

The Visegrad Group's Approach to the Arctic: Which (Sub-Regional) Policies?

PhD. Federica CRISTANI¹

Abstract

The Visegrád countries (or V4) are increasingly showing interest in the Arctic region. With different levels of engagement, the four countries carry on diplomatic, economic, and scientific activities in the Arctic. Poland and the Czech Republic are particularly active when it comes to engagement with Arctic policies. Poland enjoys Observer status at both the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. The Czech Republic, on the other hand, officially applied for Observer Status in the Arctic Council in December 2020. Hungary and Slovakia, instead, have not issued significant political documents referring to the Arctic region, even though they are involved in research cooperations in Arctic-related issues and have economic and diplomatic relationships with the Arctic states. Also, the V4 group has not issued a document addressing the Arctic policy so far – however, it engages regularly in dialogues with Arctic countries on several issues. This chapter investigates the Visegrád Group's approach to the Arctic, considered its approach as a group, as well as the national policies that have been adopted and implemented so far by the four countries, including their relationships with the Arctic states.

Keywords: *Visegrád Group; Poland; Czech Republic; Hungary; Slovakia; Arctic policies.*

JEL Classification: K33

DOI: 10.62768/TBJ/2024/14/3/04

Please cite this article as: Cristani, Federica, 'The Visegrad Group's Approach to the Arctic: Which (Sub-Regional) Policies?', <i>Juridical Tribune – Review of Comparative and International Law</i> 14, no. 3 (October 2024): 402-415.	Article History Received: 3 June 2024 Revised: 10 August 2024 Accepted: 7 September 2024
---	--

1. Introduction²

Although being non-Arctic states, the Visegrád countries (or V4) – the sub-regional group in Central Europe which includes the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary – are increasingly showing interest in the Arctic region. With different

¹ Federica Cristani - Institute of International Relations in Prague, Czech Republic, cristani@iir.cz, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0301-0960>.

² This research is partly based on notes from meetings and correspondence with EUROPE DIRECT network in the Czech Republic and with the Scandinavia and Baltic States Unit at the Western Europe Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. The author would like to express her gratitude to the government officials and experts for their time and interest in this research. Many thanks are also due to Mr Akmal Elmurodov, Research Assistant at the Institute of International Relations in Prague, for his invaluable research support.

levels of engagement, the four countries carry on diplomatic, economic, and scientific activities in the Arctic.

Among the V4, Poland and the Czech Republic are particularly active when it comes to engagement with Arctic policies. Poland enjoys Observer status at both the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and has established in 2012 the so-called Warsaw Format Meeting formula, in order to create a platform to exchange views between the Arctic Council Observer States and the EU. Most recently, in 2020, Poland has also adopted its national Polish Polar Policy. The Czech Republic, on the other hand, officially applied for Observer Status in the Arctic Council in December 2020. The Czech Republic and Poland also participate in the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) providing advice to the Arctic Council. When it comes to Hungary and Slovakia, instead, it is quite rare to find political documents referring to the Arctic region, even though they are sometimes involved in research cooperations in Arctic-related issues and (especially Hungary) have economic and diplomatic relationships with the Arctic states.

Also, the V4 group has not issued a document addressing the Arctic policy so far – however, it engages regularly in dialogues with Arctic countries on several issues.

This chapter investigates the Visegrád Group's approach and policies in the Arctic. After a brief overview of the background framework of the Visegrád Group, the chapter illustrates the general approach of the Group to the Arctic region, as well as the Arctic policies adopted and implemented so far by each of the V4 countries.

2. The Visegrád Group: *modus operandi* and engagement in Arctic policies at the national and sub-regional level

The Visegrád group was established as a forum for sub-regional cooperation³ on 15 February 1991, when the heads of governments of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary, and Poland signed the Declaration of Visegrád.⁴ One of the first aims of the V4 was “[...] the full involvement in the European political and economic system [...]”.⁵ On 1 May 2004, the Visegrád countries entered the European Union (EU) as new member states. After their accession to the EU, the four countries continued to meet at the level of the Visegrád group.⁶

³ See Carmen Gebhard, “Sub-Regional cooperation in Central Europe – past, present and future,” *AARMS* 12, no. 1 (2013): 26 and Andrzej Rudka, “Central Europe: regional cooperation and beyond,” in *The emerging new regional order in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Tadayuki Hayashi (Hokkaido University, 1997), 196-197.

⁴ Artur Wołek, “Precipices beneath summits? The Visegrád cooperation seen from middle policy levels,” in *Internal cohesion of the Visegrád group*, eds. Juraj Marušiak et al. (VEDA, 2013), 88.

⁵ “Visegrád declaration,” *Visegrad Group*, February 15, 1991, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412>.

⁶ On the Visegrád Group, see Evgeniya A. Safonova, “The Visegrad group: stages of formation and development,” *Vestnik Tomskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta Istoriya-Tomsk State University Journal of History* 53 (2018): 69-73, Lyubov Shishelina, “Visegrad Group in Light of Challenges 2020,” *Contemporary Europe-Sovremennaya Evropa* 5 (2021): 89-98 and Geza Jeszenszky, “25 Years of the Visegrad Group,” *Contemporary Europe-Sovremennaya Evropa* 6 (2017): 13-19.

