

Democratization Prospects and Challenges in Central and Eastern Europe after the Cold War: A Focus on the Visegrad Group in the Context of European Integration

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Abstract. This research focuses on democratization and consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically examining the Visegrad Group (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) after the Cold War and EU Eastern Enlargement. Using different democratization and European Integration theories, it explores the factors influencing democratization, consolidation, and stability in this region. This study analyzes the transition from communism to democracy, the impact of European Integration on democratization, and the role of civil society organizations in promoting democratic values. It acknowledges the challenges posed by populism and illiberalism and suggests practical policy solutions to strengthen democratic values and stability in Central and Eastern Europe.

1 Introduction

The historical denouement of the Cold War brought forth a momentous inflection point in Central and Eastern Europe, marking the cessation of Soviet hegemony and the transition of this region from communist rule to democratic governance. This transformative phase engendered notable attributes in the democratization trajectory, wherein participatory political systems supplanted erstwhile authoritarian regimes.

During the democratization process within Central and Eastern Europe, the Visegrad Group countries, including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, successfully navigated various challenging aspects such as developing market-oriented economic systems, ensuring political inclusivity, and establishing the rule of law. Moreover, the democratization process within the Visegrad Group was carried out in the context of European Integration, the EU's significant role in promoting democracy and stability in the region.

However, the process of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe encountered challenges. The rise of populism and the growth of illiberalism presented significant obstacles to the progress made in democratization. As a result, it is crucial to remain watchful and vigilant to protect the achievements and progress attained in this domain.

This study employs an extensive theoretical framework to analyze the challenges and possibilities pertaining to democratization and the consolidation of democratic principles in Central and Eastern Europe, with a particular focus on the Visegrad Group countries. The research explores the historical and political contexts that shaped the

democratization process, identifies the catalysts behind democratization, consolidation, and stability within the Visegrad Group, and assesses the influence of European Integration in promoting democratic reforms.

Furthermore, this study puts forth a set of policy recommendations aimed at bolstering democratic institutions and ensuring enduring regional stability.

2 Historical Background

2.1 The Formation of Eastern Bloc after World War II

As World War II concluded, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain faced mounting tensions regarding the future of Germany. Two crucial conferences in 1945, before and after the war's official end, set the stage for Europe's Cold War division.

In February of that year, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin convened at Yalta in the Crimea region to discuss the post-World War II European reorganization. Each leader had a unique vision for rebuilding war-torn Europe, with Roosevelt emphasizing Soviet participation in the newly created United Nations and requesting their support to help end the ongoing war in the Pacific against Japan. Churchill, in contrast, called for free and fair elections, specifically in Central and Eastern Europe, with a focus on Poland, to establish democratic regimes. Conversely, Stalin sought a "sphere of influence"

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for the Soviet Union in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, as a geopolitical buffer between the Soviet Union and the Western capitalist world.^[1]

During the final weeks of the Second World War, Soviet forces made significant progress on the Western front, pushing the Nazi army to Berlin, and ultimately ending the war with Soviet troops occupying multiple states in Central and Eastern Europe, including the eastern portion of Germany. As the war progressed, the USSR absorbed three previously sovereign Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as a section of Romania which was established as the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. In the remaining Central and Eastern European states, they occupied, the USSR extended its assistance to establish hardline communist governments modeled after their own system. While the four major allied powers jointly occupied Germany and Austria, they explored differing futures for the two countries. The victorious Western powers ultimately founded the Federal Republic of Germany in the West, based on market-based systems, whereas the USSR founded the German Democratic Republic in the East, built on hardline socialist principles.

The escalating hostility and fear of further communist expansion prompted the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Conversely, the USSR established the Warsaw Pact in response to the Western allies permitting rearmament in West Germany and the pact's official signing took place in Warsaw. Throughout its existence, the Warsaw Pact's member governments executed repressive policies, including extreme limitations to freedom of speech and opposition party repression. Additionally, extensive spy networks were established to keep track of citizens suspected of opposing the governing regimes. While the states of the Warsaw Pact enjoyed better living standards than the Soviet Union, they still fell significantly behind those of Western Europe.

The political and social control in Central and Eastern European countries was weaker than in the Soviet Union. The region faced added risks due to strong nationalist sentiments against the Soviet Union. After Stalin's death in 1953, the new Soviet leadership made policy adjustments toward Central and Eastern Europe. They granted some economic autonomy to these countries and aimed to improve relations with Yugoslavia to ease tensions within the socialist bloc.^[2] In 1955, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia signed the "Belgrade Declaration," emphasizing non-interference in each other's affairs. The Soviet Union acknowledged the diversity of paths to socialism during the process of normalizing relations. At the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, the cult of personality around Stalin was denounced.^[3]

On February 14, 1956, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) commenced at the Kremlin. This was the first party congress held after Stalin's death. Khrushchev had already assumed the highest leadership positions within the party and the country. During this congress, Khrushchev addressed three theoretical issues concerning the international situation: peaceful coexistence, peaceful transition, and peaceful competition. On the final late-night session of the congress, Khrushchev delivered a secret report titled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," primarily focusing on a critique of

Stalin. This "secret report" sent shockwaves through the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, the entire socialist bloc, and indeed, the world at large.

2.2 Resistance of Central and Eastern Europe against the Soviet Model during the Cold War: A Case Study of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia

Notwithstanding the initial reception of Soviet troops as liberators who expelled Nazi forces from Central and Eastern Europe, the local inhabitants rapidly developed apprehension towards Stalinist doctrine and the newly appointed communist leaders.

2.2.1 Poznan June in Poland

In the early days of June 1956, the city of Poznan in western Poland witnessed a pivotal episode. Workers at the Stalin locomotive factory voiced their demands for improved wages, reduced prices, and lighter tax burdens from the government. Upon facing the refusal of their requests, a delegation of 30 workers ventured to Warsaw, seeking redress for their concerns. Dishearteningly, the delegation encountered an unsatisfactory response, compounded by the unsettling prospect of street protests being met with the deployment of tanks. This unpalatable outcome stirred emotions among the workers at the Stalin factory, leading them to a collective decision: a strike and protest slated for June 28th. On the day designated for the strike, a congregation of more than 10,000 workers coalesced, embarking on a march toward Stalin Square. This demonstration witnessed the organic inclusion of laborers from other factories within the city, alongside a multitude of individuals who spontaneously joined the procession. Among these participants were foreign visitors attending the Poznan International Fair.^[4]

A delegation duly elected by the protesters sought an audience with the authorities to ventilate their grievances, but their entreaty was met with rejection. This juncture marked the diffusion of rumors suggesting the apprehension of the representatives dispatched to Warsaw. The propagation of such unsettling tidings further inflamed the sentiments of the assembly, catalyzing a transformation of what had hitherto been a peaceful demonstration into a vortex of violent tumult. Portions of the crowd commenced a fervent assault on government edifices, including the radio station, and audaciously unsealed prison gates, culminating in the release of incarcerated individuals and the conflagration of confidential archives. Further disconcertingly, there emerged reports of individuals seizing control of the prosecutor's office and the courthouse, resulting in the confiscation of firearms and the orchestration of assaults against law enforcement personnel.

