

Small Power Alliances in Europe: The Nordic, Baltic and Visegrád Groups

Hilmar Þór HILMARSSON¹

Abstract

The small power alliances discussed in the article are the Baltic, the Nordic and the Visegrád groups. Why were the alliances established and what is their purpose, importance and effectiveness? This article seeks to explain the reasons for the formation of those alliances, how they work and what are their benefits and limitations. These alliances can be used to form a common agenda to strengthen the position of the countries within larger alliances such as the EU, which can be described as a political and economic alliance, and NATO which is a military alliance, as well as within institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. But for the small power alliances to be effective they need to have a common vision and interests, and to broadly agree on the issues. All these small power alliances have been affected by the ongoing war in Ukraine that not only challenges them but also the EU and NATO, as well as US and European cooperation on security issues.

Keywords: *Small powers, European integration, defence alliances, NATO.*

JEL classifications: F5, F52, F55

DOI: 10.24818/RMCI.2025.4.828

1. Introduction

The small power alliances discussed in this article are: The Nordic group: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden that are often labelled as western welfare states. The Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that are former Soviet republics, and finally, the Visegrád group: Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia that are former Soviet satellite states. These groups all have their distinct history, but their participation in European integration and security cooperation brings them together in NATO. They also cooperate in the framework of Nordic-Baltic (NB8) and Visegrád (V4) cooperation.

The Nordics and the Baltics also sometimes meet with the Visegrád group to discuss issues of common importance such as the situation in Ukraine.² The Nordic group has the longest history of partnership, and they are composed of rather homogenous populations with shared history, culture and values. The Baltics

¹ Hilmar Þór Hilmarsson, University of Akureyri, Faculty of Business Administration, 600 Akureyri, Iceland, E-mail: hilmar@unak.is

² See for example: <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/utanrikisraduneyti-media/media/gunnar-bragi/NB8-VN4-statement-Narva-FINAL.pdf>

reinitiated their alliance after the fall of the Soviet Union and their cooperation is influenced by the Nordic model of cooperation. In fact, since the Baltics regained their independence in 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Nordics could be considered to serve informally as their mentor within Europe. This is not to say that the Baltics always follow the Nordic way of doing things. The Baltic economic and social systems are for example very different from those of the Nordics (Hilmarsson, 2019). The Visegrád Group, is a cultural and political alliance to advance cooperation in military, cultural, economic and energy matters of the member states and to advance their integration into the EU and cooperation with NATO.

The Baltic, Nordic and Visegrád alliances can be viewed as platforms for like-minded countries that seek to promote their common interest within larger groups most notably the EU and NATO, often meeting as a small group before the larger groups EU27 or all 32 NATO member states meet. The Nordic and the Baltic group also cooperate formally with a common executive director at global institutions, namely the World Bank and the IMF.

The effectiveness of such alliances within larger alliances depends largely on their ability to form a common agenda. The Nordics and the Baltics have a more formal cooperation than the Visegrád group³ with common institutions under the Nordic Council⁴ and the Baltic Assembly.⁵ There is also a Nordic Council of Ministers⁶ and a Baltic Council of Ministers.⁷ The Visegrád cooperation is less formal mostly without institutions comparable with the Nordics and the Baltics, but this does not stop ministers to meet to discuss issues of common interest. The Nordics have sought integrated the Baltics into their cooperation under the NB8 umbrella, for example, with shared offices at the World Bank and the IMF, as well as at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Among those three groups out of 12 countries, only 5 the Baltics, Finland and Slovakia are members of the euro area.

If one considers wealth and population of nation states as a measure of power the Baltics are the smallest group, least powerful and most vulnerable. The Nordic group is the wealthiest group and the Visegrád group has the largest population among the three groups, (see the Tables 1, 2 and 3).

³ See further: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home>

⁴ See further: <https://www.norden.org/en/nordic-council>

⁵ See further: <https://www.baltasam.org/>

⁶ See further: <https://www.norden.org/en/nordic-council-ministers>

⁷ See further: <https://www.baltasam.org/cooperation/baltic-council-of-ministers>

**Gross domestic product, current prices, U.S. dollars,
billions and population in millions.⁸**

Table 1

Baltic Group	GDP 2024	Population 2024
Estonia	42.752	1.371
Latvia	43.508	1.872
Lithuania	84.847	2.892
Total	171.107	6.135

Source: International Monetary Fund 2025, World Economic Outlook.