Regional and sub-regional platforms of discussion can help harmonize regulations and policies and can serve as a privileged channel for advocating national interests at the (next) regional (and international) level. In contrast to international organizations, regional and more in particular sub-regional organizations generally consist of states near each other, with similar political, social, economic, cultural, and historic experiences. Accordingly, this kind of *fora* can be an appropriate context where to discuss national, regional, and international issues; exchanges of best practices, experiences and knowledge might work better within a small(er) group of countries.⁷

Europe in particular includes different sub-regional formations, such like the Benelux, the Nordic Council, the Central European Initiative and the Baltic cooperation. The V4 is ‘weakly’ institutionalized - the only organizations within then Group being the International Visegrád Fund⁸ and the Visegrád Patent Institute.⁹ The Group works according to the principle of cooperation, especially through high-level political summits, expert and diplomatic meetings, activities of non-governmental associations in the region, think tanks, and research bodies.¹⁰ Each V4 country holds the presidency for one year and prepares a one-year plan of action.¹¹

V4 meetings may also take the form of the V4+ formula, when the V4 countries meet with representatives from other EU States and/or EU institutions,¹² as well as from non-EU States.¹³ Moreover, the V4 cooperates with other sub-regional bodies, such as Benelux and the Nordic Council.¹⁴ The outcomes of these meetings can be political documents including remarks and reflections on EU legislative acts and proposals, joint declarations, or other political statements¹⁵ – like the common positions of the V4 on

⁷ For an emphasis of the role of regional and sub-regional entities in shaping the international agenda, see for example the joint research project carried out by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research and the Monterey Institute of International Studies Center for Nonproliferation Studies on the role of (sub) regional organizations in implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1540, described in the paper by Johan Bergenas, “The role of regional and sub-regional organizations in implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1540: a preliminary assessment of the African continent,” *Vertic News*, 2008, http://www.vertic.org/media/assets/nim_docs/background%20articles/UNIDIR%20Scheinman%201540%20pd f2-act341.pdf.

⁸ The Visegrád Fund was established in 2000. For more information, see the official website at <https://www.visegradfund.org>.

⁹ The Visegrád Patent Institute was established in 2016. For more Information see the official website at <http://www.vpi.int/index.php/en>.

¹⁰ For information on the work and activities of the V4 group, see the official website <http://www.visegradgroup.eu>.

¹¹ See Aims and structure, Visegrád group website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/aims-and-structure>.

¹² See most recently the Summit of the V4 Prime Ministers and German Chancellor that took place in Bratislava on 7 February 2019. See the outcome declaration at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/declaration-of-the-190208>.

¹³ E.g. the meetings on the Cohesion Policy. All the meetings and relevant outcomes, as well as all the documents of the V4 that are referred to in this chapter are available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>.

¹⁴ See the relevant meetings listed on <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>.

¹⁵ They all can be accessed (English) at the official website <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements>.

the issue of the Western Balkans¹⁶ or the Eastern Partnership.¹⁷ Worth recalling are also the joint declarations of the ministers of the V4 countries on European Commission communications,¹⁸ EU proposals for regulations,¹⁹ or on EU directives.²⁰ The V4 has also addressed letters to the European Commission.²¹ The topics covered during these meetings may range from agriculture and renewable energy, to migration, financial, and labour issues, to name a few.²²

At the international level, the V4 countries interact with other countries in international *fora* and have acceded to international and regional organizations and treaties. As a sub-regional group, the V4 can act as an amplifier in reinforcing national positions at the EU level. Today, the V4 has become a “recognized” voice in international fora: the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico in 2012 highlighted that the V4 had “become a *trademark* known in Europe, North Atlantic and beyond” [emphasis added].²³ Also EU institutions tend to mention increasingly the V4 countries in press releases that report some of their meetings.²⁴ The ability to talk with one voice through the V4 platform has been labelled the “soft power” of the V4.²⁵

However, when it comes to the Arctic, the Visegrád countries have not used such power so far. Indeed, to date there is no document issued by the V4 group specifically devoted to the Arctic, while each of the four countries has its own agenda and interests in Arctic policies.

On the other hand, the V4 has held several meetings with Arctic and Baltic states, in the forms of the above mentioned V4+meetings: we can recall the Meeting of

¹⁶ E.g. Joint Statement on the Western Balkans of 29 November 2016, issued at the annual meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrád Group and the Western Balkans. The meeting was also attended by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission Federica Mogherini and by representatives from Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Romania, and Slovenia.

¹⁷ E.g. Joint statement on the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership, 6 May 2019.

¹⁸ E.g. Joint declaration of the Ministers of agriculture of the Visegrád group and Croatia on the Commission Communication on the future of food and farming, 25 January 2018.

¹⁹ E.g. Joint declaration of the Ministers of the interior on the proposal for a Regulation on the European border and coast guard, 16 October 2018.

²⁰ E.g. Joint declaration of the Agricultural Ministers of Visegrád group, Bulgaria and Romania on the renewable energy Directive after 2020, 21 September 2017.

²¹ E.g. Joint statement and Joint letter to EC prepared during the Summit of 22 June 2012; Joint Letter to High Representative Ashton and Commissioner Füle of 5 March 2013.

²² Tomas Strážay, “When pragmatism wins: Slovakia in the Visegrád group,” *Yearbook of Slovakia’s foreign policy 2018* (2019): 67.

²³ Statement by H.E. Robert Fico Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic at GLOBSEC 2012, Bratislava Global Security Forum, April 12, 2012, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/prejav-predsedu-vlady-sr-roberta-ficana-fore-globsec-v-anglickom-jazyku>.

