

Right-Wing Radical Tendencies in Neighboring States and Their Impact on Support for Ukraine

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Introduction

The countries of the so-called “Visegrád Four” (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Czechia), which in the 1990s united into an informal club with the aim of shaping policies that would most likely facilitate the integration of member states into the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), underwent a profound political transformation between 2010 and 2015. As a result, as of 2026, from diligent students in the field of democracy and good governance, they have turned into leading critics of many aspects of EU policy (in particular, migration, foreign, and financial policy), while at the domestic political level they have embarked, if not on a full-fledged authoritarian drift, then on the dismantling of the fundamental democratic principle of checks and balances. The consequences of this metamorphosis have manifested themselves fully in attitudes toward Ukraine as well: in contrast to the mood of the 2000s, when the Visegrád Four took into account the interests of Eastern European countries that did not belong to Euro-Atlantic structures, the group has turned into a vocal critic and even a driving force of unfriendly measures toward Ukraine.

The particular Central European path by which right-wing populist political movements gained political power and began to determine the nature of the political regime and, accordingly, state policy – including foreign policy – became possible thanks to a combination of structural and actor-related factors.

Since the right-wing populist turn in Central Europe affects relations with Ukraine, for Kyiv this means the need to take into account not only the institutional positions of the EU, but also the political dynamics of neighboring states, which determine the quality of regional support and the prospects for integration.

Right-Wing Populism as a Factor of Political Dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe

The determining factor of political dynamics in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia is not so much radical nationalism as right-wing populism. It is right-wing populism that is responsible for the transformation of political regimes and the shaping of domestic and foreign policy, and therefore it determines the nature of relations with Ukraine.

In this paper, populism is conceptualized as a strategy for acquiring and exercising political power, based on the large-scale mobilization of population groups that are, in reality or in perception, excluded from the political process, through the use of anti-elitist rhetoric. Like any other political strategy, populism is a combination of discursive acts (what actors say) and mobilizational measures (what they do to publicly demonstrate their position), aimed at gaining access to political office.¹

The chosen operationalization of populism has an advantage over widespread approaches that portray populism as a thin ideology² or as the rhetoric of an outsider politician seeking to circumvent the constraints of the political system,³ since it allows one to avoid the typical mistake of considering populism to be an attribute exclusively of contenders for power. The proposed conceptualization assumes that large-scale mobilization through anti-elitist rhetoric is employed both by opposition politicians (accusing those in power of failing to understand the needs of the people) and by incumbents (mobilizing citizens against “transnational corporations” or “economic manipulators”).

This framework is particularly suited to the analysis of Central and Eastern Europe, where populist forces have repeatedly made – and continue to make – the transition from street politics (demonstrations, social movements) to party activity and public administration.

Political actors receive incentives to use populism under certain conditions, namely: (1) the spread of a sense that the political system is unresponsive to citizens’ needs; (2) scandals that demonstrate immorality and abuse of power on the part of elite representatives; (3) perceptions of threats to the existence of the political community. Under such conditions, the populist strategy becomes an effective tool for mobilization and the legitimation of political actions.

Depending on the socio-political context, populism focuses on key issues and shapes rhetoric of one of two types: exclusivist or inclusive.

By appealing to inclusive rhetoric, an actor employs a strategy of left-wing populism, which seeks to integrate into the political process broad social groups that were previously marginalized, and places emphasis on social justice and the redistribution of resources.

By contrast, by appealing to exclusivist rhetoric, an actor employs a strategy of right-wing populism, which is characterized by xenophobic tendencies and the conviction that the state should belong exclusively to the “native” representatives of the nation, while “foreigners” pose a threat to it. Right-wing populism is accompanied by distrust of international institutions and an emphasis on protecting “national authenticity”.⁴

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Regardless of whether inclusive or exclusivist rhetoric is used, foreign policy issues generally play a secondary role for populist politicians and their voters as a whole. Nevertheless, the practices and rhetoric of populism in domestic politics change the social structures that formulate, discuss, and implement foreign policy measures.⁵ In other words, populism introduces into politics a Manichaeian distinction between the “friends” and “enemies” of the people, contributes to social polarization, politicizes technocratic issues, and, as a result, can channel the passions of the population – and, accordingly, mobilize its supporters – around specific foreign policy steps, such as the signing of international agreements, the formation of alliances, or policies related to national security.