**Gross domestic product, current prices, U.S. dollars,
billions and population in millions.**

Table 2

Nordic Group	GDP 2024	Population 2024
Denmark	429.458	5.961
Finland	298.833	5.604
Iceland	33.463	0.384
Norway	483.727	5.585
Sweden	610.118	10.588
Total	1,855.599	28.122

Source: International Monetary Fund 2025, World Economic Outlook.

**Gross domestic product, current prices, U.S. dollars,
billions and population in millions.**

Table 3

Visegrád group	GDP 2024	Population 2024
Czech Republic	344.931	10.935
Hungary	223.060	9.585
Poland	908.583	36.621
Slovakia	140.636	5.425
Total	1,617.210	62.566

Source: International Monetary Fund 2025, World Economic Outlook.

Among the Baltic group's weakness are small and declining populations. They have been occupied by larger powers over the centuries and remain vulnerable. However, the Baltics have been successful in integrating themselves firmly into Western structures such as the EU and NATO that are important for their security

⁸ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2025/april/weo-report?c=935,128,939,172,944,176,941,946,142,964,936,144,&s=NGDPD,LP,&sy=2024&ey=2024&ssm=0&scsm=1&sc=0&ssd=1&ssc=0&sic=0&sort=country&ds=.&br=1>

and despite severe decline in GDP during the 2008/09 economic and financial crisis, they have also been successful economically if compared with other former Soviet Republics such as Ukraine and Georgia.

The Nordics have earned a reputation of being rich countries in Europe with relatively even income distribution, relatively generous welfare policies and progressive tax systems. The Nordics all have growing populations.

The Visegrád group has the largest population and with growing GDP has the potential to become a more powerful force within Europe and the EU. The Visegrád group is however different from the other three groups in that it has one member state, Poland, that is larger than all the three other member states combined, both in terms of GDP, and population. As Gyarfášová (2018) states, 'Poland is a regional power, a key political actor, and the Poles feel that they are in a different league' (Gyarfášová, 2018). Collectively the Visegrád group has more than twice the population of the Nordic group but still slightly lower total GDP.

After EU accession the Visegrád group has been at odds with some other EU member states in terms of strict immigration policy. Democracy and the freedom of the press have also been questioned especially in Hungary and Poland. There are also diverse views within the group on the war in Ukraine, especially between Hungary and Poland.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this article is the case study method which enables the researcher to examine the issues at hand in depth (Yin, 2009). Comparative analysis is used as it enables a researcher to assess and explain the political phenomenon among cases (Lancaster & Montinola, 1997). It helps capture the effects of complex and interrelated causal influences and facilitates our understanding of political issues at national, regional, and international levels (Ragin, 2014). Additionally, the literature on the comparative analysis is rich with suggestions on how such an inquiry should proceed (Lijphart, 1975). Comparative country case studies involve analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences and patterns across different country cases that can produce knowledge about how and why particular policies work or fail to work.

3. Nordic Cooperation⁹

Looking back over the last 1000 years' the Nordic countries have fluctuated between periods of war and peace but have been working more closely together in the latest two centuries. Wars and alliances have been major features of relations between the Nordic countries throughout their history.¹⁰ For centuries there was rivalry between Nordic countries for control, especially Denmark and Sweden.

⁹ See further: <https://www.norden.org/en>

¹⁰ See further: <https://www.norden.org/en/information/history-nordic-co-operation>

In 1905, the union between Sweden and Norway was dissolved, and Norway declared independence. Finnish independence followed in 1917. A year later, Iceland achieved a significant degree of autonomy but retained the Danish monarchy and was subject to Danish foreign policy until 1944 when it became fully independent with its own president. This happened when the World War II was still ongoing.

Denmark, Iceland, and Norway joined NATO in 1949 as founding members while Finland and Sweden remained neutral until Finland joined NATO in 2023 and Sweden in 2024 (NATO, 2025).