²⁴ See e.g. the following press releases of the European Commission, “Future of cohesion policy: Commissioner Hübner to address Visegrád group in Sopot, Poland,” *European Commission - Press Releases Database*, July 1, 2009, https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-09-1067_en.htm and “Commissioner Hahn in Bratislava in the run-up to the Eastern Partnership 10th Anniversary,” *European Commission - Press Releases Database*, May 3, 2019, https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEX-19-2390_en.htm.

²⁵ Tomas Strážay, “Visegrád. arrival, survival, revival. Selected V4 Bibliography,” *Visegrad Group*, 2011, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/bibliography/visegradarrival-survival-120628>.

the Visegrád-4 and Baltic-3 Foreign Ministers of 13 November 2006, the Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrád Group Countries, Sweden and Ukraine of 23 April 2008, the Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrád Group Countries and of Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Sweden of 24 November 2008, the Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrád Group countries and Sweden of 21 May 2009, the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Visegrád, Nordic and Baltic states of 20 February 2013 and the Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Agriculture of the Visegrád Group, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia and the Baltic States on the vision of the Central and Eastern European Initiative for Knowledge-based Agriculture, Aquaculture and Forestry in the Bioeconomy of 13 June, 2018.²⁶ Though there is no recording of discussion on Arctic-related issues during these meetings, at times the discussion has been on climate change, as mentioned in the Co-Chair's Statement of the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Visegrád, Nordic and Baltic states of 20 February 2013, where the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the relevant countries "agreed that the common goal [include also] meeting [the relevant] climate policy challenges".²⁷ And most recently, in 2021 Statement of the Presidency of the Visegrád Group in Budapest, "[t]he V4 leaders reiterated their commitment to the transition to climate neutrality as well as raising the EU 2030 climate target to a net greenhouse gas emission reduction of at least 55%".²⁸

Still, discussions on climate change-related issues have been quite sporadic at the level of the Visegrád Group. This reflects a general resistance tackling climate change issues in the political discourse in the region. Indeed, as it has been very well highlighted, "[o]nly a few studies have covered environmental problems in Central Europe and analysed environmental governance in Central European countries and [very few] stud[ies] ha[ve] considered environmental cooperation in this region".²⁹

And what about the Arctic-related policies of each of the V4? The following paragraphs offer an overview of the current discussions at the national level in each country.

²⁶ All meetings are listed in the official website of the V4, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements>.

²⁷ Co-Chair's Statement, Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad, Nordic and Baltic states, February 20, 2013, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/meeting-of-foreign>.

²⁸ Statement of the Presidency of the Visegrád Group, following a summit of V4 Prime Ministers with the President of the French Republic, Budapest, December 13, 2021, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/statement-of-the-220210>.

²⁹ See Šárka Waisová, "The Environmental Situation in the Visegrád Region: Neglect and Insufficient Cooperation in the Face of Serious Environmental Threats," *Politics in Central Europe* 14, no. 2 (2018): 57, Peter Layman, "Environment in Central, Eastern Europe improves, but problems remain," *Chemical & Engineering News* 77, no. 48 (1999): 18-19, Judit Vargha, "Drifting Countries - Politics and Environment in East Central Europe," in *Environmental Cooperation in Europe*, ed. Otmar Hoell (Westview Press, Vienna, 1994): 239-246 and Joann Carmin, Stacy D. VanDeveer, "Enlarging EU environments: Central and Eastern Europe from transition to accession," *Environmental Politics* 13, no. 1 (2004): 3-24. On the topic of environmental regionalisms, see also Liliana B. Andonovaa, Stacy D. VanDeveer, "Regional institutions and the environment in Central and Eastern Europe," *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 14 (2011): 20-23.

2.1. Poland's Arctic policies: from scientific cooperation to Arctic diplomacy initiatives

Polish presence in the Arctic region covers scientific and research activities, as well as actions and initiatives related to international policy and diplomacy, economic activities, and participation in international security projects.³⁰

Poland has been an Observer country in the Arctic Council since 1998,³¹ and it has a quite long-standing tradition of involvement in Arctic affairs.³² Since 1957, Poland has had stations devoted to research activities in the Hornsund area (Spitsbergen area, in Svalbard), and currently there are four other Polish University stations in Svalbard. Arctic research in Poland is quite widespread - the Polish Polar Consortium, for example, which gathers several scientific institutions, is dedicated to research activities both in the Arctic and the Antarctic regions.³³ Scientists are also involved at the ministerial level in the discussion on Arctic-related policies. In 2011, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the Polar Task Force, which includes representatives of governmental institutions as well as scientists and academics.³⁴ The Polar Task Force is meant to work as a platform for exchanging information and coordinating measures among the different stakeholders working in the polar regions.³⁵

³⁰ Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Polish Polar Policy, Resolution 129/2020 of the Council of Ministers (11 September 2020), p. 102, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/f8fdc364-84ce-40b2-992c-e70c711050a1>. See also, among others, Danilo Vicente García Cáceres, "European cooperation: How important country is Poland to ensure the Arctic governance?," *Polar Science* 21, (2019): 47-51, Michał Łuszczuk, "Arctic Council Observer: The Development and Significance of Poland's Approach towards the Arctic Region," *Ocean Yearbook* 27, no. 1 (2013): 487-502 and Michał Łuszczuk, Piotr Rakowski, Monika Szkarlat, "Poland's polar policy in the face of the Arctic Council 2022 cooperation crisis," *Polish Polar Research* 44, no. 4 (2023): 339-364.