In response to the escalating turmoil, the Polish administration invoked the deployment of security contingents and deployed tanks to subdue the escalating discord under cover of nightfall. The events that unfolded in Poznan left a sobering wake: 74 fatalities, more than 575 injuries, the

apprehension of more than 658 individuals, and a calculable quantum of material damage approximating 3.5 million zlotys.^[5]

2.2.2 Hungarian Revolution of 1956

In the autumn of 1956, a resolute uprising unfurled within Hungary, orchestrated with the aspiration of unseating the rigid communist authorities and ushering in a regime chosen through democratic processes. The crucible of this movement lay in Budapest, where the apprehension of student demonstrators served as the catalyst for a conflagration of revolutionary fervor that consumed the entire nation. The prevailing government structure crumbled, and the shackles imprisoning political dissidents were cast aside as newfound liberty coursed through the social fabric.

During the interregnum, an ad interim administration took center stage, propounding a visionary agenda inclusive of Hungary's disengagement from the Warsaw Pact and the inception of unfettered electoral processes. Regrettably, the arc of destiny took a harrowing turn within a mere span of days: the Soviet Union orchestrated an intervention, an iron-fisted response that ruthlessly suppressed the nascent movement of self-determination. This calculated maneuver entailed a significant cost, with the toll of lives lost stretching beyond mere numbers to encapsulate the shattered dreams of more than 2,500 Hungarians and a conservative estimate of approximately 700 Soviet soldiers, victims of the days of tumultuous violence that ensued.

In the wake of this seismic event, the Soviet Union saw to the installment of a freshly sanctioned draconian regime, one that expediently embarked on a crusade to apprehend and incarcerate all those even tangentially associated with the audacious uprising. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 served as an unequivocal and indelible testament, laying bare the unwavering resolve of the USSR to quash with unyielding resolve any aspirations harbored by the Central and Eastern European states to extricate themselves from the gravitational pull of Soviet dominion. This pivotal moment underscored the inviolable boundaries of Moscow's influence, effectively delineating the contours of permissible dissent within the Soviet sphere of control.^[6]

2.2.3 Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia

During the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union experienced a paradigmatic shift attributable to the tenets of de-Stalinization, a doctrine that precipitated a proliferation of autonomous and clandestine literary and informational expressions, ushering in nascent discourses of transformative change. Amid this evolving landscape, the geographical expanse of Czechoslovakia bore witness to the burgeoning of a novel ideological movement intent on orchestrating a comprehensive overhaul of its ailing economic apparatus and the amelioration of its rigid policy framework.

In the history of Czechoslovakia, a significant turning point was the rise of Alexander Dubcek to leadership in 1968. During his leadership, he introduced a new idea

known as "Socialism with a human face." Dubcek took careful steps to make things more relaxed. He allowed more freedom in the media, which meant people could express themselves more openly. He also started to make the controlled economy more open and flexible. These changes led to a new atmosphere where people could talk more openly and discuss topics like communism and their relationship with the Soviet Union in a more detailed way. This was a big change from before.

On the other hand, in the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev rose to power after Nikita Khrushchev was removed from the top position. Brezhnev saw that his predecessor's more lenient policies were causing problems, so he started making the country's rules stricter. This was happening around the same time as changes were happening in Czechoslovakia. Brezhnev thought these changes in Czechoslovakia were a big problem because they went against the main ideas of the Soviet system and the power the Soviet Union had in that area. He strongly told Dubcek, the leader of Czechoslovakia, to stop the reforms he was making. Dubcek, however, stood up against Brezhnev's demands, showing he was determined to continue with the changes he believed in. The situation escalated in August 1968 when Brezhnev used the Warsaw Pact to order a large military intervention in Czechoslovakia. Many troops and armored units were sent in, and they took control of Prague. Despite this show of force, the people of Czechoslovakia didn't give up. They organized peaceful protests in Prague to show their resistance.

The aftermath of this intervention crystallized with the replacement of Dubcek by a more pliant figure, a change that was underscored by his relegation to a subordinate role within the Forestry Service. The events that transpired served as the inaugural volleys of an enduring historical doctrine known as the "Brezhnev Doctrine," a strategic posture that affirmed the prerogative of the Soviet Union to wield force as a potent instrument for the preservation of the rigid communist underpinnings within the domains of the Warsaw Pact. This doctrine laid bare the parameters of permissible dissent within the Eastern Bloc and firmly delineated the contours within which the Soviet dominion could and would wield its influence.^[7]

2.3 The Transformation of Eastern Bloc: From Solidarity to Dissolution of the Warsaw Pact

During the 1980s, dissident movements emerging from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries aligned with the Warsaw Pact began to capture international attention. Eminent personalities such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who had experienced incarceration within the Gulag system, nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov, and Czech playwright Vaclav Havel, undertook the clandestine dissemination of subversive literary works. These clandestine efforts sought to galvanize opposition against the prevailing authoritarian regimes, despite the formidable crackdowns imposed upon such expressions.^[8]

Concurrently, the rise of Solidarity, a Polish trade union, gained traction within the nation after a succession of labor strikes that reverberated in 1980. The organization,

though confronted with severe state-sanctioned suppression, managed to sustain its activities throughout the decade. The catalytic events of 1980 invigorated anti-communist sentiments and sentiments of dissent. The ideological landscape shifted further with the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev's policy initiatives encompassing glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), which ushered in a degree of liberalization within the Soviet economic framework and the tolerance for more open discourse. This recalibration breathed new vitality into anti-communist movements across Central and Eastern Europe. However, the entrenched conservative leadership in these Eastern Bloc countries, notably East Germany, remained obstinate in their resistance to Gorbachev's reformist overtures. Strikingly, by 1989, the Central and Eastern European communist states displayed a paradoxical fidelity to the principles of Soviet-style communism that even surpassed the Soviet Union itself.