In 1952, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden formed the Nordic Council. Finland, which at that point in time was still very much under Soviet influence did not join until 1955. In 1960, Sweden, Norway and Denmark joined EFTA. Finland became an associate member of EFTA in 1961, and Iceland joined EFTA in 1970 (EFTA, 2015). Thus, for a brief period of time all the Nordics countries were part of the same free trade area.

Treaty of Co-operation between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, the Helsinki Treaty was signed and entered into force 1962. The Nordic Council was set up in 1971. Then the purpose of the Nordic Council of Ministers was to support and maintain co-operation between all the Nordic countries.

In 1973 Denmark became a member of the European Economic Community (EEC) and was the only Nordic country with EEC membership (European Union 2025). At the time there was concern that Denmark's EEC membership would result in it neglecting Nordic co-operation. Anker Jørgensen, then the Danish Prime Minister, wrote in his published diaries that Denmark's EEC membership had not caused it to neglect Nordic co-operation: 'On the contrary, we tried in a way – and in accordance with the wishes of the other Nordic countries – to build bridges between the Nordic Region and Europe.'¹¹

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 fundamentally changed the political map of Northern Europe. At the end of 1989, democracy was introduced to Poland. East and West Germany reunited in 1990, and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The Baltic States regained the full independence they had enjoyed between World Wars I and II. In 1994, Finland, Norway and Sweden held referenda on EU membership. Finland and Sweden voted yes, and joined in 1995, but Norway again voted no to EU membership (Hilmarsson, 2019). Arguably the collapse of the Soviet Union made it easier for Sweden and especially Finland to join the EU. Russia was weak and could not retaliate. The whole of the Baltic Sea Region, except for the Russian areas around St. Petersburg and the Kaliningrad enclave, is now both within the EU and NATO.

Close contact remains between the Nordic and Baltic countries, but only time will tell what the future will bring for Nordic co-operation. Obviously, the different approaches of those countries to European integration complicates their cooperation (Hilmarsson 2016). However, with NATO membership of Finland in

¹¹ See further: <https://www.norden.org/en/information/history-nordic-co-operation>

2023 and Sweden 2024 all the Nordics are now members of the alliance. This change in policy came after the Russian invasion into Ukraine. Prior to submitting a formal application for NATO membership in 2022 both Finland and Sweden participated in NATO military exercises. They had also positioned themselves firmly in the ranks of the Western countries with their participation in EU integration.

Nordic cooperation has been institutionalized via the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Nordic Council for inter-parliamentary co-operation is run by a presidium consisting of elected parliamentarians from all the Nordic countries. The members discuss topical issues and the future of Nordic cooperation with the prime ministers once a year at a summit meeting held during the Session of the Nordic Council. The Nordic Council of Ministers is the forum for inter-governmental cooperation. The Ministers for Nordic Cooperation are responsible for the work of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Nordic co-operation is based on the “Helsinki Treaty”, which stipulates that the co-operation ministers assist the prime ministers in the coordination of Nordic issues.¹²

Nordic cooperation seeks a strong Nordic voice in the world and in European and international forums. The values shared by the Nordic countries help make the region one of the most innovative and competitive in the world. When it comes to European integration the countries have taken different approaches and this makes it more complicated for them to form a common agenda, but now they are all NATO members states. The Nordic countries regularly coordinate their foreign and security policy, and this helps them speak with a one voice internationally and can make them more influential also in NATO (Bjarnason, 2020; Haugevik & Sverdrup 2019; Stoltenberg, 2009). However, while the continental Nordics and the Baltics are in proximity to Russia, Iceland is distant from the European continent and has a different security profile than the other Nordics and the Baltics.

4. Baltic Cooperation

Cooperation among the Baltic States is based on the common interests and goals of the three countries in foreign and security policy as well as welfare policy and economic development. All three countries became members of the EU and NATO in 2004. Estonia joined the euro area in 2011, Latvia in 2014 and Lithuania in 2015. Among the three country groups discussed in this article the Baltics have the highest level of integration into EU structures (Hilmarsson, 2019). The Baltics have an intensive cooperation in the energy sectors and on transport infrastructure projects that is also related to their economic development and security.¹³ Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine tensions have been high with Russia.