³¹ Arctic Council, "Interview with Arctic Council Observer: Poland," *Arctic Council*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.arctic-council.org/news/interview-with-arctic-council-observer-poland>. The Arctic Council is an international institution founded in 1996. For a general overview on the role of the Arctic Council and the role of non-Arctic states therein, see Andrew Chater, "Explaining Non-Arctic States in the Arctic Council," *Strategic Analysis* 40, no. 3 (2016): 173-184, Andrei Sakharov, "Arctic Council as a Regional Governance Institution," *Vestnik Mezhdunarodnykh Organizatsii-International Organisations Research Journal* 10, no. 4 (2015): 72-92 and Natalia Loukacheva, "The Arctic Council and "Law-Making"," *Northern Review* 50 (2020): 109-135.

³² For a general overview, see Danilo Vicente García Cáceres, "European cooperation: How important country is Poland to ensure the Arctic governance?," *Polar Science* 21, (2019): 47-51, Michał Łuszczuk, Piotr Graczyk, Adam Stępień, Małgorzata Śmieszek, "Poland's Policy towards the Arctic: Key Areas and Priority Actions" *PISM Policy Paper* 11, no. 113, 2015, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191034/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%2011%20\(113\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191034/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%2011%20(113).pdf), 4 and Piotr Graczyk, "Poland and the Arctic: Between Science and Diplomacy," *Arctic Yearbook* 2012 (2012): 139-155 and 8. Alisa Musanovic, "Poland's polar policy: interview with Dr Michał Łuszczuk," *Polar Connection*, May 6, 2022, <https://polarconnection.org/interview-michal-luszczuk>.

³³ The Polish Polar Consortium consists of 16 scientific institutions: 11 higher education institutions and 5 research institutes. See the official webpage at <https://www.pkpolar.pl/eng/home>.

³⁴ For the contact details of the Polar Task Force, see Arctic Council, Poland, <https://arctic-council.org/about/observers/poland>.

³⁵ Arctic Institute, Poland, Arctic Policy (2023), <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/poland>.

In 2020, the Polish government adopted the Polish Polar Policy,³⁶ which builds on academic research documents, like the “Strategy of Polish polar research, the 2017-2027 proposal,” drafted by the Polish Polar Consortium and the Polish Academy of Sciences Polar Research Committee (PAS PRC).³⁷ As part of the implementation of the Polish Polar Policy, the Prime Minister established in 2022 the Polish National Polar Policy Team, chaired by a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which also includes representatives of the government from different ministries, as well as representatives of Polish research and academic institutions.³⁸

Poland has been also quite active in promoting cooperation in Arctic-related issues: suffice to recall, for example, the tradition of so-called Warsaw Format meetings, which gather, on one hand, the countries and Observers of the Arctic Council, and on the other hand, the country discharging the functions of the Chairmanship in the Arctic Council.³⁹ Poland is also an observer in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council,⁴⁰ and is a party to the 1920 Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty.⁴¹

Poland has also consistent economic interests in the region: Polish companies or their subsidiaries are involved in raw materials exploration and extraction activities in Canada and Greenland, hydrocarbon exploration on the Norwegian continental shelf, construction, shipbuilding, and ship maintenance for vessels operating in Arctic conditions, and – to a limited extent – fisheries exploitation in the North Atlantic and Barents Sea. In addition, Poles form one of the largest groups of migrants in Iceland and Norway.⁴²

Finally, when it comes to the security interests in the Arctic region, the Polish Polar Policy recalls that cooperation and military dialogue have been carried on as part of the Arctic Armed Forces Roundtable (AAFR).⁴³ Moreover, Poland has been

³⁶ Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Polish Polar Policy, Resolution 129/2020 of the Council of Ministers, September 11, 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/f8fdc364-84ce-40b2-992c-e70c711050a1> (English version from p. 92).

³⁷ Polish Polar Consortium, Polish Academy of Sciences Polar Research Committee (PAS PRC), “Strategy of Polish polar research, the 2017-2027 proposal” *PKPolar* (2017), <https://www.pkpolar.pl/eng/strategy/>.

³⁸ Ordinance No. 4 of the Prime Minister of January 28, 2022 on the Team for Polar Policy of the State, <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/polska-polityka-polarna>.

³⁹ The Warsaw Format meetings are gathered whenever needed – without a pre-fixed calendar or agenda. The outcomes of such meetings are not public – such informal settings seem very useful in order to address delicate situations, like the role of Russia in the Arctic governance following its aggression to Ukraine in February 2022. See for example the notice of a Warsaw Format meeting on 28 September 2023, as reported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Warsaw Format discusses future of Arctic cooperation, September 28, 2023, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/warsaw-format-discusses-future-of-arctic-cooperation>. See also Alisa Musanovic, “Poland’s polar policy: interview with Dr Michał Łuszczuk,” *Polar Connection*, May 6, 2022, <https://polarconnection.org/interview-michal-luszczuk>.

⁴⁰ See Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Members of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Barents Regional Council, <https://barents-council.org/barents-euro-arctic-council/members-of-the-beac-and-the-brc>,

⁴¹ The Spitsbergen Treaty was signed on 9 February 1920 in Versailles. For the history and the text of the treaty, see www.spitsbergen-svalbard.com/spitsbergen-information/history/the-spitsbergentreaty.html.