Right-wing populism specifically dominates in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. An important regional factor in its spread has been economic anxiety, linked to the perception of the economic and political situation by particular social categories who, although living in favorable socio-economic conditions, compare their own difficulties with positive national indicators and conclude that they are not receiving what they deserve.⁶ Since the economic situation in Hungary, Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia depends not only on the policies of national governments but also on decisions taken by the EU as a whole, the question of the nature of relations with European institutions has become part of the mobilizational appeals of right-wing populists in the region. And since EU foreign policy after 2022 concerns such cornerstone issues as relations with Ukraine and relations with the Russian Federation (RF), these relations have found themselves at the epicenter of right-wing populists’ attention.

Hungary as the Matrix of Right-Wing Populism in Central and Eastern Europe

Hungary has turned into a bastion of right-wing populism as a result of the prolonged and purposeful work of Viktor Orbán, which, however, would not have been so successful outside of favorable structural circumstances, namely:

- › the devastating impact of the 2008 financial crisis on the national economy, which not only worsened the material status of a significant part of society but also forced the country to turn for loans to the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which provided funds on rather harsh terms. This contributed to the spread of the belief that the country had come under “external management”;
- › the crisis of Orbán’s political opponents, above all the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), whose weakening opened the way for a convincing victory of Orbán’s party (Fidesz) in the 2010 elections, which allowed him to form a government single-handedly, amend the Constitution, fill the judiciary with political allies, and take control of the media.

Since 2014, Orbán has consistently pursued a right-wing populist course. A landmark moment in this regard was his speech in the Transylvanian town of Băile Tușnad (Romania) at the annual festival of Hungarian right-wing forces. Orbán deliberately chose this event in order to present himself as the leader of ethnic Hungarians, thereby activating irredentist motives inherent in certain segments of Hungarian society. The content of the speech no less openly challenged EU norms. Orbán directly undermined the principle of liberal democracy, criticizing the inability of the liberal state to ensure the “national good” and protection from the debt crisis. Citing examples of “successful illiberal models” in Singapore, China, Russia, Turkey, and India, he called for the creation of a genuine community of Hungarians rather than a “conglomerate of individuals”.⁷ Accordingly, the Băile Tușnad speech should be regarded as the battle cry of an alternative model of political order, which became the ideological core of right-wing populism in the region.

The 2015 migration crisis became a catalyst for the spread of right-wing populism, since the appearance of migrants – “foreigners” whose reception “European supranational technocrats” were allegedly imposing on Budapest in order to “destroy the culture and homogeneity of the nation” – offered an ideal way to use fears and resentment to strengthen the position of Fidesz. The 2018 elections demonstrated the effectiveness of the chosen strategy: Orbán’s party won its third consecutive victory, retained two-thirds of the parliamentary seats, effectively drawing votes away from the radical nationalists (Jobbik) and pushing the left (MSZP) and the centrists (Democratic Coalition, DK) to the political margins. The foundation of Fidesz’s victories was a combination of anti-elitist rhetoric (criticism of the EU) with successful mobilization of specific categories of the population. Sociological data show that 63% of Fidesz voters were over the age of 50, and the party won more votes in districts with fewer secondary-school graduates.⁸ Thus, Orbán’s electoral base consisted of older, less educated, rural voters – people who considered themselves victims of the socio-economic situation, since they saw a threat to their material status and way of life in the transnational economy promoted by European institutions.

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On this base, Fidesz continued to successfully concentrate its attention going forward. After winning the 2022 elections, in which Fidesz once again secured two-thirds of the seats, Orbán openly outlined the stakes and the opponent in this confrontation, stating: “We have won such a great victory that it can be seen even from the moon, and certainly from Brussels... Christian democratic national politics has triumphed, and we must tell Brussels that this is not the past, but the future”.⁹ The 2022 elections were also marked by another notable result: the ultranationalist, far-right, national-conservative, Eurosceptic party Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk) entered parliament, compared to which the Fidesz platform appeared moderately centrist. In other words, Fidesz did not so much shape as respond, through its ideological platform, to a specific demand within Hungarian society. In fact, in order to satisfy the interests of the conservative segment of the population, after 2022 Orbán initiated further changes in social policy: the constitutional definition of marriage as a union of a man and a woman, the introduction of restrictions on adoption by same-sex couples, an assault on the rights of transgender people, prioritization of raising the birth rate through tax benefits to support families, and resistance to immigration.¹⁰

