# Comparative Analysis of Europeanization in the pre-accession Visegrad Four and Associated Trio

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# Abstract

Associated Trio is the newest sub-regional format of cooperation in Europe, counting only a year since its foundation in May 2021 by the three member states: Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. It shares some similarities with the Visegrad Group, the most prominent cross-country cooperation format of the Central European states. The most important common feature of these two groups is that their member states have united with the aim to foster Europeanization through cooperation with each to reach their ultimate goal – EU membership.

This thesis explores and compares the processes of Europeanization in Associated Trio and pre-accession Visegrad Four. For this, it explores Europeanization based on three markers: Identity, values and norms. Finally, to explain how such institutionalization of sub-regional partnership can be instrumental for fostering Europeanization, this thesis examines what kind of institutional formations Associated Trio and Visegrad Four are.

**Keywords**: Associated Trio, Visegrad Four, Europeanization, European Union, Enlargement, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Sociological Institutionalism.

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# 1. Introduction

Associated Trio is the newest format of cross-country regional cooperation in Europe. Founded in May 2021 by its three members, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, this partnership aims to cooperate policies among member states and foster the process of Europeanization to bring these countries closer to EU accession. In some ways, it is similar to Visegrad Four, the most prominent Central European cross-country cooperation format that emerged in Europe three decades ago and continues to exist to this day. In 1991 the Visegrad Group, initially comprised of three countries - Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia - united their efforts to first transform from a Communist dictatorship to parliamentary democracy and then convince the EU that they were deserving members of the European community. After the "velvet divorce" in 1993, which resulted in the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, "Visegrad Three" became Visegrad Four. Despite uneven Europeanization and stumbling blocks on their path, their cooperation proved to be fruitful, and the four countries eventually joined the EU in 2004. This thesis compares the two cooperation formats, the Visegrad Four and Associated Trio, and examines how they are instrumental in boosting Europeanization.

The similarities between these two groups, first and foremost, lie within how they discursively framed their belonging to the "European family." In making their argumentations, the countries in both groups framed prospective EU accession as a "return to Europe" rather than joining Europe. Thus, claims of holding European identity, and the methods employed for convincing the EU, is their common feature.

Secondly, the security concerns that the Visegrad Group held before the EU and NATO accession are salient for Associated Trio countries today. Whilst the Visegrad Group countries' fears that Russia would regain influence over them never materialized, the recent war in Ukraine is a vivid demonstration that the development, independence, or even the very existence of Associated Trio countries is under threat from Russia. Besides, all three countries have break-away regions which are under the de-facto control of Russia, be it Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, or Crimea in Ukraine. Because of this, the two out of three Associated Trio countries – Ukraine and Georgia - seek to join NATO as well, whilst Moldova has chosen neutrality.

The Russian factor, however, is twofold: on the one hand, its destructive character and ambition to influence its neighbors through the use of hard and soft power threaten the prospects of these countries' Europeanization. On the other hand, this may also serve as a catalyst for Europeanization because the European values that the Associated Trio countries claim they have, are asserted against competing values. The civil unrest of 2013-2014 in Ukraine, which became known as the protests of "Euromaidan," is a testament to this argument. The demonstrations in Kyiv were sparked by the Ukrainian government's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in favor of closer ties with Russia. The outcomes of these protests have strengthened Ukraine's European aspirations, just like Russia's current war in Ukraine has surged the support for EU membership among Ukrainian citizens. The war had a spill-over effect in the two other Associated Trio countries as well.

The third similarity between the two groups of countries lies within the trajectories of normative convergence with the EU. The path that Associated Trio countries are walking through to attain EU membership is similar to the path of the Visegrad Group: Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are fulfilling Association Agreements with the European Union, trying to Europeanize domestic policies to comply with *acquis communautaire* and have recently applied for the EU membership almost simultaneously. Georgia and Moldova followed in the footsteps of Ukraine, which lodged the impromptu EU membership application on 28 February 2022 amid the Russian invasion. Similarly, the Visegrad Four countries fulfilled the so called Europe Agreements, which formed the legal framework for the accession process of these countries to the EU.

Overall, the Associated Trio's current membership bid shows the dynamics of the third wave of Europeanization. Following the first two waves, - the economic integration and political unification of Europe, - the third wave of Europeanization, also known as cultural Europeanization, began in the 1990s.[1] In line with this wave, the cooperation of Visegrad countries became most active in the late 1990s and early 2000s, after they received the EU membership candidate status. As the Associated Trio countries are currently awaiting the European Commission's assessment of their membership applications, their partnership gains even more relevance in terms of how they manage to join efforts to achieve their mutual goals.