⁴² Arctic Institute, “Poland. Economy” *The Arctic Institute* (2023), <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/poland/>.

⁴³ Established in 2011 as meetings of the eight Arctic countries and delegates from France, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK, including since 2012 the meetings of chiefs of staff of Arctic countries. See Polish

constantly involved in joint Arctic exercises conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁴⁴

2.2. The Czech Republic's Arctic policies: a major focus on research cooperation

The Czech Republic has a long-standing tradition in research involvement in the Arctic region. The Czech Republic has been a signatory of the Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty and Czech scientific teams have been conducting research in Svalbard since 1989.⁴⁵ A number of research and academic institutions have conducted research on the Arctic in the Czech Republic: the Czech Polar Research Centre, a research consortium established in 2008, include experts from the Masaryk University in Brno, the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, the Czech Geological Survey, the Botanical Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, the Geological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, the Biological Center of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, the Charles University of Prague, the Palackého University of Olomouc and Comenius.⁴⁶

In 2017, the Czech Republic hosted the Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW), a significant conference that brought together experts and researchers from various disciplines to discuss and advance Arctic research.⁴⁷ Czech scientists have also actively participated in long-term research projects contributing to the work carried out by the three working groups of the Arctic Council—the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program (AMAP), the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), and the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG).⁴⁸ These groups specifically address important issues related to the environment, climate change, and their societal, and economic implications.

The Czech Republic officially applied for Observer Status in the Arctic Council in December 2020. At the meeting in Reykjavik in May 2021, no decision was taken on

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Polish Polar Policy, Resolution 129/2020 of the Council of Ministers, September 11, 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/f8fdc364-84ce-40b2-992c-e70c711050a1>.

⁴⁴ Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Polish Polar Policy, Resolution 129/2020 of the Council of Ministers, September 11, 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/f8fdc364-84ce-40b2-992c-e70c711050a1>. On the topic of the involvement of NATO in the Arctic, see Duncan Depledge, "NATO and the Arctic The Need for a New Approach," *Rusi Journal* 165, no. 5-6 (2020): 80-90 and Helg Haftendorn, "NATO and the Arctic: is the Atlantic alliance a cold war relic in a peaceful region now faced with non-military challenges?," *European Security* 20, no. 3 (2011): 337-361.

⁴⁵ Barbora Padrtová, Zuzana Trávníčková, "Region Arktidy: aspekty politicko-bezpečnostní, ekonomické a vědecko-výzkumné," *IIR Policy Paper*, 2017, <https://www.iir.cz/region-arktity-aspekty-politicko-bez-pecnostni-ekonomicke-a-vedecko-vyzkumne>, 63. Moreover, the Czech Republic has opened a Czech Arctic Scientific Infrastructure in Svalbard, i.e the Josef Svoboda Station – for an account on the work developed there, see Zdenek Lycka, Josef Elster, "Punk's not dead, even at the Czech Arctic Scientific Station in Svalbard," *Oceanologia* 62, no. 4 (2020): 622-627.

⁴⁶ See all Information on the official webpage: <http://ncvpo.webnode.cz/>.

⁴⁷ Czechia in the Arctic/ Arctic in the Czechia (2021). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. https://www.mzv.cz/file/4247197/Czechia_in_the_Arctic_The_Arctic_in_Czechia.pdf.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

admitting new Observers. Although for now obtaining Observer Status is not on the table – and though the Czech Republic has not yet adopted any Arctic policy document at the governmental and/or ministerial level -, the Czech Republic continues to be actively involved in scientific cooperation in the Arctic region and to be interested in Arctic-related issues.⁴⁹

The interests of the Czech Republic in the Arctic include the maintenance of peace and international cooperation in the Arctic, as well as efforts in addressing the negative impacts of climate change that are taking place in the Arctic. In order to achieve these goals, the Czech Republic has been developing bilateral cooperation with partners in the Arctic, especially in the field of research and business.⁵⁰

More and more scientific projects of Czech research groups are connected to the topic of Arctic policies, especially in the field of climate change.⁵¹ And since 2018, the former Czech Ambassador to Denmark Zdeněk Lyčka has been organizing the annual Arctic Festival, a cultural and scientific event about Arctic issues targeting the general public.⁵²

2.3. Slovakia and Hungary's (lack of) Arctic policies

In the European region, Slovakia – together with other countries, like Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania – does not have a scientific polar programme.⁵³ This also connects to the lack of tradition of climate change-related policies: suffice to recall, for example, that Slovakia adopted its first ever climate law only in January 2023.⁵⁴

There are sporadic research exchanges of researchers – for example, in the framework of the bilateral research programme with Norway, sponsored by the Norwegian Embassy in Bratislava, which encourages research also in the Arctic

⁴⁹ Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Czech Republic and the Arctic Council,” *MZV* (2023), https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/candidacy_arctic_council/index.html. See also an overview of scientific projects being carried on in the Arctic region on the official website of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Activities of Czech scientists related to the Arctic at https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/candidacy_arctic_council/activities_of_czech_scientists_related.html. For a comment, see Over the Circle, “Centre-to-North: The Arctic Policies of the Czech Republic,” *Over the Circle*, March 28, 2021, <https://overthecircle.com/2021/03/28/centre-to-north-the-arctic-policies-of-the-czech-republic>.