A common approach to EU integration facilitates Baltic cooperation as they have common interests and similar goals. This is different from the other groups

¹² See further: <https://www.norden.org/en/information/official-nordic-co-operation>

¹³ See further: <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/co-operation-among-baltic-states>

especially the Nordics that participate in European integration, but in different ways, and the Visegrád group with only one country has adopted the euro.

The initial steps in cooperation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were taken in the 1920s, soon after the independence of the three countries. On September 12, 1934, the foreign ministers of the Baltic States signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Geneva, Switzerland. This MOU was in force until the occupation of the Baltic States during WWII. The cooperation of the Baltic States became visible again in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the struggle for the restoration of their independence and the Baltic Way - human chain in 1989. Baltic independence was then restored in 1991.

After regaining their independence, the Baltics received support from the Nordics, and the Baltic Assembly was created based on the model of the Nordic Council. The Baltic Council of Ministers was based on the model of the Nordic Council of Ministers. In addition to advancing cooperation among the Baltic States these bodies also advance Baltic and Nordic cooperation¹⁴ including NB8 which includes all the Baltics and the Nordics. The NB6 includes all the Baltics and the Nordics that are also EU member states. According to Rüse (2014) the NB6 interact in pre-negotiations stage in the EU Council, thus enhancing their bargaining power. However, we cannot speak of a permanent regional 'block' in the EU because of member state' interest differences (Rüse, 2014). The Baltics and the Nordics also have cooperation and consultation meetings with the Visegrád group, V4. Also, as Havelka (2021) notes Poland prioritizes communications with its neighboring countries, especially the Baltic States (Havelka, 2021).

Within the framework of Baltic cooperation, dialogue is ongoing at the level of presidents, speakers of parliaments, heads of government, ministers, and experts. Baltic Parliamentary cooperation takes place in the Baltic Assembly,¹⁵ which was established in 1991. The Baltic Assembly is an entity under international law, with its headquarters based in Riga, Latvia (Baltic Assembly, 2025). It has its own symbols and a flag. Each year one of the Baltic States takes over the presidency. Intergovernmental cooperation between the Baltic States takes place in the Baltic Council of Ministers, founded in 1994. The Baltic Council of Ministers provides a link to executive power of the Baltic States.

5. Visegrád Cooperation¹⁶

The Visegrád Group, V4, was founded in 1991 at the initiative of the president of the Czechoslovak Republic, Václav Havel, President of Poland, Lech Wałęsa, and the Prime Minister of Hungary, József Antall (Visegrád Fund 2025). This meeting in the town of Visegrád Hungary, created an historical link with a similar meeting, that took place there in 1335 and was attended by John of

¹⁴ See further: <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/baltic-sea-region/co-operation-among-the-baltic-states-13464-en>

¹⁵ See further: <https://www.baltasam.org/about-us/how-do-we-work>

¹⁶ See further: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home>

Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, Charles I of Anjou (Charles Robert), King of Hungary, and Casimir III, King of Poland. The central idea behind the two meetings was the desire to promote cooperation and partnership among the Central European states.¹⁷

Apart from the idea to form an alliance between the countries of central Europe, the formation of the Visegrád Group in 1991 was obviously motivated by different factors than those of 1335. In 1991 several factors had a decisive relevance. Those included: (i) the desire to eliminate the remains of the communist bloc in Central Europe when the Visegrád countries were Soviet satellite states; (ii) the wish to overcome historic animosities between the Central European countries; (iii) the conviction that through joint efforts it would be easier to achieve common goals, i.e. to successfully accomplish social transformation and (iv) join in the European integration process with the aim of joining the EU and on the security front by joining NATO. Thus since 1991, after that fall of the Soviet Union, the Visegrád countries worked together on their transition to democracy and market economy, as well as a swift EU and NATO integration. The Czech republic, Hungary and Poland became members of NATO in 1999 and Slovakia in 2004. All Visegrád countries joined the EU in 2004. After the V4 states' accession to both organisations being completed by 2004, Visegrád became an essential framework of representing joint interests in the EU, launching joint projects, and bringing closer the four nations.