As 1989 unfolded, burgeoning restiveness precipitated mass mobilizations and street demonstrations across the region. Signaling a departure from the Brezhnev Doctrine, Gorbachev publicly indicated his disavowal of employing Soviet military forces to salvage the beleaguered communist regimes within the Eastern Bloc. A pivotal juncture materialized when, in 1989, Solidarity achieved a historic milestone by becoming the foremost non-communist entity to secure electoral victory within the Warsaw Pact sphere. Simultaneously, communist regimes across the alliance found themselves dislodged from their positions of power during a wave of revolutions. Romania stood as an exception; its transformative trajectory was marred by violent upheaval culminating in the execution of long-standing leader Nicolae Ceausescu on Christmas Day of that same year.

In 1991, the constituent states of the Warsaw Pact collectively opted for the dissolution of the alliance. After this dissolution, several erstwhile member countries have subsequently aligned themselves with NATO, including the trio of Baltic states that achieved sovereign independence after their separation from the Soviet Union.^[9]

3 Establishment of the Visegrad Group

The Visegrad Group, an amalgamation encompassing four countries nestled within Central and Eastern Europe—namely Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—materialized as a salient and pivotal entity against the backdrop of the recalibrating geopolitical currents that ensued in the aftermath of the Cold War's culmination. Anchored in the contours of historical junctures, this assemblage, christened in homage to the Hungarian township of Visegrad where its seminal convocation unfolded, occupies a distinct niche within the region's annals. It crystallizes a collective yearning for synergistic endeavors, equilibrium, and a seamless convergence in the swiftly metamorphosing terrain of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe.^[10]

3.1 Emergence and Objectives of the Visegrad Group: A Regional Collaborative Endeavor in the Post-Communist Era

The origins of the Visegrad Group can be traced back to a transformative period in Central and Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This era was characterized by profound changes, notably marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismantling of Eastern Bloc. These events created a unique opportunity for countries that had previously been under communist rule to chart new courses for their future.

Amid this shifting landscape, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia recognized the potential advantages of regional cooperation in advancing their political, economic, and security interests. The context of shared historical and cultural ties further solidified the foundation for their collaboration. The core principles of the Visegrad Group were deeply rooted in their historical connections. These principles encompassed a commitment to democratic governance, market-oriented economies, and a strong desire to integrate into Western institutions, such as the European Union and NATO.

The group's early objectives were grounded in the ideals of peaceful cooperation, mutual respect, and a collective ambition to address the challenges posed by the transition from centrally planned to market-driven economies. Formally, the Visegrad Group was established on February 15, 1991, when the leaders of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia convened in the town of Visegrad and signed a joint declaration outlining their shared goals and aspirations.

Subsequently, the group expanded with the inclusion of Slovakia in 1993, following the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia. In its initial years, the Visegrad Group concentrated on key priorities, with a primary focus on economic transformation and integration. These countries engaged in the exchange of experiences, strategies, and best practices, which proved invaluable in navigating the intricate processes of privatization, deregulation, and structural reforms. This collaborative approach underscored the significance of mutual support and knowledge sharing during the early stages of their cooperation.^[11]

3.2 The Visegrad Group's Role in Shaping European Integration and Cooperative Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe

The Visegrad Group achieved a monumental milestone by playing a pivotal role in facilitating the accession of its member states to both the European Union (EU) and NATO. The unwavering commitment of these countries to democratic principles and market-oriented economies proved instrumental during the complex negotiations for membership in these prestigious international organizations. This successful integration not only deepened their political and security ties but also underscored the potency of regional collaboration in achieving shared objectives.

The Visegrad Group's journey is characterized by significant accomplishments, with its members successfully navigating the intricate processes required for EU and NATO membership. Their commitment to democratic

governance and market-oriented economic reforms served as a strong foundation for the accession negotiations. These accomplishments were a testament to the group's ability to work cohesively, leveraging their collective strength to overcome challenges and seize opportunities.

However, as the Visegrad Group evolved, it encountered challenges, including disparities in national interests and priorities among its member states. These differences tested the unity of the group and required adept diplomatic navigation to reconcile varying perspectives. Furthermore, the addition of Slovakia to the EU and NATO necessitated adjustments within the group's dynamics. Nevertheless, despite these complexities, the Visegrad Group remained a valuable platform for coordination and cooperation, particularly in advocating for the interests and concerns of its member states within the European Union.

The formation of the Visegrad Group represented a pivotal moment in the history of Central Europe. It symbolized the collective aspirations of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia to transcend their communist past and forge a shared future grounded in democratic governance, economic prosperity, and collaborative security. The group's journey stands as a testament to the power of regional cooperation in shaping the trajectories of countries during times of transformative change. It has left an indelible mark on the history of post-communist Europe, serving as an enduring reminder of the potential for collective action and cooperation in pursuit of common goals.^[12]

4 Political Democratization: Tracing the Polity Shift of the Visegrad Group from Communism to the Present Era

After the Cold War, political democratization became an important aspect of Central and Eastern Europe, and the promotion of the establishment of democratic polities was a central element of political democratization. Semi-presidential and parliamentary systems of governance were generally established in Central and Eastern Europe after the Cold War. Overall, these two regimes have played a positive role in promoting democratic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. However, despite their overall good performance, both systems of governance in Central and Eastern Europe have experienced some problems, such as cabinet instability, conflict between the executive powers of the president and the prime minister, too many parliamentary parties, and monopolization of parliamentary, cabinet, and presidential positions by a single party.^[13]

Within the Visegrad Group, both the Czech Republic and Hungary opted for a parliamentary system of governance, while Poland and Slovakia (after January 14, 1999) opted for a semi-presidential system of governance. The establishment of the new form of governance was marked by the introduction of new constitutions.

The timing of the introduction of the constitutions and the establishment of the form of governance in these four countries can be found in **Table 1**. below.

Table 1. Date of Adoption of New Constitutions and Forms of Governance in the Visegrad Group Countries

Country	Polity	Date of Adoption of the New Constitution
The Czech Republic	parliamentary system	December 16, 1992 (Effective January 1, 1993)
Hungary	parliamentary system	August 24, 1990
Poland	semi-presidential system	April 2, 1997 (adopted by referendum on May 25, 1997, and entered into force on October 17, 1997)
Slovakia	parliamentary system (Before 1999) semi-presidential system (After 1999)	The parliamentary system of governance was established on September 1, 1992, by the adoption of a new Constitution, which entered into force on October 1, 1992, and on January 14, 1999, Slovakia changed its Constitution from a parliamentary to a semi-presidential system of governance.

4.1 Parliamentary Systems of Governance in the Czech Republic and Hungary

In the wake of the Cold War, the Czech Republic and Hungary embraced a parliamentary system of governance driven by historical context and practical considerations.