⁵⁰ Barbora Padrtová, Zuzana Trávníčková, “Region Arktidy: aspekty politicko-bezpečnostní, ekonomické a vědecko-výzkumné,” *IIR Policy Paper*, 2017, <https://www.iir.cz/region-arktity-aspekty-politicko-bezpecnostni-ekonomicke-a-vedecko-vyzkumne>, 68.

⁵¹ Michael Wenger, “Czech Republic’s research wants to join Arctic Council,” *Polar Journal*, March 26, 2021, <https://polarjournal.ch/en/2021/03/26/czech-republics-research-wants-to-join-arctic-council>.

⁵² The last edition of the Arctic Festival took place between 17 September to 31 December 2023. for more Information, see the official website, <https://arktickyfestival.cz/en/home>.

⁵³ European Science Foundation, “Developing Polar Programmes in Europe,” *ESF.org*, 2023, <http://archives.esf.org/hosting-experts/expert-boards-and-committees/polar-sciences/about/developing-polar-programmes-in-europe-copy-1.html>.

⁵⁴ Barbara Zmušková, “Slovak government presents first-ever climate law,” *Euractiv.sk*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovak-government-presents-first-ever-climate-law>.

region,⁵⁵ or in the broader framework of bilateral research grants between Slovakia and other countries, including Finland and Norway.⁵⁶

Also, Hungary lacks a dedicated Arctic policy. However, in the last years, the Arctic has started to be considered in some governmental documents: for example, in 2020, the Hungarian Government published a new National Security Strategy (*Hungary in a Changing World*), which mentions the Arctic region as an area of interest, affirming that “[t]he power competition is increasingly extending to the global commons: there is an increasing struggle for control of international waters and resources, the Arctic and outer space, and the dominance of cyberspace”.⁵⁷ On the security side, it is also worth recalling that Hungary has taken part in some Arctic exercises organized by NATO, like the 2018 Trident Juncture exercise.⁵⁸ The Arctic region has been also given attention in the Hungarian Second National Climate Change Strategy 2018–2030, prepared by the Ministry for Innovation and Technology in 2018.⁵⁹ The report refers the risks connected to climate change challenges in the Arctic region, though it does not put forward any suggestion or dedicated plan of action.⁶⁰

Research cooperation in the Arctic region has been also quite good for Hungary. From the Hungarian perspective, the Arctic region became especially important from the second half of the 1800s, during which time three Austro–Hungarian research expeditions were carried out. Later, in the early 1900s, the Hungarian Geographical Society carried out a number of research expeditions with the scope to investigate the region, while the first Hungarian publications about the Arctic started to appear.⁶¹ In 2021, Hungary signed a memorandum of understanding on space cooperation with Finland. However, Arctic issues have not caught so much attention among Hungarian researchers.⁶²

3. Concluding remarks

As emerged from the previous paragraphs, Arctic-related policies have not been

⁵⁵ See all relevant Information on the Norwegian Embassy in Bratislava, <https://www.norway.no/en/slovakia/services-info/research/>.

⁵⁶ See all relevant Information on the Slovak Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, <https://www.minedu.sk/bilateral-scholarships-for-20232024/>.

⁵⁷ 1163/2020 (IV. 21.) Government Resolution on the National Security Strategy of Hungary. Point no. 148. available in the English language at <https://honvedelem.hu/hirek/government-resolution-1163-2020-21st-april.html>. For a comment, see Dóra Molnár, Patrik Szalkai, “Could the Arctic Be a New Field of Advocacy for Hungary?,” *Hadmérnök Fórum* 17, no. 3 (2022): 169-185.

⁵⁸ Melinda Hovány-Pap, István Háda, “Eredményesen zárult a Trident Juncture 2018 gyakorlat,” *Honvédelem*, December 5, 2018, <https://honvedelem.hu/hirek/hazai-hirek/eredmenyesen-zarult-a-trident-juncture-2018-gyakorlat.html>.

⁵⁹ Ministry for Innovation and Technology: 23/2018 (X. 31.) Parliamentary Resolution on the Second National Climate Change Strategy 2018–2030, looking ahead to 2050.

⁶⁰ Dóra Molnár, Patrik Szalkai, “Could the Arctic Be a New Field of Advocacy for Hungary?,” *Hadmérnök Fórum* 17, no. 3 (2022): 171.

⁶¹ Viktória Németh, “The Arctic from a Hungarian Perspective,” *Modern Geográfia* 18, no. 1 (2023): 45.

⁶² Dóra Molnár, Patrik Szalkai, “Could the Arctic Be a New Field of Advocacy for Hungary?,” *Hadmérnök Fórum* 17, no. 3 (2022): 175.

at the heart of the agenda of the Visegrád Group as such. While the V4 countries have issued a few general statements on the importance to advance in climate change policies, all Arctic-related topics have been mainly dealt with at the national level in each one of the Visegrád countries, at different levels. In particular, the Arctic region has been at the center of several political initiatives in Poland, and to a certain extent also in the Czech Republic, while in Hungary and Slovakia the region has been taken into consideration only in connection with other issues, like climate change, or only for academic and research purposes.

Apart from Poland, in particular, it is quite evident that Arctic issues are normally channeled in as part of the discussion of non-Arctic and/or non-polar related issues, like climate change and/or security. This can be partly connected to a general lack of interest and disinformation related to climate-related topics.