It was particularly in the initial period from 1991 to 1993 when the Visegrád Group played its most important role during discussions with NATO and the European Union. In the following years, the intensity of cooperation between the Visegrád countries began to slacken due to the belief that individual country efforts towards accession to the Euro-Atlantic integration would be more efficient. The cooperation among the Visegrád countries then resumed in 1998.

Following the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Visegrád Group has been comprised of four countries, as both successor countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, remain members of the Visegrad Group. More recently the Visegrád group has had issues with the EU. Controversies surrounding the Visegrád group include its opposition to EU immigration policy.¹⁸ There have also been concerns about democracy, rights of minority groups as well and the freedom of the judiciary, especially in Poland and Hungary.

According to Nič (2016) internal flexibility of the Visegrád group was tested to the limit by deep divisions at the outset of the ongoing Ukrainian conflict that started in 2014. The positions taken range from Poland's strong anti-Russian stance to Hungary's more privileged partnership with Russia, with the Czechs and Slovaks standing somewhere in between (Nič, 2016).

¹⁷ See further: <https://www.visegradfund.org/news/30th-anniversary-visegrad-group/>

¹⁸ See further: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180621-visegrad-anti-immigrant-eastern-eu-states-boycott-eu-summit-merkel-orban-kurz>

The Visegrád group also cooperates with the Baltic and the Nordic groups in the form of Nordic Baltic 8 (NB8) + Visegrad Group (V4).¹⁹ This is a format where Ministers of Foreign Affairs from NB8 countries and Visegrád Group countries meet. It was in 2013 that the Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski and Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt came up with the idea to have a meeting of both cooperation formats. The meetings are co-organized by the coordinating country of the NB8 and by the country holding the presidency of the V4.²⁰

The Visegrád cooperation can be considered the most clearly profiled initiative in Central Europe. The cornerstone of this cooperation consists of contacts at all levels, from the high-level political summits to expert and diplomatic meetings, to activities of the non-governmental associations in the region, think-tanks and research bodies, cultural institutions or networks of individuals.²¹

Cooperation between the respective ministries constitutes an important part of the activities within the V4 framework, whether at the level of the ministers or in the form of joint expert teams. Several joint projects are currently being implemented particularly in the fields of culture, environment, internal security, defense, science and education. This comes in addition to growing cooperation in the field of justice, transportation, tourism, energy, and information technologies.

The member states of the Visegrád Group also desire to cooperate with their closest neighbors, with the reforming countries in the broader region, and with other countries, regional formations or organizations which are interested and with which specific areas of cooperation are found in the common interest and in the spirit of all-European cooperation.

In this context the Visegrad Group cooperates with other regional alliances, as well as with individual countries in the region and beyond both on an ad-hoc and on a regular basis. The Benelux countries, the Nordic countries and the Baltic states, the countries within the EU's Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans belong to the Visegrád group's priorities.²²

There are also differences within the Visegrád group. The Czech Republic for example values its relationship with Germany as more important than that with any of its Visegrád partners. Likewise, Slovakia is part of the euro area, making it more integrated with Germany and core Europe than the other Visegrád countries, and even ready to move further ahead with greater EU fiscal integration (Nič, 2016).

Unlike the Nordic and the Baltic cooperation, the Visegrád cooperation is not institutionalized in any manner.²³ There is no Visegrád Council or Assembly, or a Visegrád Council of Ministers. The Visegrád cooperation is based periodical

¹⁹ See for example: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/official-statements/joint-press-release-of>

²⁰ See further: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/official-statements/meeting-of-foreign#:~:text=Ministers%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20of,and%20Europe%20as%20a%20whole>.

²¹ <https://archive.visegradgroup.eu/about/aims-and-structure>

²² See further: <https://archive.visegradgroup.eu/about/cooperation>

²³ See further: <https://archive.visegradgroup.eu/about/aims-and-structure>

meetings of its representatives at various levels, from the high-level meetings of prime ministers and heads of states to expert consultations. Official summits of Visegrád prime ministers take place on an annual basis. Between these summits, one of the Visegrád countries holds presidency, part of which is the responsibility for drafting a one-year action plan. At the time of writing Hungary holds the presidency.