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[1] Klas-Göran Karlsson, "The Uses of History and the Third Wave of Europeanisation," in *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance*, ed. Malgorzata Pakier and Bo Sträth (Berghahn Books, 2010), 38.

This also increases the relevance of the Associated Trio cooperation as a research subject. The experience of the Visegrad Group can be instrumental in understanding how the Associated Trio countries can unite efforts to boost Europeanization should they be granted a candidate status.

Because the formation of the Associated Trio is such a new development, counting only a year since it was put together, it is understudied. At the moment, there is virtually no academic literature exploring this format. Meanwhile, the Visegrad Group has been widely scrutinized in academic circles. The empirical relevance of this thesis lies within its ambition to narrow the gap between that knowledge and the unknown by examining the Associated Trio format and contrasting it against the Visegrad Group.

This thesis proposes two main research questions:

1. How does the Europeanization progress in the Associated Trio compare to that in pre-accession Visegrad Four?

I will answer this question though exploring the process of Europeanization in both groups on three levels: Identity, values and normative convergence with the EU. Therefore, the sub-questions that arise from the research on this subject are: how the Associated Trio and Visegrad Four countries framed their European Identity and longing for EU membership? What tools did they use/are using for convincing the EU that they are deserving membership candidates? Is their European identity underpinned by the commitment to European Values? If not, why? How does the normative convergence in the Associated Trio compare to pre-accession Visegrad Fours? What are the factors contributing to Europeanization in this respect and what are the stumbling blocks on the path to EU membership?

However, in order to answer my first research question, I will first examine the institutional nature of the Associated Trio. Therefore, my second main research question intends to highlight the role of these countries' cooperation in their quest for EU membership. This is strongly linked to the empirical goal of this thesis, which is to observe the Associated Trio and identify its institutional characteristics, similarities and differences in comparison to the Visegrad Group. The second research question is as follows:

2. What kind of institutional formation is Associated Trio and how does it compare to Visegrad Group in this regard?

My theoretical goal is to define and interpret the institutional characteristics of Associated Trio and Visegrad Four. By doing so, I want to contribute to the theoretical Constructivist discussions, namely to the literature on Sociological Institutionalism which will be employed in this thesis as the main theoretical explanatory framework. The sub-questions that are essential to answer my second main research question are: in what context were the Associated Trio and Visegrad Four born? Are they strong or weak institutional formations? In both cases, does it provide an advantage or disadvantage for them?

Finally, my personal goal is to contribute to research on the Eastern European countries' EU accession prospects and how the third wave of Europeanization continues across Europe's eastern borders. In order to answer my research questions, I will first explore the European identities of the two groups of countries, which will be followed by an examination of their partnerships' institutional frameworks. I will continue with the discussion on discrepancies between the support for EU membership and commitment to EU values in the Associated Trio countries and, in the end, contrast normative convergence between pre-accession Visegrad Four and Associated Trio countries. The next chapter of this thesis explains the theoretical and methodological tools, as well as empirical data that I analyze to find answers to my questions.

# 2. Theory and research design - Sociological Institutionalism and Europeanization

## 2.1. Sociological Institutionalism

Institutionalists agree on the assumption that institutions matter;[2] Keeping this assertion in mind, by treating both the Visegrad Group and Associated Trio formats as institutionalized formations forged for a specific purpose, Sociological Institutionalism should provide a toolkit for explaining how they are instrumental in fostering Europeanization. Sociological Institutionalism

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[2] Sabine Saurugger, "Sociological Institutionalism and European Integration," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, May 24, 2017, 1, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.179.

was chosen as a theoretical framework for this thesis with the intention to explain what kind of institutions Visegrad Group and Associated Trio are and how they can be utilized by member states. More importantly, however, this theoretical approach is instrumental in explaining the complex circumstances which influence the choices that countries make, contending against the assumptions that states are mostly guided by egoistic self-interests and rational decision-making.

It is important to note here that I employ a cross-disciplinary approach; however, in my research, sociological aspects are of secondary importance and the study of identity, values and institutions are of key prominence.

Sociological institutionalists focus on why or how specific attitudes are considered more appropriate by actors.[3] They contend that the "influence on actors' decisions may stem not only from formal rules such as laws, regulations, or court decisions, but also from the fact that some choices seem more natural, plausible, appropriate, and legitimate than others."[4] These categories refer to the actors' identities. This is yet another reason why this theory was chosen for this analysis, namely, its strong emphasis on identity as a guiding principle in the behavior and decision-making of actors. It should be instrumental in understanding how the concerned regional partnership formats came about, why the Central and Eastern European countries chose Europe for partnership in their foreign policies and why they seek to replicate European policies domestically.