For Orbán, foreign policy primarily served as a mobilizational element for achieving advantages in domestic politics. And since the role of the main internal enemy for Hungarian right-wing populists was played by liberal democracy and its supranational institutional embodiment – the EU – in foreign policy Orbán actively criticized and resisted EU policy, while also seeking allies both among ideologically kindred movements and among occasional fellow travelers. In particular, from 2015 he entered into a partnership with the right-wing populists of Central Europe, above all with the Polish Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS). Beyond the regional context, Orbán actively promoted his own version of an “Eastern policy”, strengthening economic ties with Russia and China. The Russian factor was distinctive not only because of Orbán’s private interest in the energy market, but also because Hungary had for a long time remained one of the EU member states most dependent on Russia in energy terms: between 2021 and 2025, the share of Russian gas imports rose from 60% to 90%, and of oil from 61% to 93%, while the Russian company Rosatom undertook to build two new reactors at the Paks II nuclear power plant – a project financed predominantly with Russian funds. Also important to the friendly Hungarian–Russian relationship was a convergence of rhetoric: starting in 2014, the Kremlin consistently presented itself as a “defender of traditional values” and criticized liberal democracy. Given the combination of these factors, Orbán’s consistent pro-Russian policy – the scope of which was demonstrated by a conversation “leaked” in 2026, in which Orbán declared Budapest’s readiness to act as a mediator or ally of Moscow within the EU and NATO¹¹ – should come as no surprise.

Relations between Budapest and Kyiv, on the other hand, have been paradoxically uneven. In 2016, Orbán stated: “If we – the countries of the Visegrád Four – had not become members of the European Union, then instead of economic growth the EU would have seen only stagnation and decline. [...] The same will be true for Ukraine [...]. That is why we will always advocate for Ukraine’s accession to the European Union. [...] Everyone should be aware of the risk that Ukraine took when it decided three years ago to move closer to the European Union”.¹² However, over the following years the situation changed radically. Starting in 2017, Budapest increasingly criticized Ukrainian legislation on education and language, positioning itself as the defender of the rights of the Hungarian minority in Zakarpattia. This step was an element of mobilizational practice, since in order to protect Hungarians abroad, the nation, by design, was supposed to unite around its leader.

With the start of the Russian Federation’s full-scale aggression, Orbán used the foreign-policy context even more openly for domestic mobilization, positioning himself as the guarantor of a “peaceful path” and refusing to actively support Ukraine. The culmination was open hostility: Hungary put forward 11 demands to Ukraine,¹³ effectively undermining its sovereignty, systematically blocked European aid packages, delayed decisions on negotiations for Ukraine’s EU accession, and increasingly presented Ukraine as a burden for Europe and a threat to Hungary’s peaceful development.

Unfriendly steps toward Ukraine, however, primarily reflected the logic of Hungary’s domestic political struggle in 2022–2026: for the 2026 elections, Fidesz chose a populist strategy of using the

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image of a “foreigner” posing a threat to the national community – and Ukraine, a neighboring country with a Hungarian minority and a party to the war, fit this role perfectly. Evidence supporting this interpretation is the fact that anti-Ukrainian rhetoric was most often an element of the triad “EU – Hungarian opposition – Ukraine”, within which Orbán criticized the EU for “ignoring the will of the people” in trying to drag Hungary into a war with the RF, and branded the opposition as “the Hungarian left, which, directed by Macron and von der Leyen, carries out Brussels’ orders”.¹⁴

The key question that has arisen after Fidesz’s crushing defeat in the 2026 elections and the rise to power of Péter Magyar at the head of the Tisza party is whether Orbán’s departure will improve Ukrainian–Hungarian relations. The analysis presented above calls for cautious and limited optimism. Orbán chose a confrontational course in relations with Kyiv – and, more broadly, with Brussels – not because of particular values or ideology, but because the rejection of liberalism and nationalism were in demand in Hungarian society and contributed to his political dominance. This demand has not disappeared with Tisza’s victory. On the contrary, following the results of the 2026 elections, the far-right Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk) won 6 seats, while the centrist Democratic Coalition (DK) failed to clear the 5% electoral threshold, which clearly indicates the preferences of Hungarian society.