The only organization within the Visegrád platform is the International Visegrád Fund.²⁴ The fund was established in 2000 with the aim of supporting the development of cooperation in culture, scientific exchange, research, education, exchange of students and development of cross-border cooperation and promotion of tourism—represents the civic dimension of Visegrád cooperation. In majority of cases, the fund provides financing to activities of non-governmental organizations and individual citizens. Apart from grant programs, the fund awards individual scholarships and artist residencies which contribute to the exchange of views in the Visegrád region and the neighboring countries.

6. System-Determining, Influencing, Affecting or Ineffectual.

Keohane (1969) suggested a focus on the systemic role that state leaders see their countries playing and their impact on the international community. These are the following: *System-determining*; *System-influencing*; *System-affecting*; and finally, *System-ineffectual* states (see further Keohane, 1969).

Arguably the US was *system-determining* state among Western countries after the WWII. It was the prime architect of key institutions such as the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Bank and the IMF, which were formed during the war, but became operational after the war, along GATT that later became WTO.

NATO, still the world's most powerful security alliance, was also created under US leadership in 1949. But after WWII a revival emerged with the Soviet Union and its own military alliance under the Warsaw Pact. The world was thus divided between the US and the Soviet Union which shaped the eastern bloc until around 1991 when it collapsed. After the fall of the Soviet Union came a period where the US was dominant as the sole superpower until recently with the rise of China as a great economic and military power and Russia re-emerging as a military power.

One can hardly speak about a global hegemon today that is *system-determining* for the entire international system. China has created its own international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) along with the BRICS countries. There are also powerful states in Europe that strongly influence the EU and can be classified as *System-influencing i.e.* states that cannot individually dominate the international system but may be able to influence it through either unilateral or multilateral actions. Clearly Germany and France fit this category within the EU. The world

²⁴ See further: <https://archive.visegradgroup.eu/about/aims-and-structure> see also <https://www.visegradfund.org/about-us/the-fund/>

today sees more shared power, not a unipolar or bipolar system, but multipolar with great powers competing for power.

But how can this classification contribute to our understanding of the behaviour of small states in international institutions? As Keohane observes, “...a major function of international organizations — perceived by many small and middle powers — is to allow these states acting collectively to help shape developing international attitudes, dogmas and codes of proper behaviour” (Keohane, 1969).

Smaller groups such as the Baltics, Nordics and Visegrád countries can form groups as Keohane discussed if they feel that they cannot affect the international system if acting alone but can exercise significant impact if cooperating through small groups or through regional organizations such as the EU. Acting alone they would risk becoming *system-ineffectual* states that can do little to influence the system-wide forces, except in groups that are so large that each state has minimal influence. This is true for all the states in the groups discussed in the three country groups, except perhaps Poland that could become *System-affecting i.e. a* state that cannot affect the international system if acting alone but can impact on the system if working through small groups or alliances e.g. through universal or regional international organization such as the EU. Poland could attempt to do this via the Visegrád group if the other countries in those groups have a common interest and agree to have a larger state in the group lead. One might argue that Sweden via the Nordic group could be *System-affecting* in the EU, but the Nordics have different approaches to European integration which complicates cooperation and the formation of a common agenda.

The Baltics States on their own would be *systems-ineffectual* within the EU or the euro area. The EU is a too large group and with too many other much larger states for the Baltics to have influence. In the euro area the Baltics could cooperate with Finland but would still have limited influence given the small size of that group in terms of population and wealth. During the 2008/09 it became clear that the Baltics did what they were told to do in terms of exchange rate policy and fiscal austerity to be able to fulfil necessary conditions to adopt the euro. The terms were set by other more powerful states (Hilmarsson, 2019).

The Nordics could perhaps be systems-affecting within the EU in certain matters, but not in the euro area with only one member states, Finland. NB8 and NB6 should, if well-organized, be able to be systems-affecting within the EU, but less so in the euro area with only four member states. The NB8 share an office at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and one common board member called executive director at each institution. This increases their influence, and they could be systems-affecting as they form a common position for all the eight countries.