In Institutionalists' view, institutions are "more than just agents facilitating exchanges between actors, or instruments to lower transaction costs."[5] In the words of David March and Johan Olsen, the founding fathers of new Institutionalism, institutions are "a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized principles, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the

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[3] Saurugger, 4.
[4] Saurugger, 4.
[5] Saurugger, 2.

idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances."[6]

## 2.2. Isomorphism

To explain how institutions function and what influences actors' decision-making, Institutionalists laid down three concepts: Isomorphism, Logic of Appropriateness and Rhetorical Action. The first one stands for replication by actors of "organizational models collectively sanctioned as appropriate and legitimate."[7] Three mechanisms have been identified leading to isomorphism: coercion, mimesis, and normative pressures.[8]

One of the most frequent forms of Isomorphism in the European Union is structuring state behaviors through supranational institutions. This makes an example of *coercive isomorphism* in which pressures come from actors upon which the institutions are dependent and "institutions conform with expectations from the outside." Similarly, the use of conditionality mechanisms with third countries to trigger reforms can be regarded as an example of the use of such Isomorphism.[9]

In the case of *Mimesis,* institutions are regarded so attractive that they are imitated by other actors. A good example of this is the transfer of systems of Western European countries through the process of reforms into the Central and Eastern European countries, which are often facilitated by foreign experts, that is, expert groups, non-governmental organizations, or think-tanks.

The last one, *normative pressures* is linked to "the institutionalization of specific attitudes."[10] This is instrumental in explaining why Central and Eastern European countries complied to *acquis communautaire* to join the European Union. Studies conducted in this field concluded

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[6] James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Elaborating the "New Institutionalism,"* The Oxford Handbook of Political Science: (Oxford University Press, 2011), 3, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604456.013.0008.
[7] Saurugger, "Sociological Institutionalism and European Integration," 6.
[8] Saurugger, 6.
[9] Saurugger, 7.
[10] Saurugger, 8.

that *normative pressures* lead to institutional Isomorphism as opposed to a purely cost-benefit based analysis.[11]

## 2.3. Logic of Appropriateness

Sociological Institutionalism is guided by the principle of the *logic of appropriateness*, meaning that for actors, the guiding principle is the collective understanding of what constitutes proper behavior.[12] In this, actors seek to meet social expectations in contrast with the rationalist paradigm, whereas actors seek to maximize their egoistic self-interest.[13] Therefore, in the Institutionalist's view, the goals and what is perceived as rational action is guided by social expectations.

According to March and Olsen, within the tradition of the logic of appropriateness, actions are seen as rule-based entities.[14] They contend that "human actors are imagined to follow rules that associate particular identities to a particular situation" and that "the pursuit of purpose is associated with identities more than with interests, and with the selection of rules more than with individual rational expectations."[15]

The authors explain foreign policy as "the application of rules associated with particular identities to a particular situation" and argue that appropriate action is the one that is essential to a particular conception of self.[16] They explain behavior "by determining the identities that are evoked and the meaning given to a situation."[17]

Sociological Institutionalists share the belief that social phenomena "cannot be reduced to aggregations or consequences of individuals' attributes or motives."[18] This means that choices that countries make cannot be regarded to be only the sum of their egoistic interests. Instead,

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[11] Saurugger, 8.
[12] *European Union Politics*, Sixth edition. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 119.
[13] Saurugger, "Sociological Institutionalism and European Integration," 1.
[14] James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (October 1, 1998): 951.
[15] March and Olsen, 951.
[16] March and Olsen, 951.
[17] March and Olsen, 951–52.
[18] Frank Schimmelfennig, "The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," *International Organization* 55, no. 1 (January 1, 2001): 58.

they are mixtures of complex decisions, guided by the kind of rationality that is "context-bound."[19]

Of course, only the desire of aspiring states, even if they comply with the *acquis communautaire,* is not enough for the membership to be granted. Sociological Institutionalism is instrumental in explaining the receiving community's logic as well. From the perspective of Sociological Institutionalism, enlargement is understood as "the expansion of international community."[20] Therefore, opening accession negotiations with the Central and Eastern European countries by the EU can be explained as "the inclusion of those countries that have come to share its liberal values and norms."[21]

However, to contend that shared values and norms are enough for accession would be an oversimplification of the enlargement process. Even though Sociological Institutionalism puts emphasis on these qualities, it doesn't rule out that there are other important factors that play an important role in decision-making. This can be well explained in the Rationalist's account of enlargement. As for Sociological Institutionalism, rationality is different and it's far from the "theoretical premises of (economic) rationalism."[22] In fact, it's "constructed" or "context-bound," which is why, hypothetically, from the Sociological Institutionalist's perspective, "the EU will be ready to admit any European state that reliably adheres to the liberal norms of domestic and international conduct."