Moreover, Tisza displays a number of features characteristic of a populist force:

- › It is a typical party built around a leader: apart from Péter Magyar himself, most of its representatives remain little known to voters – even the most recognizable figures, such as István Kapitány or Márk Radnai, have a recognition level of only 30-40%.¹⁵
- › The party’s rise began in 2024 on the wave of a scandal involving pedophilia among individuals close to Fidesz,¹⁶ thanks to which Magyar began presenting himself as a defender of children against the immorality of those in power.
- › In the fight against Fidesz’s dominance, Magyar consistently pointed out that the elites within Orbán’s circle, and the prime minister himself, engage in corrupt dealings at the expense of ordinary Hungarians.¹⁷
- › Magyar’s main method of engaging with voters was direct mobilization (visits to localities, online voting for candidates, and mass rallies)¹⁸ – that is, methods that allow him to bypass traditional party structures.

All of the aforementioned factors are typical elements of a populist strategy. Combined with the fact that Magyar was a member of Fidesz’s inner circle for about 20 years, has maintained friendly relations with a number of former colleagues, and was perceived by part of the electorate during the elections not as a new force but as a conservative politician, it can be concluded that the new prime minister will have several reasons to gradually shift his rhetoric and, accordingly, his policy, in order to meet the demands of right-wing populist voters. Undoubtedly, the first signals currently being sent by Magyar hint at more harmonious relations with Brussels, since he seeks to unblock billions of euros in EU financial assistance, and therefore promises “anti-corruption measures, Hungary’s accession to the European Public Prosecutor’s Office, and the restoration of the independence and freedom of the judiciary, the press, and higher education”.¹⁹ But alongside concessions to the EU, he displays a certain firmness in his rhetoric toward Ukraine,²⁰ since, by demonstrating strength, populists in power appeal to their own electorate. This means that Kyiv should respond favorably to any friendly initiatives from Magyar’s government, while at the same time remaining aware that Budapest could worsen relations within the EU–Ukraine–Hungary triangle at any moment.

Right-Wing Populism with National Flavor: Cases of Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia

The main reason for Fidesz's prolonged dominance in Hungary, in addition to structural factors, was the party's colonization of state institutions and the weakness of the political opposition. In Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia, which find themselves in similar structural circumstances, right-wing populists have proven less successful in capturing the state and weakening the opposition, which has resulted in shorter periods in power and the existence of constraints on what populists in power can say and do.

In Poland, the conservative, nativist, and illiberal²¹ – that is, right-wing populist – Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) came to power in 2015, when in May the party's representative Andrzej Duda won the presidential election, and in October, having won 235 seats, PiS formed a majority and, accordingly, a government. The victory was secured by rhetoric condemning post-communist liberal elites and the West as the bearer of technocratic liberalism. This rhetoric resonated with a significant part of the population owing to the resentment that had formed during the era of political and economic transition as a result of a sense of humiliation, which spread due to the need to copy the experience of Western Europe as the only correct model.²² The political situation remained unchanged after the 2019 parliamentary elections and the 2020 presidential race, following which PiS forces continued to control both the executive and legislative branches of power. It was only after the 2023 parliamentary elections that PiS, although it remained the largest faction, failed to form a government, which was instead formed by the centrist opposition bloc Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO). After the victory of PiS representative Karol Nawrocki in the 2025 presidential election, Poland has officially existed in a state of cohabitation. This attests, at the institutional level, to the polarization of Polish society, which places certain constraints on the capacity of right-wing populists in the country: unlike Hungary, Poland has an active and organized left-liberal force that plays the role of a counterweight to PiS.