The Visegrád group could in some cases be *System-affecting* within the EU, but less so in the euro area as only Slovakia is a member. As Havelka (2021) comments “[a]ll four member states agree on a common position towards the Eastern Partnership, Enlargement, and Western Balkans.... One might argue that these areas are the only where the V4 can positively influence the European discourse, and even

manage to set the agenda. It must be stressed, though that in other issues – such as EU policy towards Russia – the Visegrád states fail to agree. In this sense, relations with Russia break the otherwise strong tandem of Poland and Hungary. Whereas Polish policy on Russia has always been cautious, Hungary tends to position itself as a ‘bridge’ between Russia and the rest of the EU. Czechia and Slovakia somehow oscillate between these rather extreme positions.” (Havelka, 2021). One might add that the Visegrád countries can be systems affecting when it comes to EU migration policies.

7. The Effects of the Ongoing War in Ukraine

There are also occasions when NB8 and V4 meet to discuss issues affecting all the countries and country groups such as COVID-19 and the situation in Ukraine. All 12 countries to some extent feel threatened by Russia and have common interest in discussing security issues and formulating a common position that can both be communicated at EU and NATO meetings in Brussels.

The ongoing war in Ukraine is of great concern to all the countries. The Nordics, Visegrád and especially the Baltics rely on NATO for their defence, and the EU does not have a common army. Given that NATO is backed by the US the relationship with the US government is critically important. All the countries are under the US security umbrella and rely on NATO article 5 guarantee.

Donald Trump has during his second term as president put pressure on European NATO member states to contribute more to their defences. During the NATO heads of state meeting in the Hague on 25 June 2025 member states agreed to a 5% commitment of GDP for defence investment by 2035. This includes two categories, 3.5% of GDP annually for defence expenditure and 1.5% of GDP annually for critical infrastructure.²⁵ This reflects growing security concerns because of the war in Ukraine and US demands that Europe should contribute more to its own defence. Arguably for the US there are now three areas of importance militarily. Most important is East-Asia because of the rise of China, then the Persian Gulf because of oil and finally Europe.

Given the tense relations with Russia there are areas in proximity to the Baltic, Nordic and the Visegrád groups that where tensions are high and where conflict could break out. Among those are the Baltic Sea where all the surrounding countries are NATO member states except Russia, the Arctic where again all the member states in the Arctic Council²⁶ are in NATO except Russia. Kaliningrad which is a Russian territory between Poland and Lithuania yet another dangerous area. Also, all the Baltic States border Russian territory and so does Finland and Norway. Hungary, Poland and Slovakia border Ukraine and Latvia, Lithuania and

²⁵ See further: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm#:~:text=We%20reaffirm%20our%20ironclad%20commitment,safeguard%20our%20freedom%20and%20democracy.

²⁶ See further: <https://arctic-council.org/about/states/>

Poland border Belarus. All these borders are sensitive especially when there is an ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia.

8. Conclusions

The small power alliances discussed in the article are the Baltic, the Nordic and the Visegrád groups. These groups can be used to form a common agenda to strengthen the position of the countries within larger alliances such as the EU and NATO. But for the alliances to be effective they need to have common interests and agree on key issues.

The Baltics all had a common agenda regarding both EU and NATO accession so cooperation among them undoubtedly helped them in obtaining membership. However, the Baltics are small and have often teamed up with the Nordics via NB8. The Baltics have the closest integration with the EU of the three groups, all adopted the euro and are in NATO.

The Nordics have a long history of cooperation and are known for democracy, equality and comparatively generous welfare systems. Their approach to European integration however varies with three out of five members of the EU, but only one country in the euro area. They have now all joined NATO

The Visegrád group undoubtedly benefited from cooperation on both EU and NATO accession and all of them joined those organizations. Only one out of four adopted the euro. There are cases where the Visegrád countries differ sharply on issues such as the war in Ukraine and relations with Russia.

All the countries in the three country groups are now members of NATO and ten out of 12 are in the EU and 5 countries are in the euro area.

The ongoing war in Ukraine is a serious challenge to both the EU and NATO. Neither institution seems to have a credible strategy to end the war and rescue the situation in Ukraine.