Still, in the case of the 2004 accession of Central and Eastern European countries, not every EU member state was convinced that the applicants should be granted membership. This was due to the uneven (political and economic) impact of expansion that enlargement would incur on the EU member states.

In light of this, while the logic of appropriateness is instrumental in explaining the aspirant countries' motivations, it is not necessarily helpful in explaining why the EU member states granted them membership. As a solution, Sociological Institutionalists attempted to specify "a

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[19] Schimmelfennig, 58.
[20] Schimmelfennig, 47.
[21] Schimmelfennig, 48.
[22] Schimmelfennig, 58.

causal mechanism through which the EC's value and norms asserted themselves against self-interested national preferences and bargaining behavior."[23]

## 2.4. Rhetorical action

The third strand of argument of Sociological Institutionalism lies in the *rhetorical action*, which was conceptualized by Frank Schimmelfennig. By rejecting the logic of appropriateness as the standard explanatory tool, in his accounts of the EU's Eastern enlargement he deviated from the classic argumentation of Sociological Institutionalism. Instead, he contended that the enlargement of the Central and Eastern European countries was achieved through *rhetorical action*, which, in his words, is "the strategic use and exchange of arguments to persuade other actors to act according to one's preferences."[24]

Schimmelfennig argued that in the accession of Central European countries neither member, nor applicant countries acted "appropriately," that is to say, based on internalized membership norms. Instead, the accession came about through the rhetorical use of arguments that came to be "shaming"[25] the member states into granting them membership. In other words, they convinced the European Union or "rhetorically entrapped" it by basing their "claims for enlargement on the collective identity and the constitutive liberal values and norms of the community organizations to which the member states had subscribed."[26]

## 2.5. Operationalization of data

When it comes to Europeanization, Borzel and Risse describe it as "the various ways in which institutions, processes and policies emanating from the European level influence policies, politics, and polities at the domestic level (be it member or non-member states)."[27] In line with this description and in light of the objectives of this thesis, I will employ the term Europeanization with the meaning of the process of convergence, in which the EU's normative frameworks, including on the level of identity, values and norms, are implemented domestically.

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[23] Schimmelfennig, 62.
[24] Frank Schimmelfennig, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492068.
[25] Schimmelfennig (2003), 5.
[26] Schimmelfennig (2003), 5.
[27] *European Union Politics*, 3.

The implementation of these normative frameworks will further be referred to as "domestic impact" or "convergence."

Such a definition begs the question of who holds the agency in the process of Europeanization. Keeping in mind that this thesis is interested in the power of regional cooperation formats, besides individual seven countries, Visegrad Four and Associated Trio groups as institutions are regarded as agents that enact Europeanization. Moreover, considering that Europeanization is a communicative process in which the input, or convergence of concerned countries is assessed by the EU bodies, the European Commission holds an important agency as it judges these countries' performances.

Because of this, my primary empirical data for measuring Europeanization is the reports produced by the European Commission. In order to explain how I plan to operationalize this data and what my secondary materials are, I'll return to my research questions.

To answer my first research question **-** how the Europeanization progress in the Associated Trio compares to that in pre-accession Visegrad Four, - I examine relevant progress reports that the European Commission produced on the individual countries in Visegrad Four and Associated Trio groups. In the case of Visegrad Four, I explore the European Commission's opinion reports on the four country's applications for membership, all published in July 1997.

As for the Associated Trio, I examine the latest Association Agreement implementation reports, dating 2020-2021, as well as the EU's 2021 report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World.

I use three markers for observation: Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. Particularly these three markers were chosen because they make cornerstones of EU acquis and are key pre-conditions for membership. Secondly, they are enshrined in the EU's conditionality mechanisms and the performances of third countries in this regard undergo heavy scrutiny from the EU institutions.

How the above-mentioned reports are comparable to each other will be further explained in the relevant chapter, where I compare the two groups' normative convergences.

As for my second research question, - what kind of institutional formation is Associated Trio and how does it compare to Visegrad Group in this regard? - I examine the founding documents of each regional cooperation to find out whether they are relatively strong or weak institutional formations and how that can affect the process of Europeanization. After contrasting them against each other as institutions, I interpret what their institutional foundations mean for their success in achieving their goals.

As for my secondary data, which helps to see the full picture in the quest for answers to the above questions, I first use academic literature that contextualizes the historical dynamics in which these partnerships emerged. To understand these dynamics, the following chapter will focus on the collective identities of the countries in both groups. The review of literature shows the discursive practices that were employed by these countries in order to shift the mental borders and place themselves in the "European family." Furthermore, I use excerpts from the speeches of public officials, as well as essays that are instrumental in understanding the discursive practices about "return to Europe."