The central question is whether the liberal-democratic camp in the country will have sufficient capacity to halt the right-wing populist drift observed in Polish society. Similar to the Hungarian situation, where alongside Fidesz a more radical Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk) is politically active on the right flank, in Poland the potential actor drawing right-wing populist votes away from the systemic PiS party is the Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość). This coalition of small parties brings together various components of the Polish alternative right – libertarian, ultranationalist, antisemitic. As of spring 2026, according to polls, the Confederation (Konfederacja) enjoys the support of 12–14% of Polish voters,²³ although in the elections it won only 7%, which is the best dynamic among all political forces in the country. Even these figures do not outline the upper limit of the potential of right-wing populism in Poland, since, separately from Konfederacja, Confederation of the Polish Crown (Konfederacja Korony Polskiej), which split off from the main Konfederacja, is also competing for the votes of the illiberal segment and currently attracts 9% of Poles.

The political trajectories of the leaders of the Confederation Liberty and Independence (Krzysztof Bosak, Sławomir Mentzen) and Confederation of the Polish Crown (Grzegorz Braun) embody local resentment against the dominance of Western liberalism. Bosak, a student of the Warsaw School of Economics and a participant in the show "Dancing with the Stars", was elected to parliament from the

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constituency of the city of Kielce, known for the largest anti-Jewish pogrom in the country's history, and now the capital of an agricultural region and one of the most economically unsuccessful regions of both Poland and the EU.²⁴ Mentzen, a certified specialist in public debt issues and an entrepreneur, moved from libertarianism to vocal criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement, Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes, and the European Union.²⁵ And Braun, an active participant in the anti-communist underground movement of the 1980s Orange Alternative (Pomarańczowa Alternatywa) and a lecturer in journalism at the University of Wrocław, has become known for verbal attacks on the EU²⁶ and a scandalous antisemitic speech at Auschwitz.²⁷ In all these cases, privileged members of the middle class, who obtained their education and status thanks to Poland's close integration into European structures, have turned to right-wing populism to acquire political capital.

At first glance, the situation in Slovakia resembles not the Polish but rather the Hungarian scenario. Since gaining independence, the country has remained a stronghold of populism: in the 1990s power was held by Vladimír Mečiar, and between 2006 and 2026, with brief interludes in 2010–2012 and 2018–2023, by Robert Fico. His political party Direction – Social Democracy (Smer – sociálna demokracia, SSD) was founded as a social-democratic party but resorts to a strategy that is in fact right-wing populist. The “left-wing tilt” manifests itself exclusively in the program of strengthening the social role of the state, which is supposed to protect the interests of ordinary people. By contrast, the sociological profile of the SSD voter is typical of Central European populists: 39% of voters over 65 years of age, 46.9% of pensioners, 39% of people in an uncertain financial situation, and 36% of residents of rural regions (the largest share in each category) vote for SSD.²⁸ In other words, Fico's party is not social-democratic or left-wing; it professes the principles of a socially oriented national economy, which, combined with irredentism, clericalism, distrust of minorities, rejection of the EU, and criticism of corruption, constitutes a typical Central European form of right-wing populism.²⁹

Additional evidence in favor of the right-wing populist nature of SSD is provided by the character of the political alliances the party has built: in 2006, 2016, and 2023, this was the nationalist Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana, SNS), which is marked by chauvinism, Slovak nationalism, and the rejection of democratic principles. Another partner in 2023 was Peter Pellegrini's Voice – Social Democracy (Hlas – sociálna demokracia, HSD). The similarity between the names SSD and HSD is not coincidental: the latter split off from the former in 2020 after Pellegrini had spent 20 years as a member of Fico's party. The split allegedly occurred because Fico, tainted by a corruption scandal, “could not be the leader of 21st-century Slovakia... a Slovakia that faces the enormous challenge of rising again and shaping a vision of its future for decades to come”.³⁰ The parallels between Pellegrini and Magyar, insider politicians who, despite their past, resort to rhetorical criticism of the old elites, outline the similarity of the trajectories of Hungary and Slovakia.