The EU can hardly afford rebuilding Ukraine any time soon should the country join, and Russia is unlikely to sign any peace agreement that would allow for its NATO membership. Europe is still reliant on the US for its defense and in solving the Ukraine problem and there is no end at sight to the war with Russia at the time of writing.

References

1. Baltic Assembly. (2025). Baltic Assembly. Available at: <https://www.baltasam.org/> (Accessed on 10 August 2025).
2. Bjarnason, B. (2020). Nordic foreign and security policy 2020: Climate change, hybrid & cyber threats and challenges to the multilateral, rules-based world order. *Reykjavik: Nordic Foreign and Security Policy*. Available at: https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/02-Rit--skyrslur-og-skrar/NORDIC_FOREIGN_SECURITY_POLICY_2020_FINAL.pdf (Accessed on 23 July 2025).
3. EFTA. (2015). This is EFTA. Available at: <https://www.efta.int/sites/default/files/publications/this-is-efta/this-is-efta-2015.pdf> (Accessed on 10 August 2025).

4. European Union. (2025). EU member countries in brief. Available at: https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries_en (Accessed on 10 September 2025).
5. Gyarfášová O. (2018). 'Public Opinion in the V4 about Visegrad and Beyond.' In Péter Stepper (ed.). *Central Europe and the Visegrád Cooperation: Historical and Policy Perspectives*. Antall József Knowledge Centre, Budapest, 2018.
6. Haugevik, K. M., & Sverdrup, U. (2019). Ten years on: Reassessing the Stoltenberg report on Nordic cooperation. Available at: <https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ten-years-on-reassessing-stoltenberg.pdf> (Accessed on 23 July 2025).
7. Havelka, V. (2021). 'Visegrád Group.' In Tamás Levente Molnár (ed.), *Minilateral Cooperation in the EU. Internal Cohesion, Group Dynamics, and Voting Behaviour of Selected State Blocks*. Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hungary.
8. Hilmarsson, H. Þ. (2019) *The Economic Crisis and its Aftermath in the Nordic and Baltic Countries – Do as We Say and Not As We Do*. Europa Economic Perspectives. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
9. Hilmarsson, H.Þ. (2016). *Iceland and the Challenge of European Integration: Is European Union Membership Feasible?* In Lino Briguglio (ed.) *Small States and the European Union*. Europa Economic Perspectives, 2016 – Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
10. International Monetary Fund. (2025). World Economic Outlook, 2025. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2025/april/weo-report?c=935,128,939,172,944,176,941,946,142,964,936,144,&s=NGDPD,LP,&sy=2024&ey=2024&ssm=0&scsm=1&scs=0&ssd=1&ssc=0&sic=0&sort=country&ds=.&br=1> (Accessed on 2 September 2025).
11. Keohane, R. O. (1969). 'Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics.' *International Organizations*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring, 1969), pp. 291-310.
12. Lancaster T. D., Montinola G. R. (1997). "Toward a Methodology for the Comparative Study of Political Corruption", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, Vol. 27: 185–206.
13. Lijphart A. (1975). "The Comparable-Cases Strategy in Comparative Research", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 8: 158-177.
14. NATO. (2025). NATO member countries. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm (Accessed on 26. August 2025).
15. Nič, M. (2016). The Visegrád Group in the EU: 2016 as a Turning-point? *European View*, 15(2), 281-290.
16. Ragin C. C. (2014). *The Comparative Method: Moving beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
17. Rūse, I. (2014). Nordic-Baltic interaction in European Union negotiations: taking advantage of institutionalized cooperation. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 45(2), 229-246.
18. Stoltenberg, T. (2009). Nordic Cooperation on Foreign and Security Policy. Proposals presented to the extraordinary meeting of Nordic foreign ministers in Oslo on 9 February 2009. Available at: <https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/ud/vedlegg/nordicreport.pdf> (Accessed on 23 July 2025).
19. Visegrád Fund. (2025). 30th Anniversary of the Visegrad Group. Available at: <https://www.visegradfund.org/news/30th-anniversary-visegrad-group/> (Accessed on 10 August 2025)
20. Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*, 4th ed., Vol. 5. California: SAGE Inc.