Secondly, I analyze the public opinion surveys produced by various pollsters in the Associated Trio countries. The goal is to examine the gap between, on the one hand, indicators of support for EU membership in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova and on the other hand, internalization of EU values, such as equality and protection of minority rights. Minority rights were chosen as the most suitable marker for such analysis because of its controversial nature in Eastern Europe.

Finally, in order to achieve these goals, I use comparative content analysis as a methodological tool. It is especially useful for this thesis since it helps to filter and analyze a large volume of written content from which I extract information on the basis of pre-determined three markers of Europeanization, as stated above. As normative convergence cannot be measured in binary opposites such as "successful" and "failed," content analysis allows extraction of measurements of Europeanization in the same or similar wording as the drafter of the materials have used.

## 2.6. Limitations

My research is limited in several respects. First of all, amongst many criteria by which Europeanization can be measured, this thesis focuses on only three: Identity, values and normative convergence. The latter is an even more complex one, as *acquis communautaire* ranges all the way from political and economic markers to infrastructure and energy. My research of normative convergence will be limited to only three markers: Democratization, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. It should also be noted that in the assessment of normative convergence of Associated Trio countries, I use the latest reports of the European Commission. However, the latter hasn't published the assessment report on Ukraine in 2021; therefore, for this one, I use the 2020 report, whilst for Georgia and Ukraine, I analyze the 2021 reports of the European Commission.

Besides, it should be noted that the data that I use also has its limitations. In the assessment of European identity, I mostly rely on secondary sources, that is to say, academic literature that reviews the concerned subjects. The same applies to the marker of values, for which I use public opinion polls provided by public opinion survey organizations, as well as analysis carried out by scholars based on the data provided by the European Values Study (EVS).

Furthermore, whilst EVS provides information on the European values of "Orthodox Eastern non-member states," it doesn't contain survey data on two Associated Trio countries – Ukraine and Moldova. Still, it allows generalization of findings which is further explained in the relevant chapter.

# 3. Contextualizing Europeanization: European identity and discourses of "Return to Europe"

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern European countries, which sought integration into the developed West, set out to make a case for why they indeed belonged in the "European family." While Visegrad Four succeeded in their bid and eventually joined the EU, the quest for making a convincing case still continues in the Associated Trio countries. In their quest for accession, similar discursive patterns can be observed in both pre-

accession Central European countries and Eastern European countries that we examine in this thesis, namely, practicing the discourse of "return to Europe."

The Visegrad Group's efforts to join the West involved discourses of distancing themselves from the "East" that held a negative connotation and was widely regarded as under Soviet influence. For this reason, they adopted the term "Central Europe," which was widely employed not only by intellectuals but country officials as well in their foreign policies.

These discursive efforts were successful, and the mental border was drawn between Central and Eastern Europe. Now, many years later, the Associated Trio is putting in the same efforts, only they cannot escape the label of "Eastern Europe." As the term continues to carry a negative connotation, Eastern European countries rarely describe themselves as Eastern Europeans and the only tool at their disposal seems to be the demonstrated conformity with the liberal Western rules, or in other words, Europeanization.

In this chapter, I will describe the collective identity-building process and the discursive practices that shaped these identities.

## 3.1. The case of Visegrad Group

I shall begin with the description of the European identity-framing process of Visegrad group countries, which following the 1989 revolution, held the "return to Europe" as a core tenet of their foreign policy.

In the discursive practices of Central and Eastern European countries, the boundaries of Europe are constantly contested and socially constructed.[28] In the post-Cold War period, the binary of the East-West divide was still salient, whereas, as noted above, the notion of "Eastern Europe" held a negative connotation. With the aim to distance themselves from the latter, the Visegrad

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[28] Aliaksei Kazharski, "The End of 'Central Europe'? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four," *Geopolitics* 23, no. 4 (October 2018): 756, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1389720.

group countries framed themselves as belonging to "Central Europe," a region closer to Western values and identities.[29]

Scholars date the emergence of the term "Central Europe" back to the times of WWI. According to Trencsényi, in the German discourse, the term *Mitteleuropa* originally referred to "a concentric framework pitting the continental German-dominated center against the Eastern and Western peripheries."[30] He argues that while understandings of West and East were more stable, the term "Central Europe" never stabilized and "different national and disciplinary frames created "divergent local usages." But as the cold war instilled a rigid East-West division, the term became less salient in the German context and went into temporary decline.[31]

However, the term made a comeback in the 1980s in the works of intellectuals from the three countries. Neumann argues that the new discourse on Central Europe was "born of frustration with the Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe."[32] The most prominent work where such discursive efforts were evident is the essay of Czech writer Milan Kundera - "The Tragedy of Central Europe," published in 1984."[33]

In his essay, Kundera argued that Central European countries, which historically belonged in the West, were "kidnapped" by the "East." For Hungarians, Czechs and Poles, he argued, "'Europe' does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word 'West.'"[34] And, shall Hungary no longer be European, "it loses the essence of its identity."[35] He proposed the division of Western, Central and Eastern Europe and argued that with the imposition of the Iron Curtain, Central Europeans that "always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East."[36] In his words, Central Europe at the time was "culturally in the West and politically in the East."

