, in person, Brussels
Interview 15	Czech civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 06 05 10.30, online
Interview 16	Former Hungarian civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 06 05 15.00, online
Interview 17	Tandem of three civil servants working at DG HOME	2023 06 06 10.00, online
Interview 18	Former Slovak civil servant and legal adviser from the Council of Ministers	2023 06 07 9.00, online
Interview 19	Adviser working for an EPP MEP	2023 06 07 14.00, in person, Brussels
Interview 20	Legal Adviser at the Council Legal Services	2023 06 07 16.45, in person, Brussels
Interview 21	MEP, Renew involved in prominent position in the creation and triggering of general regime of conditionality	2023 06 08 12.00, in person, Brussels
Interview 22	Civil servant working at DG JUST	2023 06 08 17.00, in person, Brussels
Interview 23	MEP assistant working at ECR	2023 06 09 15.00, in person, Brussels
Interview 24	Former Hungarian civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 06 12 11.00, online

Interview 25	Slovak civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2024 06 14 9.00, online
Interview 26	Civil servant working at DG BUDG	2023 06 16 10.00, online
Interview 27	Polish civil servant working at the EEAS	2023 06 21 12.00, online
Interview 28	Hungarian civil servant from the Council of Ministers	2023 06 22 10.00, online

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