4.1.1 Parliamentary Legacy and Transformations: Hungary's and Czechia's Political Trajectories in Historical Perspective

Hungary's rich parliamentary heritage traces its origins back to the 13th century, firmly establishing it as one of the earliest examples of legislative assemblies in global history. This enduring tradition has played a pivotal role throughout Hungary's political evolution, with significant parallels to the governance model employed by the United Kingdom. Across the centuries, the parliamentary platform has consistently been at the heart of Hungary's governance, serving as a driving force in shaping the nation's destiny.

As the 20th century dawned, Hungary, like many European countries, experienced a series of seismic shifts in its political landscape. Following World War I, on August 1, 1919, Hungary gained independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire while still adhering to the idea of a constitutional monarchy. However, the country's course took an abrupt turn with the leadership of Miklós Horthy, whose regency ushered in a period of rapid transformation, ultimately leading to a temporary phase of dictatorial rule.

Similarly, in February 1920, Czechoslovakia established a constitutional framework that solidified a parliamentary system as the cornerstone of its governance. This move mirrored Hungary's commitment to parliamentary

democracy, marking an era where such systems gained prominence across the region.

The end of the Cold War brought about new opportunities for political reconfiguration in Central Europe. Both the Czech Republic and Hungary, having traversed diverse historical chapters, consciously chose to revive their parliamentary systems of governance. This strategic alignment with the pre-World War II governance paradigm represented a deliberate choice, reflecting their commitment to infuse continuity and historical resonance into their contemporary political frameworks.^[14]

4.1.2 Practical Considerations behind the Selection of a Parliamentary Form of Governance in the Czech Republic and Hungary

After the Cold War, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe found themselves facing a pressing need for comprehensive legislative reform and the establishment of entirely new state frameworks. This era witnessed a rapid rise in the prominence and influence of parliamentary bodies throughout the region. Particularly, during the early 1990s, a unique opportunity emerged in countries like the Czech Republic and Hungary, where parliamentary institutions began to amass significant power. In contexts where no single dominant political figure held sway over discussions about the shape of institutional architecture, the adoption of parliamentary systems of governance emerged as a pragmatic and logical choice.

Conversely, countries that leaned towards semi-presidential governance structures often did so due to the presence of formidable personalities at the helm of their political landscapes. Figures such as Ion Iliescu in Romania, Zhelyu Zhelev in Bulgaria, and Milan Kučan in Slovenia epitomized this trend. These influential leaders typically favored direct popular electoral endorsement over indirect parliamentary selection, which strongly influenced the inclination towards semi-presidential regimes.

The aftermath of the Cold War ushered in a period of political transformation and experimentation across Central and Eastern Europe. In countries where parliamentary systems gained traction, there was a recognition of the need for inclusive and deliberative decision-making processes. Parliamentary institutions became a symbol of democracy and the will of the people, representing a shift away from autocratic rule.

In contrast, semi-presidential systems often reflected a preference for charismatic leaders who could take swift and decisive action. These leaders, with their direct popular mandates, wielded considerable power and influence over their respective countries' political landscapes. However, this concentration of power could also present challenges to democratic governance, as it relied heavily on the individual leader's judgment and discretion.^[15]

4.2 Semi-presidential Systems of Governance in Poland and Slovakia

4.2.1 The Evolution of Poland's Political Landscape: From Presidential Aspirations to Semi-Presidential Governance

In contrast to the countries within the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern European countries of the early 1990s exhibited a distinct landscape characterized by a relatively balanced political opposition to the former communist parties. For instance, the presence of entities like the Solidarity trade union in Poland set the stage for a noteworthy political dynamic. Solidarity's "your president, our prime minister" configuration laid the groundwork for contemplation regarding a prime ministerial presidential system.^[16]

Lech Wałęsa, who assumed the Polish presidency at the close of 1990, aspired to establish a presidential system in Poland that would grant him authority in appointing and dismissing the Prime Minister and the cabinet members. However, this proposition encountered resistance within the Polish parliament. In 1992, the parliament passed a "mini-constitution" that curtailed some of the president's prerogatives. While the president retained the power to nominate a prime minister, the ultimate selection rested with the parliament. Furthermore, the president lacked the authority to oust the prime minister or the cabinet from their positions. Nevertheless, the president retained broader powers, encompassing the initiation, and vetoing of legislation (though vetoes could be overridden by a 3/5 majority of the parliament), the prerogative to dissolve the parliament, and the capacity to appoint the Ministers of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and the Interior.

Subsequent developments in the political landscape continued the trend of constitutional reform aimed at diminishing presidential powers and augmenting those of the prime minister. The center-left camp's victory in the parliamentary elections of 1993, coupled with Lech Wałęsa's defeat in the 1995 presidential race, set the stage for further constitutional adjustments. By 1997, a new constitution was introduced that further delineated the scope of presidential authority. In this constitutional framework, the president's capacity to propose candidates for key ministerial positions was relinquished, and powers not explicitly attributed to a national or local body were vested in the cabinet. The president's veto power remained, albeit subject to override by a 3/5 majority in the parliament.^[17]

This trajectory resulted in Poland adopting a Prime Minister-President system characterized by a division of powers between the Prime Minister and the President. However, the presidential powers were notably attenuated, leading to a governance structure often referred to as semi-presidentialism.

4.2.2 The Evolution of Parliamentary Authority and the Semi-Presidential System in Slovakia (1969-1999)

Slovakia, once conforming to the archetype of a nation favoring a parliamentary framework, witnessed the establishment of the Slovak Parliament in 1969, although its substantive influence during the era spanning 1969 to 1989 was marginal. Following the momentous transformations that swept through Czechoslovakia in November 1989, a pivotal juncture that underscored Slovakia's quest for autonomy within the Czechoslovak federation, the paradigm of the Slovak parliament shifted towards active participation. The unfolding of events culminated in the formal separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia on January 1, 1993. In this partition, the Czech Republic seamlessly assimilated the pre-existing state political apparatus of the erstwhile Czechoslovak federal epoch. In stark contrast, the task of erecting Slovakia's state machinery and political institutions from the ground up was vested in the Slovak parliament. Endowed with the prerogative to draft the foundational constitution and determine the contours of governance, the Slovak parliament ascended to a pivotal role.

This ascent in the authority of the parliament was further cemented by the advent of the new Constitution in 1992, which bestowed exclusive competence upon the parliament to sanction legislative enactments. Additionally, the parliament was vested with the agency to instigate motions of no-confidence targeting the Cabinet or specific ministers, compelling their abdication if successful. It retained the agency to convene premature parliamentary elections and to promulgate legally binding decisions. Furthermore, the parliament assumed the responsibility to nominate and terminate the tenure of the President. The appointment of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet also lay within its purview. Notably, the parliament was entrusted with the selection of the President and Vice-Presidents of the Supreme Court and Constitutional Court, thereby solidifying its influence across the judicial landscape. The parliament's prerogatives extended to the initiation of referendums, encapsulating its multifaceted role in shaping the sociopolitical discourse.^[18]

Despite the transition towards direct election of the President of Slovakia in 1999, the nation retained its distinctive semblance as a ceremonial semi-presidential entity. Within this construct, the parliament's centrality within the politico-administrative framework persevered, substantiating its enduring significance in the echelons of political authority.