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[29] Claudia Maria Bedea and Victor Osei Kwadwo, "Opportunistic Sub-Regionalism: The Dialectics of EU-Central-Eastern European Relations," *Journal of European Integration* 43, no. 4 (May 19, 2021): 386, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1776271.
[30] Kazharski, "The End of 'Central Europe'?," 758.
[31] Kazharski, 758.
[32] Kazharski, 758.
[33] Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," in *The Tragedy of Central Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 191–214, https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048533084-015.
[34] Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," *New York Review of Books* Volume 31 (1984): 1.
[35] Kundera, 1.
[36] Kundera, 1.

The "East," in Kundera's essay, signifies the Soviet bloc and recoining "Central Europe" can be viewed as an attempt to distance oneself from the negative connotation that "Eastern" signified.

Kundera expressed his disappointment with Western Europe for seeing "in Central Europe only Eastern Europe."[37] Such a framing of "Central Europe" and othering of "East," or in the context of Sociological Institutionalism - rhetorical action, become a moral plea to the West to reintegrate forcefully "kidnapped" cousins into the "European family." Therefore, the essay is a testament to an active social construction of a Central European region, involving the self/other binary.[38]

This binary, however, was later criticized by scholars who argued that such a border-drawing tended to project notions of insecurity on actors like Russia not necessarily because of their specific behavior but "because insecurity was attributed to the presumed essence of Russian culture."[39]

In the 1990s, the same binary became salient and the concept of "Central Europe" was heavily employed by the Central European countries who sought to join the EU and NATO in their foreign policy schemes. According to Neumann, "with the local Communist politicians gone and the former dissidents installed in their still-warm seats, the discourse on Central Europe became part of the armory of official foreign policy."[40] Reportedly, Polish and Czech diplomats tended to correct Westerners in Brussels whenever mentioning "Eastern" instead of "Central" Europe, signifying a fear of being marginalized.[41]

In May 1990, the president of then-Czechoslovakia Vaclav Havel addressed the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe with a historical speech, in which he reiterated the narrative of "return to Europe."

> Obviously, the states once ruled by a totalitarian system, which are now
> recovering from its consequences and want to return to Europe, can most rapidly

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[37] Kundera, 11.
[38] Kazharski, "The End of 'Central Europe'?," 759.
[39] Kazharski, 759.
[40] Kazharski, 759.
[41] Kazharski, 759.

and effectively do so not by competing and contending but by helping each other in solidarity. If these countries want to make overtures to the new Europe, they must first of all establish contact with each other. The new democratic government in Czechoslovakia, therefore, wants to do all in its power to contribute to the co-ordination of efforts by Central European countries to enter various European institutions.[42]

His plea to European organizations "that are theoretically European, but are in fact for the time being Western only" was to be flexible with countries "which for long years were severed from them even though logically they belong there."[43]

On the other hand, in the early years, the position of Central Europe in the eyes of Western Europe was quite ambiguous.[44] According to Kuss, the term "East-Central Europe" had been employed, which placed these countries "simultaneously in Europe and not European." She elaborates that the EU and NATO employed orientalist discourse as candidate countries were discursively framed "in a liminal space, neither developed nor underdeveloped, neither learned nor wholly ignorant, in the process of becoming mature Europeans."[45]

To prove them otherwise, Visegrad Group countries had to resort to conformity and compliance to the rules laid down to them by the EU. This meant unconditional compliance with the EU's standards and policies without the option to opt out. Therefore, this led to intense isomorphism as former "Eastern Europe" marked the moment of normative identification with the "West" by voluntarily subjecting itself to this unconditional institutional transfer.[46]

## 3.2. The case of Associated Trio countries

The quest of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova to join the European Union strongly resembles the discursive efforts of the Visegrad Group countries. Similar to them, the Associated Trio group embraced the discourse of "Return to Europe" and resorted to othering Russia in discursive

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[42] "Speeches Made to the Parliamentary Assembly (1949-2018)," accessed May 20, 2022, http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/Speeches/Speech-XML2HTML-EN.asp?SpeechID=88.

[43] "Speeches Made to the Parliamentary Assembly (1949-2018)."

[44] Kazharski, "The End of 'Central Europe'?," 760.

[45] Kazharski, 760.