This similarity is reinforced by Fico's policy after 2023, which is based on several interconnected strategies: portraying the EU, NATO, and domestic media as enemies of the state; hands-on control of state media (RTVS, Radio and Television of Slovakia); and attempts to fill the judicial system with loyalists.³¹

And yet, despite all this, Slovakia is not a second Hungary, since after “Slovakia's accession to the EU and NATO, Slovak institutions strengthened, and democracy consolidated to such an extent that the left-nationalist and illiberal coalition of SSD and SNS in 2006–2010 was unable to divert the country from the democratic path”,³² and in 2025 Fico's government faced mass protests,³³ a shrinking parliamentary coalition, and a decline in the ratings of SSD, SNS, and HSD to 17.3%, 2.8%, and 7%, respectively.³⁴

The Situation in Czechia in structural terms resembles the Slovak case, but due to particular features of the country's political system – namely the existence of the office of president, who since 2012 has

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been elected by direct vote and who plays the role of a counterweight in political life and its moral arbiter³⁵ – important parallels with Poland can be observed.

Structurally, the country is witnessing the decline of the social-democratic left, the search for alliances with right-wing populists as a way for social democrats to solve this problem, and the erosion of voters' trust in technocratic politicians. The Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD), which dominated the country's political life in the 1990s and repeatedly formed governments (most recently after the 2013 elections), won only 15 seats in the 2017 elections, and as a result of the 2021 elections failed even to clear the 5% electoral threshold. Renewal, rebranding, and the building of electoral coalitions proved unsuccessful: the party began calling itself Social Democracy (Sociální demokracie) after 2023, joined the Enough! (Stačilo!) coalition in the 2025 elections, and nevertheless did not enter parliament.

The trajectory of ČSSD is explained by general shifts in voter preferences combined with a failed political strategy. In 2014, in order to gain enough votes to form a government, ČSSD took the right-wing populist party ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) as a junior partner. In 2017, having lost 35 seats, ČSSD once again formed a government coalition with ANO, but this time played the role of junior partner itself, ceding the right to form a government to ANO's leader, Andrej Babiš. For the social democrats, the alliance with ANO turned into a disaster: for left-leaning ideological voters it looked like betrayal, while for those who valued the party's social program, consistent support for ANO became the more logical and advantageous option. ANO's results in four consecutive election campaigns (47 seats in 2013, 78 in 2017, 72 in 2021, and 80 in 2025) attest to the flow of voters from the social democrats to right-wing populists – similar to the situation in Slovakia.

Partly responsible for the decline of ČSSD was its leader – and, from 2013 to 2023, President of the Czech Republic – Miloš Zeman. A participant in peaceful protests against Soviet communism and later chairman of ČSSD, who played a primary role in the country's accession to NATO and the EU, Zeman made a dramatic turn in 2013, when he began consistently advocating for cooperation between Prague and Moscow and Beijing. As part of this "Eastern turn", he criticized the sanctions imposed against the Russian Federation after the annexation of Crimea, called the peninsula's status a "settled issue", and believed that Kyiv should take the interests of the Kremlin into account in its foreign policy.³⁶ It was Zeman who, in 2014, insisted that ČSSD enter into cooperation with ANO,³⁷ and he subsequently established a partnership with Babiš to such an extent that Zeman began to be justifiably classified as a right-wing populist.³⁸ In fact, in 2021–2023, when Babiš lost his government position, it was Zeman who served as the official mouthpiece of populism and an active critic of the liberal-democratic course of Prime Minister Petr Fiala.

The role of the president as a counterweight in the Czech political system manifested itself no less clearly after 2025, when ANO once again managed to form a government, while the office of president is instead held by the centrist Petr Pavel. As in the Polish case, democratic forces have sufficient resources to restrain the populist tide. This structural constellation is extremely important for Ukraine, since the Czech Republic, on the initiative of Pavel and Fiala, was responsible for supplying the Armed Forces of Ukraine with artillery ammunition. Tellingly, although during the election campaign Babiš stated that Prague would withdraw from the initiative, this did not happen, since Czech industry receives significant dividends from it, but also thanks to the efforts of Pavel.

What Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia have in common is significant electoral potential for right-wing populists, which, nevertheless, more liberal political forces and institutions managed to constrain between 2015 and 2026, as a result of which, even while in power, these populists have not enjoyed the same broad freedom of action observed in Hungary. In other words, despite the constellation of structural factors and the preferences of right-wing populists, existing constraints soften the

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character of their policies. This directly affects the nature of the foreign policy pursued by right-wing populists in each of these countries, including relations with Ukraine.