4.3 Primary Challenges Encountered during the Political Transformation of the Visegrad Group

4.3.1 Dual Executive Challenges in Semi-Presidential Systems: Comparative Insights from Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe

Prominent scholars of political science, Juan Linz, and Alfred Stepan have highlighted an inherent challenge within

semi-presidential systems, the conundrum of a dual executive. This predicament becomes particularly salient when certain conditions are met when the president is not aligned with the majority party in the parliament, when the prime minister lacks parliamentary majority support, or when constitutional provisions remain ambiguous.^[19]

The phenomenon of the "dual executive" has also surfaced within Western European semi-presidential countries. However, owing to the more established democratic systems in Western Europe, prolonged practical experience has progressively clarified many of the ambiguities. As a result, these situations generally have not culminated in governmental crises. For instance, Finland has navigated the intricacies of the "dual executive" dilemma by gradually diminishing the president's executive authority. The president's executive powers are primarily circumscribed to foreign affairs and security matters, necessitating consultations with the prime minister, foreign ministers, and defense ministers before pivotal decisions are made. Notably, Finland's constitutional revisions in 1999 further delineated those matters related to foreign affairs within the European Union squarely rested with the prime minister, notably attenuating the president's executive sway.

Contrastingly, in France, the president enjoys a paramount role in the realm of executive authority. This disposition substantially mitigates conflicts between the executive powers vested in the president and those held by the prime minister. When the president and prime minister hail from the same political party, conflicts tend to be minimal. Even in instances of coalition governments, where some degree of contention between the president and prime minister may arise, the situation seldom devolves into political gridlock.^[20]

The multitude of political parties in the parliaments of Central and Eastern European countries makes it unlikely, compared to Western Europe, for the President and Prime Minister to come from the same party. This increases the likelihood of having "coalition governments" in Central and Eastern European countries. Additionally, the constitutions of Central and Eastern European countries generally require both the President and the Cabinet to jointly approve important decisions. This rule is meant to encourage collaboration, but it can often be exploited as a tool by one party to exert pressure on the other. Furthermore, these Central and Eastern European countries are experiencing significant historical events like nation-building, political transformations, and accession to the EU and NATO. This often leads to the emergence of highly esteemed political figures. When these figures become President, they sometimes exceed their constitutional powers and engage in power struggles with the Prime Minister.

When Donald Tusk assumed the role of Prime Minister in November 2007, heading Poland's Civic Platform party, he found himself in a strained and conflict-ridden relationship with the then-President, Lech Kaczynski, who led the Law and Justice party. Their discord reached a boiling point in October 2008 during a contentious dispute regarding who should represent Poland at an EU summit. This dispute escalated to such an extent that it had to be adjudicated by the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court's ruling clarified that the President retained the right

to maintain a symbolic "presence" at international events while emphasizing that the nation's diplomatic authority rested with the government. In essence, while acknowledging the President's symbolic role, the Constitutional Court limited his capacity to "represent" Poland on the international stage without the consent of the Cabinet. Nevertheless, the conflict between the President and the Prime Minister remained unresolved, leading to a persistent standoff on nearly all crucial political matters. Kaczynski wielded his veto power over a multitude of bills passed by the Parliament, effectively stalling the functioning of the Polish Cabinet.

4.3.2 Shifting Paradigms in Parliamentary Systems and the Rise of Conservatism

In the context of Central and Eastern Europe, the parliamentary system exhibits certain potential flaws. Under this system, once a political party secures a parliamentary majority, it often gains considerable influence over both the prime minister and the president. Conversely, in semi-presidential countries, when a party attains parliamentary control, its authority primarily extends to the prime minister, as the president is not chosen by the parliament. Moreover, in semi-presidential systems, the president is elected by the entire populace, necessitating primary accountability to the citizenry rather than exclusive allegiance to the ruling parliamentary faction.

The concept of accountability in this regard is underscored by the observations of Hungarian scholar Ágh Attila. In the post-Cold War era, Central and Eastern European parliaments evolved by modernizing pre-World War II democratic traditions and drawing inspiration from the successful Western parliamentary model. This transformation elevated parliaments to prominent roles in the region's democratic consolidation, consolidating their dominance in political affairs, thus culminating in a phenomenon described as "supra-parliamentarization".^[21]

An illustrative example of this transition is evident in the case of Slovakia, which adhered to a parliamentary system of governance from 1994 to 1998. During this period, the cabinet led by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar wielded significant influence, manipulating the parliamentary majority while concurrently maintaining control over the presidency. However, in 1999, the newly formed ruling coalition opted to amend the constitution, effecting a transformation from a parliamentary to a semi-presidential system. This pivotal change mandated the direct election of the president, thereby reshaping Slovakia's system of government into a semi-presidential framework.

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, a prevailing trend in Central and Eastern European countries has been the enduring dominance of right-wing political parties across parliamentary, executive, and even presidential offices. In the April 2010 parliamentary elections, the "Young Democrats' Union-Hungarian Civic Union" party in Hungary secured an overwhelming victory, capturing 52.73% of the popular vote and securing more than two-thirds of the parliamentary seats. In the subsequent 2014 parliamentary elections, while the party's vote share experienced a slight decline, it still retained control over 133

out of 199 seats, comprising over two-thirds of the total, thereby enabling it to establish an independent government. Upon assuming parliamentary authority, the party promptly assumed control of the prime ministerial position and the cabinet. Simultaneously, it clinched the presidency in that year's election. Furthermore, this same party exercised authority over both the legislative and executive branches. In 2012, despite facing limited opposition, it succeeded in pushing through a revised constitution, albeit one that exhibited certain vulnerabilities. In a swift maneuver in 2010, the President of the Supreme Court, whose term had not yet concluded, was replaced by an individual aligned with the Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Union, cementing their influence over the judiciary.^[22]

A 2014 report from the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index revealed a concerning decline in democracy across Central and Eastern Europe in recent years. Hungary occupied the lowest position among new EU member states, experiencing a notable deterioration in both its "Democracy Score Ranking" and "Democracy Index Score Ranking." Consequently, Hungary found itself at the bottom of the list among the new EU member states in these key democratic assessments.^[23]