In June 2022, the International Republican Institute's Beacon project launched an initiative called the "European Green Deal: Mapping perceptions in Central and Eastern Europe," in which six partner organizations studied how the European Green Deal is perceived in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.⁶³ When it comes in particular to the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the research has shown how the discussion around the European Green Deal in general, and climate change in particular, is strongly politicised and how the European Green Deal has been used as a proxy for supporting anti-EU narratives while ignoring climate change research.⁶⁴

In the Czech Republic in particular, climate change is among the most contested topics within society. As well pointed out, "[d]espite the extensive scientific evidence supporting human-induced climate change, climate change denial still exists and contributes to delaying mitigation efforts".⁶⁵ Climate change denial goes hand in hand with a lack of awareness and education on climate change issues. According to the findings of a major 2022 study of the Czech Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Institute for Empirical Research, while Czech citizens seem "happy to protect nature, the landscape and the climate [they are] very concerned about the economic and social impacts of such a transformation".⁶⁶ Overall, the Czech population seems to have very little information about the causes and effects of climate change: according to the STEM's survey, only one tenth of citizens have enough information about the Green Deal for Europe, roughly half know a little, a third almost

⁶³ International Republican Institute, "Beacon project, European Green Deal: Mapping perceptions in Central and Eastern Europe" *IRI Beacon Project*, June 2022, <https://www.iribeaconproject.org/our-work-analysis-and-insights/2022-06-30/european-green-deal-mapping-perceptions-central-and-eastern-europe>.

⁶⁴ Tatiana Mindeková, "Monitoring of the EU's Green Policies: Perceptions and Narratives in the Czech and Slovak Information Space," *Europeum*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.europeum.org/en/articles/detail/5424/report-monitoring-of-the-eu-s-green-policies-perceptions-and-narratives-in-the-czech-and-slovak-information-space>.

⁶⁵ Kirsti M. Jylhä, Pontus Strimling, Jens Rydgren, "Climate Change Denial among Radical Right-Wing Supporters," *Sustainability* 12, no. 23 (2020): 1-15.

⁶⁶ STEM Ústav empirických výzkumů, "Czech (non)transformation 2022," *STEM.cz*, September 20, 2022, <https://www.stem.cz/en/ceska-netransformace-2022/>.

nothing.⁶⁷ This is in line with a previous poll released by STEM in March 2020,⁶⁸ which highlighted that, though the Czech Republic seemed to have become less climate-skeptic than in the past, still more than half (53%) of respondents said they had never heard of any public debate surrounding climate change related to the EU agenda.⁶⁹ The STEM analyst Nikola Hořejs warns that citizens are still “very confused about what can be done” and that, as a result, they can easily be influenced by politicians’ statements.⁷⁰

The sociologist and director of STEM Martin Buchtík expressly highlighted that “if we want (...) a green transformation, it must be primarily social and socially sensitive. Otherwise, there will be no transformation”.⁷¹ Unfortunately, as well summarized by an online Czech journal “The public’s ignorance of climate is alarming”.⁷²

Climate change misperceptions seem common also in Poland, where “48% of Poles aged 35 to 54 believe global warming is due to human activity, against only 34% of 18 to 34 year-olds”⁷³ and where “only 40% of Poles believe [] that climate change has already become a threat to humanity, against 59% for the EU average”.⁷⁴

The situation is slightly more positive in Slovakia, where “79% of Slovaks feel they are doing all they can to fight climate change in their daily lives [...and] 58% of Slovaks say they consider climate change when choosing a holiday destination [...or] 57% of young Slovaks consider climate change when looking for a job”, according to the results from the second release of the 2021-2022 Climate Survey published by the European Investment Bank in February 2022.⁷⁵

And also in Hungary, it seems that “Hungarian public is particularly concerned about climate change and believes that politicians should take this issue more

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ STEM Ústav empirických výzkumů, “Češi se obávají změn klimatu a podporují uhlíkovou neutralitu. Mají ale strach z dopadů na českou ekonomiku,” *STEM.cz*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.stem.cz/cesi-se-obavaji-zmen-klimatu-a-podporuji-uhlikovou-neutralitu-maji-ale-strach-z-dopadu-na-ceskou-ekonomiku>.

⁶⁹ Kafkadesk Prague Office, “Climate change awareness reaches record-high in the Czech Republic,” *Kafkadesk News*, March 21, 2020, <https://kafkadesk.org/2020/03/21/climate-change-awareness-reaches-record-high-in-the-czech-republic>.

⁷⁰ Ibid. See also Anna Fodor, “Czechs want to protect environment – but can’t agree on how,” *Radio Prague International*, September 22, 2022, <https://english.radio.cz/czechs-want-protect-environment-cant-agree-how-8762230>.

⁷¹ “Polovina lidí z ČR se bojí, že přechod k udržitelné ekonomice posílí chudobu,” *České Noviny*, September 20, 2022, <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2259242>.

⁷² Terezie Wasserbauerová, “Češi se bojí sucha i znečištěného ovzduší, víc ale toho, kolik změny budou stát,” *Idnes.cz*, September 20, 2022, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/pruzkum-dopady-oteplovani-green-deal.A220920_130624_domaci_wass.

⁷³ European Investment Bank, “In terms of climate change perceptions, age differences in Poland deviate from the EU average,” *EIB.org*, 2023, <https://www.eib.org/en/infographics/poland-age-differences-on-climate-change-perceptions-deviate-from-eu-average>.

