How Budapest and Bratislava are reviving the Visegrád Four

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Liza Oliinyk



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After years of silence, during which the V4 format existed only at a technical level, on 23 June in Gödöllő, the prime ministers of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia announced the revitalisation of the Visegrád Four. A week later, the presidency of the group was transferred to Bratislava under the slogan 'V4 for a stronger Europe'.

Throughout June and July, Budapest agreed to open two of Ukraine's six negotiation clusters – Fundamentals and External Relations. The remaining four stayed frozen. In early September, Hungary again blocked Ukraine at the Council's enlargement working group, tying its consent to guarantees for the Hungarian minority – the same lever Viktor Orbán had used for years, and one now aimed at Bratislava too.

So the question is not whether the Visegrád Four have returned. The question is what exactly has returned – and whose year is it really, Bratislava's or Budapest's?

Budapest: a change in method, not content

On 12 April, Péter Magyar's Tisza party won 141 of the 199 seats, bringing Viktor Orbán's sixteen-year era to an end. The government took office on 13 May, and the changes it has brought about should not be underestimated. Budapest has stopped using its veto as a bargaining chip with Brussels – a practice whereby blocking any EU decision served as leverage to unfreeze its own funds. The new government's priority has become the unfreezing of funds rather than prolonging the conflict. Instead of escalation, there are now negotiations on the rule of law. However, whilst the approach has changed, the substance remains the same. At the June meeting of the European Council, Budapest no longer blocked the conclusions – it succeeded in having the call to open the remaining negotiation clusters removed from them. The same rhetoric, the same desired outcome, but achieved through different means – one that does not cost Hungary its reputation.

The main focus is national policy, and it is here that the continuity with the previous administration is clearest. The protection of Hungarian minorities abroad has been a constant tool of Orbán's, and the new government has not only retained it but also expanded it. Budapest is demanding guarantees for Hungarians in Zakarpattia from Kyiv as a condition for moving forward, but it is also demanding the very same guarantees from Bratislava. The only difference is that Ukraine is an EU candidate, whilst Slovakia is a partner in the format that Magyar has promised to revive.

The dispute over the Beneš Decrees came to a head in December 2025, when the governing coalition fast-tracked an amendment to the Criminal Code. Act No. 416/2025 Coll. introduced a new offence: publicly denying or questioning Slovakia's post-war settlement, punishable by up to six months in prison. Fico likened it to the ban on Holocaust denial and called the decrees an integral part of the Slovak legal order. These actions are connected to the acceleration of land expropriation for the construction of a new highway.

Magyar set his conditions in his first conversation with Fico: repeal the law criminalising criticism of the decrees and guarantee no further confiscation of land belonging to the Hungarian minority, around 9 per cent of Slovakia's population. Until then, no substantive talks and no V4. He also calls Slovakia by the historical name Felvidék – and on 4 June, at the Trianon commemoration, he declared that Hungary is the only country in the world that borders itself.

Bratislava: a year under the chairmanship of the respondent

On 1 July, a week after Gödöllő, the chairmanship of the group passed to Bratislava – the capital against which Hungary's leverage is directed. The right to decide which meetings will take place and what will be discussed at them was given for a year to the party that is the respondent in this dispute.

It is important to understand what the presidency entails. The Visegrád Group has neither a secretariat nor binding decisions nor a voting mechanism. The only permanent institution is the International Visegrád Fund in Bratislava. The presidency here does not confer authority but rather sets the agenda. The capital holding the presidency decides which meetings to convene, at what level and on which topics. It has the right to determine what the Four will discuss – and, consequently, what they will not discuss.

In recent years, Fico has acted in tandem with Orbán: together they blocked decisions on Ukraine and stayed outside the EU's common positions. After 12 April, he was left without that partner – with the same policies, but now on his own.

But it is not only the loss of a partner. Slovakia goes to the polls in 2027, and the Hungarian issue is, for the first time in years, a usable tool for mobilisation. While Orbán was in power, the alliance itself contained the conflict: neither capital could afford to fall out with its only partner inside the EU. That constraint is gone, and Budapest's demands are only growing louder.

The first notable ministerial event of the presidency confirms this logic: on 1 September, the foreign ministers of the 'Four' and Japan gathered near Bratislava – for the first time in five years. The format began with an agenda on which there are no disagreements.

This is the answer to the question of whose year this is. Budapest dictates the terms, but Bratislava sets the agenda – and does so in such a way that Budapest's terms do not feature in it. Both capitals are satisfied with this arrangement: Magyar gets the format he promised to revive, whilst Fico gets a format in which he is no longer left to stand alone.

What is returned is not a political bloc but a working format with a carefully chosen agenda. The method changed; the content did not – on both banks of the Danube. And while the quarrel between its two members stays off the agenda, the V4's revival is measured not by what it agreed on, but by what it agreed to leave unsaid.