Since the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, Czech politics and political parties have exhibited a notable trend towards conservatism. In the 2010 elections, despite the leftist Social Democratic Party (SDP) securing the highest vote share at 22.09%, it faced the challenge of forming a cabinet due to the predominantly right-leaning nature of parliamentary parties. Consequently, the Civic Democratic Party (CDP), the second-largest party, assumed a dominant role in the government. The Civic Democratic Party (CDP), holding the second-largest vote count, took the helm of the cabinet. Subsequently, the conservative right-wing forces gained control over both the parliament and the executive branch. Furthermore, Vaclav Klaus, who has held the presidency since 2003, also hails from the Civic Democrats, resulting in a unique scenario where a single party exercises authority over the parliament, the cabinet, and the presidency of the Czech Republic.^[24]

5 European Union's Contribution to the Political Democratization of the Visegrad Group in the Context of European Integration

During the process of democratic transition in Central and Eastern European countries, the European Union (EU) applies pressure on candidate countries to implement reforms that align with EU standards. This pressure is primarily exerted through the establishment of accession criteria, the formulation of normative treaties and specific requirements in various domains, and the periodic assessment of progress. Simultaneously, the EU actively supports and guides the democratic transition in Central and Eastern European countries by offering financial assistance, technical expertise, and sharing advanced experiences.

5.1 The Evolution of Legal and Constitutional Reforms in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case Study of Poland

During the 1990s, Central and Eastern European countries faced a shared set of structural and socio-economic challenges as they transitioned from their communist pasts to embrace democratic principles and market-oriented economies. To effectively adapt their national legal systems to the evolving social and economic landscape and to maintain the stability of their legal orders, many of these countries turned their gaze toward the European Union (EU). The EU's accession standards became a guiding light for these countries, offering a framework for necessary reforms and improvements in governance. These reforms were further incentivized and catalyzed by the EU's periodic evaluation rounds, which scrutinized the progress of candidate countries.

In this context, the framework and trajectory of reforms within the judicial domain of Central and Eastern European countries evolved through their engagement with the EU. Through this interaction centered around EU norms, these countries cultivated a legal system endowed with legitimacy. The constitutions of these countries delineate the mechanisms for the exercise of state power, encompassing both restrictive and empowerment aspects known as "authorization functions." The legitimacy of political authority is intricately linked to the multifaceted functions of their respective constitutions. Prior to EU membership, the principle of sovereign protection embedded in the constitutions of Central and Eastern European countries accorded them exclusive rights over domestic governance without sharing authority with external entities. However, EU accession necessitated the voluntary relinquishment of a portion of their sovereignty to EU institutions. Acknowledging EU norms became imperative for legitimacy, and consequently, the legislative function had to align with and be constrained by EU norms. These countries embarked on a path of reform under the scrutiny of EU accession criteria.^[25]

For instance, Poland embarked on a series of constitutional revisions in 1997, a crucial step in establishing and enhancing legal procedures for the transfer of state power. These revisions provided a robust framework for sovereignty transfer, aligning Polish law with European standards. In 2000, Poland took another significant step by establishing the EU Legislative Committee of the National Assembly. This committee was instrumental in further harmonizing legislative efforts, facilitating the absorption and internalization of EU laws and regulations, and ensuring that Poland diligently worked to meet EU membership standards. These proactive initiatives by Poland garnered attention and commendation from the EU, signifying the country's commitment to aligning its legal and political systems with the broader European community.

5.2 Advancing Judicial Reform and Legal Development in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case Study of Hungary and the Czech Republic

In the EU Strategy Document and Assessment Report, the European Commission lauded the remarkable progress

achieved by candidate countries in Central and Eastern Europe in their efforts to adopt fundamental legislation. The Commission recognized that well-defined, forward-looking laws are essential for providing clear guidance for effective action. However, the Commission also emphasized the critical importance of having an independent and impartial judiciary to support the pursuit of justice. This judiciary must adhere unwaveringly to the principles of natural justice and remain accessible to individuals seeking redress for perceived violations of their rights. The process of judicial reform embarked upon by these countries was viewed as a transformational journey, one that aimed to reshape the legal and political legacies of Central and Eastern European countries. This transformation, in turn, contributed significantly to legitimizing new regimes and establishing self-regulatory mechanisms that would serve as the bedrock of democratic governance.

Furthermore, the European Commission outlined specific action details in its proposal for Central and Eastern European countries. It underscored the need to bolster human resource management within the judicial sector, emphasizing that judges in these candidate countries should be well-trained, efficient, highly regarded, and compensated fairly. Efforts should be directed towards enhancing the working conditions of judicial personnel, refining the mechanisms for executing judgments, and improving citizens' access to the judicial system. This multifaceted approach aims to build and enhance public confidence in the judicial systems of Central and Eastern European countries.^[26]

For instance, in the 2001 Hungarian report, the EU highlighted the crucial importance of continuous professional development for judges, with a particular emphasis on clarifying their powers and responsibilities. This was seen as a means to ensure the expeditious and effective processing of cases, thus preventing case backlogs and ensuring that justice was delivered in a timely manner. In the Czech reports of 2001 and 2002, it was noted that judge training should encompass diverse areas of expertise, including human rights, market economics, and EU law. By broadening their knowledge in these crucial areas, judges were better equipped to handle complex cases and make informed decisions, ultimately enhancing their competence and understanding.

5.3 Promoting Human Rights and Minority Protection in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case Study of Slovakia

Central and Eastern Europe boasts a rich tapestry of ethnic diversity, with various minority groups contributing to the cultural, social, and historical fabric of the region. This diversity includes Hungarian communities in Slovakia, Roma populations scattered across the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, as well as foreign nationals who arrived during the communist era for educational or work purposes. Regrettably, these minority groups often face discrimination and unfair treatment within their host countries, prompting Central and Eastern European countries to make human rights reforms a central focus of their agendas.

The European Union (EU) has emerged as a pivotal player in advancing human rights protection in candidate countries within Central and Eastern Europe. This endeavor is not only aimed at harmonizing standards but also at minimizing the potential impact of their accession on existing EU member states and fostering peaceful coexistence among new member states, with a particular emphasis on reforming minority protection policies.