⁷⁴ European Investment Bank, “Poles are less concerned about climate change than their fellow Europeans,” *EIB.org*, 2023, <https://www.eib.org/en/infographics/poland-less-concerned-about-climate-change>.

⁷⁵ European Investment Bank, “Slovak people are increasingly adapting their habits in a more sustainable manner to tackle climate change,” *EIB.org*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2022-054-slovak-people-are-increasingly-adapting-their-habits-in-a-more-sustainable-manner-to-tackle-climate-change>.

seriously”⁷⁶

It seems that a lot remains for further research to be conducted in the Visegrád countries on how to better channel Arctic-related issues in climate change discussions.

Bibliography

1. Andonovaa, Liliana B. & Stacy D. VanDeveer, “Regional institutions and the environment in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 14 (2011): 20–23.
2. Cáceres, Danilo Vicente García, “European cooperation: How important country is Poland to ensure the Arctic governance?,” *Polar Science* 21, (2019): 47-51.
3. Carmin, Joann & Stacy D. VanDeveer, “Enlarging EU environments: Central and Eastern Europe from transition to accession,” *Environmental Politics* 13, no. 1 (2004): 3-24.
4. Chater, Andrew, “Explaining Non-Arctic States in the Arctic Council,” *Strategic Analysis* 40, no. 3 (2016): 173-184.
5. Depledge, Duncan, “NATO and the Arctic The Need for a New Approach,” *Rusi Journal* 165, no. 5-6 (2020): 80-90.
6. Gebhard, Carmen, “Sub-Regional cooperation in Central Europe – past, present and future,” *AARMS* 12, no. 1 (2013): 25-38.
7. Graczyk, Piotr, “Poland and the Arctic: Between Science and Diplomacy,” *Arctic Yearbook 2012* (2012): 139-155.
8. Haftendorf, Helg, “NATO and the Arctic: is the Atlantic alliance a cold war relic in a peaceful region now faced with non-military challenges?,” *European Security* 20, no. 3 (2011): 337-361.
9. Jeszenszky, Geza, “25 Years of the Visegrad Group,” *Contemporary Europe-Sovremennaya Evropa* 6 (2017): 13-19.
10. Jylhä, Kirsti M., Pontus Strimling & Jens Rydgren, “Climate Change Denial among Radical Right-Wing Supporters,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 23 (2020): 1-15.
11. Layman, Peter, “Environment in Central, Eastern Europe improves, but problems remain,” *Chemical & Engineering News* 77, no. 48 (1999): 18-19.
12. Loukacheva, Natalia, “The Arctic Council and "Law-Making",” *Northern Review* 50 (2020): 109-135.
13. Łuszczuk, Michał, “Arctic Council Observer: The Development and Significance of Poland’s Approach towards the Arctic Region,” *Ocean Yearbook* 27, no. 1 (2013): 487-502.
14. Łuszczuk, Michał, Piotr Rakowski & Monika Szkarlat, “Poland's polar policy in the face of the Arctic Council 2022 cooperation crisis,” *Polish Polar Research* 44, no. 4 (2023): 339-364.
15. Lycka, Zdenek & Josef Elster, “Punk's not dead, even at the Czech Arctic Scientific Station in Svalbard,” *Oceanologia* 62, no. 4 (2020): 622-627.
16. Molnár, Dóra & Patrik Szalkai, “Could the Arctic Be a New Field of Advocacy for Hungary?,” *Hadmérnök Fórum* 17, no. 3 (2022): 169-185.
17. Németh, Viktória, “The Arctic from a Hungarian Perspective,” *Modern Geográfia* 18, no. 1 (2023): 41-57.

⁷⁶ DemNet, “Vast majority of Hungarians think that we should be more concerned with climate change,” *DemNet.hu*, October 17, 2019, <https://demnet.hu/en/hungarians-are-concerned-about-climate-change/>.

18. Rudka, Andrzej, “Central Europe: regional cooperation and beyond,” in *The emerging new regional order in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Tadayuki Hayashi (Hokkaido University, 1997), 193-209.
19. Safonova, Evgeniya A., “The Visegrad group: stages of formation and development,” *Vestnik Tomskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta Istoriya-Tomsk State University Journal of History* 53 (2018): 69-73.
20. Sakharov, Andrei, “Arctic Council as a Regional Governance Institution,” *Vestnik Mezhdunarodnykh Organizatsii-International Organisations Research Journal* 10, no. 4 (2015): 72-92.
21. Shishelina, Lyubov, “Visegrad Group in Light of Challenges 2020,” *Contemporary Europe-Sovremennaya Evropa* 5 (2021): 89-98.
22. Strážay, Tomas, “When pragmatism wins: Slovakia in the Visegrád group,” in *Yearbook of Slovakia’s foreign policy 2018* (2019): 67–74.
23. Vargha, Judit, “Drifting Countries - Politics and Environment in East Central Europe,” in *Environmental Cooperation in Europe*, ed. Otmar Hoell (Westview Press, Vienna, 1994): 239-246.
24. Waisová, Šárka, “The Environmental Situation in the Visegrad Region: Neglect and Insufficient Cooperation in the Face of Serious Environmental Threats,” *Politics in Central Europe* 14, no. 2 (2018): 57-73.
25. Wołek, Artur, “Precipices beneath summits? The Visegrád cooperation seen from middle policy levels,” in *Internal cohesion of the Visegrád group*, eds. Juraj Marušiak et al. (VEDA, 2013), 86–99.