In Poland, the juxtaposition of a traditionalist Poland against a liberal EU and the portrayal of the country as a victim of European technocrats led the right-wing populist government to depart from, and even break with, the customary EU-friendly foreign policy.³⁹ The three pillars of Polish foreign policy were: (1) strengthening transatlantic ties with the United States and achieving national security within the framework of NATO; (2) an emphasis on the need to deepen and enlarge the EU; (3) the containment and isolation of the Russian Federation.⁴⁰ During the period of PiS rule, the first two of these eroded: the policy of the Trump administration significantly undermined confidence in the alliance, while relations with the EU underwent a notable reversal after then Prime Minister of Poland Beata Szydło stated in 2015 that the Visegrád Four countries “would offer their own recipe for solving the EU’s problems by returning power to the member states”.⁴¹ In 2015–2020, Budapest and Warsaw mounted coordinated resistance to EU migration policy and strategically used the unanimity voting procedure to block sanctions against Poland and Hungary.

During this same period, Polish–Ukrainian relations also deteriorated: in order to mobilize their electorate, Poland’s right-wing populists began threatening Ukraine’s European integration prospects in order to secure the upper hand for their own interpretation of the historical debate over the causes and scale of the ethnic cleansing of Poles in Volhynia. Subsequently, Warsaw harshly criticized Ukraine’s memory politics. The start of the Russian–Ukrainian war was marked by a moment of solidarity with the Ukrainian people and a significant contribution by Warsaw to Ukraine’s ability to resist the invasion (the transfer of military equipment, the unconditional acceptance of refugees, diplomatic support). But in 2023, initiatives by the Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) and Confederation of the Polish Crown (Konfederacja Korony Polskiej), which sought to gain additional political capital in the form of support from farmers who considered themselves victims of EU policy allowing temporary exports of agricultural products from Ukraine, led to a blockade of the Polish–Ukrainian border. In 2024–2026, nationalist agitation led to a significant deterioration in Poles’ attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees, with Braun being one of the main drivers of this trend.⁴² In 2025, in an interview with a Hungarian magazine, President Nawrocki emphasized the depth of the Hungarian–Polish partnership – and the informal alliance of illiberal regimes in Central Europe – and outlined the Polish right-wing radicals’ program regarding relations with Ukraine: the RF’s imperial policy poses a threat to the region, so Ukraine’s resistance is welcomed and supported, but Ukraine’s accession to the EU contradicts Poland’s national interests.⁴³ Tellingly, Nawrocki’s interview confirms that the third pillar of Warsaw’s foreign policy – countering the RF – remains important and robust. Moreover, Polish right-wing populists interpret Polish–Ukrainian relations precisely as a component of this pillar, while the second, European-integration pillar, and Ukraine’s place within it, is minimized.

The idea that Warsaw’s strategic interests extend far enough to include military and economic cooperation with Kyiv, but that European integration lies beyond their bounds, corresponds to the views of Slovak right-wing populists on foreign policy. Between 2020 and 2022, the coalition of liberal-centrist parties regarded Bratislava’s cooperation with NATO and the EU as the main way of protecting Slovak interests. The RF’s invasion of Ukraine led to intensified cooperation between Bratislava and Washington and unequivocal support for Kyiv. These two processes were interconnected: in March 2022, NATO troops (the majority of which was an American contingent, including Patriot air-defense systems) were deployed in Slovakia for the first time, while Bratislava transferred S-300 systems to Kyiv.⁴⁴ Slovakia also transferred various types of weaponry to Ukraine, receiving financial compensation from the US government. SSD’s victory in the 2023 elections marked an important shift in Bratislava’s foreign policy: Fico declared that he would pursue an “all-azimuths” policy, which among other things meant deepening relations with Beijing and resuming communication with Moscow. This new multi-vector approach came at the expense of Slovak–Ukrainian relations: Fico categorically spoke out against arms deliveries to Ukraine and the continuation of sanctions against the RF,⁴⁵ threatened that Slovakia would suspend electricity sales to

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Ukraine,⁴⁶ and believed that EU support for Ukraine harmed the interests of member states, and therefore promised to block votes on granting Ukraine a financial loan from the EU.⁴⁷