In 1993, during the Copenhagen Conference, the EU formally incorporated "respect and protection of national minorities" into its standards. Subsequently, the EU introduced various measures to facilitate the reform of minority protection policies in Central and Eastern European countries. Given that EU member states are predominantly members of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, EU policies regarding ethnic issues either directly align with the policies of these two organizations or incorporate their fundamental principles. Notable examples include the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. In 2000, the European Union enacted key legislative instruments such as the "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union," the "Racial Equality Act," and the "Employment Equality Act." These measures served as benchmarks for Central and Eastern European candidate countries, prompting them to adopt similar laws and align their domestic legal frameworks with EU standards.^[27]

For instance, in 2001, Slovakia introduced a "Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Law," a significant step towards addressing discrimination and promoting equal rights for minority populations. This was followed by the adoption of Slovakia's New Labor Code in 2002, effectively incorporating EU anti-discrimination legislation into Slovak legal norms. Furthermore, international organizations like the OSCE have issued valuable recommendations, including the "Hague Recommendations," "Lund Recommendations," and "Oslo Recommendations." These recommendations have played instrumental roles in promoting initiatives related to education, self-governance, political participation, and resistance to ethnic-based discrimination targeting minority populations in Central and Eastern Europe.

6 Illiberalism and Populism: Impeding Factors to Political Democratization of the Visegrad Group

The emergence of illiberalism and populism has become a significant political trend in recent years within Central and Eastern Europe. This rise in populism is rooted in the ongoing challenges of democratic transition that the region has been facing since 1989, particularly within the framework of liberalism. Illiberalism, fundamentally characterized as national populism, has shifted the political landscape, diminished the traditional left-right party divisions, and highlighted a schism between nationalist conservatives and pro-European liberals.

6.1 Populism and Shifting Sentiments: Central and Eastern Europe's EU Journey Amidst Crises

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern European countries aspired to "return to Europe" and reconstruct what they considered a "normal society." During the 1990s, the European Union (EU) generally enjoyed a positive perception in Central and Eastern Europe. Riding the wave of public sentiment, the EU played a pivotal role in overhauling the economies of these countries. It mandated applicant countries to modernize their economic structures and establish viable market-oriented systems.^[28]

At its core, the EU's strategy for expanding eastward aimed to align Central and Eastern European countries with the Western political bloc, solidifying their geopolitical advantages. As part of this endeavor, the EU imposed stringent political prerequisites on applicant countries, demanding the preservation of "democracy and freedom" and the genuine implementation of "political pluralism." In 2004, the European Union incorporated the former Central and Eastern European Group into its strategic sphere, giving rise to the term "New Europe" for the relevant countries. While extending economic support to these countries, the EU continued to instigate changes in their systems and disseminate its values.

Initially, during the early stages of transformation in Central and Eastern European countries, most citizens harbored positive expectations of EU accession, primarily driven by the anticipation of economic advantages. However, they did not fully comprehend the EU's political system and value framework. Their preparedness for potential adverse consequences of EU membership was limited. Consequently, when crises emerged, there was a notable shift in public sentiment. Membership in the EU was akin to a double-edged sword. While it opened greater opportunities within the Western European market, the high degree of reliance on foreign trade rendered these countries acutely sensitive to fluctuations in the EU market. Even minor shifts had swift repercussions in these countries. Furthermore, the process exacerbated social disparities, leading to increased polarization between the affluent and disadvantaged, along with the consolidation of social strata, due to institutional changes. A substantial portion of the middle and lower-income populations still failed to reap the economic benefits promised by EU accession.^[29]

Starting from 2010, the European Union has faced a series of significant challenges, including the European debt crisis, the refugee crisis, and Brexit. Consequently, the outlook of people in Central and Eastern European countries towards the EU has shifted, and doubts among the middle and lower classes regarding EU membership have resurfaced. The European debt crisis marked the first major economic shock that "New Europe" encountered after joining the EU. Since 2011, the EU economy has struggled with stagnation and recession. This economic downturn initiated a detrimental cycle in the economies of Central and Eastern European countries. Investors grew increasingly skeptical about their economic prospects, resulting in higher interest rates, increased unemployment, lower wages, and reduced incomes and living standards for many households. People in these regions came to the

realization that the stability of the Eurozone's economy was not as secure as they had envisioned.

However, the pivotal moment that intensified the centrifugal tendency of Central and Eastern European countries within the EU was the European refugee crisis. In 2015, over a million refugees from the Middle East and North Africa arrived in Europe, catching the European Union off guard. Central and Eastern European countries were allocated a significant number of refugees, sparking widespread panic and discontent in the region. Between May 2015 and April 2016, due to ongoing terrorist attacks and the EU's imposition of refugee quotas, the proportion of Polish citizens strongly opposing refugee acceptance surged from 21% to 43%. Notably, younger generations in Poland displayed a more negative stance toward refugees, with a decreasing likelihood of acceptance among Poles under 45.^[30] In 2015, Hungary became the second-largest destination for asylum applications after Germany, with the highest per capita rate of refugee acceptance in Europe. The country also expressed dissatisfaction with the handling of the refugee crisis by Austria, Germany, and the EU. According to a European Commission poll in the autumn of 2015, 82% of Hungarians and 81% of Czechs expressed resistance to immigrants from outside the EU.^[31]

These successive crises disrupted the previously harmonious relationship between the EU and Central and Eastern European countries, bringing to light potential conflicts between "old" and "new" Europe. Despite more than a decade passing since their accession to the EU, these countries maintain distinct religious, ethnic, and cultural traditions that have contributed to a profound divide between them and the traditional "Western" societies. Tensions have escalated between upper-class elites embracing Western European culture and lower-class individuals nostalgic for the previous system. These circumstances have provided fertile ground for the emergence of populism as a significant political force, with the refugee crisis serving as a catalyst for the transformation of deep-seated dissatisfaction in Central and Eastern Europe into populist movements.

6.2 Illiberalism in the Visegrad Group: Viktor Orbán's Ideological Shift and Its Regional Impacts

On July 26, 2014, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán delivered a speech at the "Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp," where he expounded on his illiberal ideology. During his address, Orbán identified 2008 as a significant turning point. He believed that the era before 2008 was characterized by the dominance of the "liberal worldview," while the period following 2008 saw a growing interest in understanding the successes of non-Western liberal democracies. Orbán argued that it was imperative to recognize that democracy does not inherently align with liberalism. He further asserted that societies organized around the principles of liberal democracy may face challenges in maintaining their global competitiveness unless substantial changes are enacted. This necessitated a departure from liberal principles and societal organization, marking a general shift away from a liberal understanding of society.

In the realm of interpersonal relationships, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, offered a critical analysis of the prevailing liberal social structures. He pointed out that these structures were firmly grounded in the principle that individuals have the right to act as long as their actions do not infringe upon the freedoms of others. This principle, often associated with Western liberal democracies, had been embraced by Hungarian society in the two decades leading up to 2010. During this period, Hungary had adopted many of the fundamental principles of Western Europe, aligning itself with the prevailing liberal ideology. However, Orbán argued that in practice, the determination of what constituted mutual freedom was not guided solely by abstract principles of justice. Instead, it was heavily influenced by the power dynamics at play within society. The most powerful individuals and groups, Orbán contended, had a disproportionate say in defining the boundaries of freedom, potentially leading to unequal access to opportunities and resources for the broader population.