[46] Kazharski, 761.

practices that equated the latter to the complete opposite of their strategic Western aspirations. Europe, or joining the EU, has been defined in existential terms in light of security threats and Russia's animosity towards these countries, especially after Russian aggression in Georgia and Ukraine, in 2008 and 2014, respectively.

The existing formats of the Associated Trio's relationship with the EU were born in the context of growing enlargement fatigue in the EU amidst evolving eastern enlargement. Facing the need to redefine its relationship with its neighbors, the EU launched European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003 to create a "ring of friends" and a zone of "prosperity and a friendly neighborhood."[47] In 2009, the ENP's Eastern dimension, Eastern Partnership (EaP), was launched with the aim to "reinforce the political association and economic integration" between the EU and six Eastern European countries: Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus.[48] This format of cooperation can be viewed as a "successful projection of an accepted EU identity/self"[49] onto Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, all of whom signed Association Agreements (AA) accompanied by Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with the EU in 2014, a legally binding bilateral agreement of political and economic association.

To better understand this projection, it's important to discuss the binary of two powers the Associated Trio countries are squeezed between. Association Agreements are the means for the Associated Trio's normative conformity with the EU. By offering such a reinforced relationship that entails democratic reforms, according to Vieira, the EU forged a new identity category, - "Potential we," which can be distinguished from "Prospective we" - corresponding to EU candidate status. Therefore, "Potential we" was defined as "more than partnership" but "less than membership."[50]

However, in 2015, a year after the Associated Trio signed the AA/DCFTA, Russia launched the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) - a similar in nature treaty of economic cooperation for the

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[47] Alena Vieira, "The European Union's 'Potential We' between Acceptance and Contestation: Assessing the Positioning of Six Eastern Partnership Countries*," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 59, no. 2 (March 2021): 303, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13069.

[48] "Eastern Partnership," accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/.

[49] Vieira, "The European Union's 'Potential We' between Acceptance and Contestation," 301.

[50] Vieira, 303.

post-Soviet states - to which, two EaP states, Armenia and Belarus subscribed.[51] Both partnerships can be viewed as the attempts by the EU and Russia to exert their influence on the respective region. Domestically, in all three countries largely similar discursive practices have prevailed with regard to these "influences," of which framings of identity are the most prominent for this study. It is important to note here that the following information in this chapter applies to the period before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The change in perceptions of the EU and Russia after the war began, will be discussed in the upcoming chapter, where I discuss public opinion polls.

In the meantime, by 2019, in Georgia and Ukraine, in their strategic documents and leadership discourses, AA/DCFTA has been widely framed as a "civilizational choice" associated with the idea of "return to Europe."[52] These agreements have been further framed as a "master plan for Europeanisation and true modernization" and as means to achieve "deep internal Europeanisation."[53] AA/DCFTA, which serves as a guidebook for implementing democratic reforms, establishing the rule of law and so forth, has been associated with European values, and the political course of enforcing these agreements has been framed as a precondition for these countries' security and independence.[54]

The Eurasian Economic Union in Ukraine and Georgia has been mostly ignored in recent years and was framed as analogous to the Soviet Union or as "a new form of the Soviet Union initiated by Putin to undermine the progress achieved in our region with respect to NATO and the EU."[55]

Meanwhile, in Moldova, internal polarization had complicated the country's relationship with the EU, and reforms had become the key theme. AA/DCFTA has been framed as "a 'step on the way to getting the 'European passport'" and a "'bridge to be crossed' to enter the EU."[56] However, Moldova had not been as assertive as two other Associated Trio countries in terms of their membership aspirations, partly because of "the precedent set when the EU provided almost

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[51] "Eurasian Economic Union," accessed May 20, 2022, http://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en#about.
[52] Vieira, "The European Union's 'Potential We' between Acceptance and Contestation," 304.
[53] Vieira, 304.
[54] Vieira, 304.
[55] Vieira, 304.
[56] Vieira, 304.

unconditional support to the 'pro-European' leadership of the country, which was later associated with state capture and the notorious bank fraud exposed in 2014."[57]

As for its framing of Russia, although acknowledging its destabilizing influence, it had not been defined as a threat in Moldova. Instead, "close cooperation" and "dialogue" were the themes characterizing the relationship with Russia.[58] Interestingly, as Vieira noted, "EU integration is repeatedly portrayed as 'not being directed against Russia' and as compatible with close cooperation with Russia and the EAEU."[59]

Finally, albeit the differences compared to Ukraine and Georgia in terms of their othering of Russia, Moldova too has embraced the narrative of civilizational framing of the EU. AA/DCFTA has been framed as "irreversible," impossible to revoke, and the driver of reforms.[60]

## 3.3. Summary

The Associated Trio countries, similar to Visegrad Four members, have framed their ambition to join the Western European communities as "return to Europe" rather than joining the European Union.