Despite Fico's fiery rhetoric, the overall balance of Bratislava's relations with Kyiv under his rule has been fairly pragmatic: Slovak manufacturers continued to sell weapons to Ukraine,⁴⁸ Fico did not block the decision to grant a €90 billion loan, and he spoke out twice in support of Ukraine's prospects for joining the EU – in 2025⁴⁹ and 2026.⁵⁰ The warming of relations in 2026 was likely influenced by the defeat of Fico's ally Orbán in the Hungarian elections and by the fact that the European Parliament adopted, by 418 votes, a resolution calling on the European Commission to launch a procedure to review compliance with the rule of law in Slovakia. This step opens up the possibility for European institutions to freeze the country's funding (€1,225 million) in the future, using the same mechanism that was applied to Orbán's government in Hungary.⁵¹

Conclusions

Neither the new government in Hungary, nor the zigzags of Fico's foreign policy, nor cohabitation in Poland and Czechia should obscure an important and common trend in the relations of Central European right-wing populists with Ukraine: they are characterized by harsh rhetoric combined with a transactional approach, that is, a desire to pragmatically advance strategic interests. Strategic interests range from geopolitical calculations to economic subventions for Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, and Ukraine is not always the subject of the relevant transactions. Moreover, the perception of geopolitical risks and benefits is not one-dimensional among Central European right-wing populists: despite a shared dislike of the EU, the Polish side broke with the Hungarian side when the threat of Russian imperialism arose,⁵² whereas Fico – like Orbán – tried to maintain a working relationship with the Russian Federation. Navigating this current is becoming increasingly difficult for Kyiv, but the strategic goal of Ukraine's relations with the countries of Central Europe must not be lost from sight, namely: avoiding the formation of a belt of unfriendly counterparts comprising Bulgaria, Romania, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland, since their joint actions could, in both diplomatic and physical terms, block Ukraine's western border. Accordingly, it is necessary to minimize reactions to unpleasant rhetoric and to continue giving right-wing populists in power reasons to interpret interactions with Ukraine positively. Ultimately, not out of love for Ukraine, but out of direct benefit, the governments of Babiš and Fico continued to sell weapons, Polish activists unblocked the border, and Hungarian populists led by Orbán unblocked the EU loan for Ukraine after Fidesz's defeat in the 2026 elections.

Policy Recommendations

Since right-wing populist governments mobilize domestic discontent by presenting Ukraine as a threat, it is advisable to neutralize this tendency by shaping a positive attitude toward Ukraine through cooperation with civil society. This direction is realistic, since civil society institutions (universities, non-governmental organizations, media) remain pluralistic and less subject to government control.

In particular, Ukraine should:

- › expand academic exchanges, joint research projects, and cultural programs with Central European institutions;
- › support partnerships with non-governmental organizations in the fields of democracy, regional cooperation, and fact-checking as a form of countering populist mobilization;
- › encourage cooperation between regional media outlets that will cover Ukraine's contribution to the economic and cultural life of the border regions of neighboring countries.

This will form alternative channels of influence that will make it possible to bypass unfriendly governments and ensure a positive presence for Ukraine in public discourse.

Since populist governments use the issue of ethnic minorities in Ukraine as a tool for mobilizing their supporters, presenting the Ukrainian state as an enemy of minorities, it is advisable to challenge such narratives by developing transparent, proactive policies on national minorities and promoting further international communication on this matter.

In particular, it would be advisable to:

- › create a specialized communication platform for direct engagement with minorities and international observers;
- › emphasize the compliance of Ukraine's practices with the standards of the Council of Europe and the EU, in order to more closely engage potential allies from the liberal civil societies of Central Europe.

Since populist leaders instrumentalize Ukraine as an "external enemy" during election cycles, Kyiv should systematically monitor electoral processes and populist rhetoric in neighboring states.

In particular, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should:

- › establish a permanent monitoring unit to track populist rhetoric, election cycles, and political shifts in the region;
- › develop early-warning reports linking domestic populist mobilization to likely foreign-policy obstacles;
- › prepare diplomats to apply counter-narrative strategies, enabling Kyiv to respond promptly to hostile interpretations before they gain traction.

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