Orbán also raised concerns about how liberal democracy, as it was practiced in Hungary, posed challenges to national interests. He argued that both the liberal democratic ideology and the liberal-oriented Hungarian government had failed to adequately protect the collective assets of the community and to shield Hungarian families from the impacts of foreign debt crises. This perceived failure to safeguard national interests led Orbán to emphasize the importance of prioritizing the community as the cornerstone of national reconstruction. In Orbán's view, there was a profound interconnectedness between individual labor and interests with the well-being of the community and the nation-state. He believed that strengthening the community and ensuring its prosperity were essential for the overall health and stability of the nation.^[32]

Drawing from these ideas and concerns, Orbán concluded by characterizing the Hungarian state that he and his administration were constructing as an "illiberal state." This label signaled a deliberate departure from the liberal principles that had previously guided Hungary's political landscape. It marked a shift towards a more centralized and controlled form of governance, where the state played a more active role in shaping society and protecting what Orbán saw as the nation's core values and interests.

In line with his illiberal ideas, Orbán bolstered the governing party's administrative authority through constitutional and legislative amendments. Additionally, he increased control over media outlets, cultural institutions, and similar entities. In terms of economic policy, there was a concerted effort to cultivate a favorable investment climate and strengthen economic partnerships with Eastern countries, including China, Russia, and countries in Central Asia. This strategy aimed to reduce Hungary's economic reliance on Western countries. Measures were also taken to generate employment opportunities domestically, especially through public works projects aimed at assisting the underprivileged. Initiatives like providing free meals to school and kindergarten students were implemented to address social welfare concerns, resulting in a reduction in Hungary's poverty rate.

Analysts have noted that the trend of illiberalism is not limited to Hungary but has also manifested itself in Poland. Illiberal tendencies have surfaced in Slovakia and the Czech Republic as well, with notable features being anti-immigration stances, skepticism towards Western values, efforts to consolidate authoritarian governance, and a focus on preserving economic and cultural distinctiveness while catering to national interests and voter preferences. Some studies have even suggested that while Hungary and Poland are at the forefront of this trend, similar patterns are emerging in countries like Slovakia and Croatia. In recent years, doubts have arisen regarding the liberal model that emerged after 1989. This skepticism primarily challenges the legal framework of liberal democracies, emphasizes nationalist narratives, and underscores the importance of what is often referred to as the "culture war."^[33]

6.3 Strengthening Democracy in the Visegrad Group: A Comprehensive Approach

To fortify and enhance democracy within the Visegrad Group, a comprehensive and collaborative approach is imperative, involving both governmental bodies and civil society organizations (CSOs). This multifaceted strategy is vital for safeguarding democratic values and ensuring long-term stability in this region.

A primary focus should be on nurturing the growth and independence of CSOs. This entails providing financial support, legal safeguards, and essential resources to bolster their capabilities. CSOs serve as critical pillars of democracy by actively promoting democratic principles, scrutinizing government actions, and advocating for the rule of law.

Media freedom is an essential cornerstone of a vibrant democracy. Governments must play a role in ensuring a level playing field in media ownership by enacting and enforcing regulations that prevent undue concentration of media ownership. Encouraging investigative journalism and ensuring media outlets have access to diverse sources of information is crucial. Furthermore, supporting independent media watchdog organizations can help maintain fairness and integrity in reporting.^[34]

Civic education programs within educational institutions should be fortified to impart a deep understanding of the significance of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These programs should also cultivate critical thinking skills and media literacy among citizens, enabling them to discern accurate information from misinformation. An informed and engaged citizenry is pivotal for sustaining democracy.

The fight against corruption necessitates the establishment and enforcement of stringent anti-corruption measures and transparency regulations. It is essential to create an independent body dedicated to investigating and prosecuting corruption cases. Additionally, governments should adopt practices that promote transparency, such as disclosing government contracts and expenditures, thereby ensuring that public resources are used ethically and efficiently.^[35]

Active collaboration with the EU and other international organizations committed to democratic values is of paramount importance. The EU can play a significant role in holding the Visegrad Group accountable for adhering to democratic standards. Establishing partnerships and fostering dialogue with other countries and international groups can facilitate mutual learning and joint efforts to bolster democracy's strength and stability.

In summation, the Visegrad Group can secure the longevity of its democracy by translating these practical proposals into action. By doing so, the region can uphold the fundamental principles of democracy, including fairness, human rights, and transparency, ensuring that its democratic institutions remain robust and resilient in the face of challenges.

7 Conclusion

In post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, the transformation towards democracy represented a significant historical turning point. The Visegrad Group played a critical role in this shift from communism to democracy and free markets, bringing about substantial political, economic, and social changes. During the democratization process, the Visegrad Group sailed through several challenges such as developing market-oriented economic systems, ensuring political inclusivity, and establishing the rule of law. The transition was, however, not without obstacles, including weak democratic institutions, corruption, and political instability. Nonetheless, their commitment to democratization paid off, resulting in some of the region's most successful and stable countries.

The democratization process in Central and Eastern Europe was inextricably linked with the region's alignment with the European Union. The EU played a significant role in promoting democracy and stability in the area by promoting democracy as a prerequisite for membership and offering several incentives and support programs that accelerated the democratization process in the territory. Furthermore, by providing a framework for democratic consolidation and institutional strengthening, European Integration contributed to the Visegrad countries' successful transition to democracy.

However, democratization in Central and Eastern Europe faces ongoing challenges despite the progress achieved. The erosion of civil society, the rise of populism, and the emergence of illiberalism pose significant threats to the stability and long-term sustainability of democracy in the region. Hence, it is crucial to remain watchful and continue to strengthen democratic institutions, promote civic engagement, and support sustainable governance practices to safeguard the region's democratic gains. To this end, this study has suggested various policy strategies and interventions that aim to address the democratization process's challenges and opportunities. Such recommendations include strengthening democratic institutions, promoting media freedom, enhancing civic education, and improving transparency and accountability. Implementing these measures will enable the Visegrad countries, and other countries in the region, to establish resilient

and sustainable democratic systems that enhance stability, prosperity, and security.

Overall, this research contributes to a better understanding of democratization processes in Central and Eastern Europe, mainly the Visegrad Group countries, and the EU's role in promoting democracy and stability. The study draws from a theoretical framework and provides practical recommendations to address the region's ongoing challenges and opportunities. This research is anticipated to facilitate efforts to sustain democracy and stability in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

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