However, unlike Central European countries, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova never developed a shared sense of "self," as the sub-regional identity of "Eastern European" never crystalized. This may partially be because of the negative connotation that the term continues to entail. Still, the sub-regional identity of Associated Trio countries is weak. However, this may change if the partnership proves to be successful in the years to come.

In their individual efforts to integrate into Western European communities, Associated Trio countries framed Europe as their civilization choice, making an example of *rhetorical action*. However, in order for this approach to work, it will be necessary to be complemented with strong normative conformity with the EU's rules, as this was the case with the Visegrad Four countries.

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[57] Vieira, 304.
[58] Vieira, 304.
[59] Vieira, 306.
[60] Vieira, 306.

Lastly, in terms of self/other binary, Russia has been portrayed as the opposite of the Associated Trio countries' identity and aspiration, even though this binary was not uniform in all three countries. However, in light of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, it is likely that othering of Russia will only intensify, contributing to assertion of the EU's liberal values in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

# 4. The institutional side of regional cooperation: Comparing Visegrad Four and Associated Trio as institutions

As discussed above, the history of creation of the Visegrad Group is also the history of drawing mental borders. In contrast to Middle Ages, when Europe was synonymous with Christendom,[61] during the cold war, the mental (and geographic) borders shifted and Europe became synonymous with the West. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, in the eyes of the West, the borders of Europe ended at the Iron Curtain. Satellite states situated beyond that border were viewed as part of the Soviet sphere of influence.[62] This is an important context for understanding the birth of the Visegrad Group.

## 4.1. Institutional Side of the Visegrad Group

According to Schmidt, the regional integration of the Visegrad Group was a natural consequence of historical forces.[63] This was also acknowledged in the Visegrad Declaration, the foundational document of the Visegrad group, which stated that their cooperation was based on a "natural historical development."[64]

Schmidt argued that "regional integration was useful since there was no external actor who could assist with the transformation and orientation of these countries."[65] However, even though the

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[61] Schmidt Andrea, "Friends Forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration," *Politics in Central Europe* 12, no. 3 (December 1, 2016): 115, https://doi.org/10.1515/pce-2016-0019.
[62] Schmidt Andrea, 116.
[63] Schmidt Andrea, 63.
[64] Webra International Kft, "The Visegrad Group: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia | Visegrad Declaration 1991," text ((C) 2006-2010, International Visegrad Fund, August 24, 2006), https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412.
[65] Schmidt Andrea, "Friends Forever?," 117.

natural course of action would be to forge a permanent institutional structure for cooperation, the founding countries of the Visegrad Group instead took a looser approach by creating a cooperation "entailing limited norms and a less institutional structure."[66] It is noted in the Visegrad Declaration that the cooperation would be realized "through meetings and consultations held at various levels and in various forms."[67]

The Visegrad Group was founded on 15 February 1991 in Visegrad, Hungary, by the heads of the three states: Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. The location of the summit was intentional, referring to the medieval Congress of Visegrad that took place in 1335. Such use of symbolism emphasized the connections that these countries had historically had.

The formation of the Visegrad group came in stages and its relevance has been changing throughout time. Initially, there were a number of common interests around which these countries united: transition from the Communist dictatorship to parliamentary democracy, protection of human rights, adoption of a free-market economy, establishing the rule of law, involvement in the European political and economic system and reserving security. The latter was relevant as there were shared concerns that Russia's retreat from Central Europe would be only temporary.[68] Because of this, the Visegrad Group sought to integrate not only into the EU but NATO as well.

The Visegrad Declaration emphasized that by coordinating their efforts, they maximized the chances of attaining their desired goals and objectives. Their unity was further underpinned "by the similar character of the significant changes occurring in these countries, their traditional, historically shaped system of mutual contacts, cultural and spiritual heritage and common roots of religious traditions."[69]

Finally, by establishing their cooperation, they pledged to, among other things, 1. harmonize activities to shape cooperation and close contacts with European institutions; 2. develop economic cooperation and 3. create favorable conditions for free flow of information, press and cultural values.

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[66] Schmidt Andrea, 118.
[67] Kft, "Visegrad Declaration 1991."
[68] Schmidt Andrea, "Friends Forever?," 119.
[69] Kft, "Visegrad Declaration 1991."

Overall, the institutionalization of the Visegrad Group was underpinned by the long history of partnership among the founding countries, and their new foundation was supported not only by their common political interests and aspirations, but by common identity, geographical and cultural proximity as well. This means that the Visegrad Group was not only a political and economic project, but also a cultural one.

However, at this stage the cohesion between the member states wasn't developed enough to represent a consistent group-level argumentation[70] and the formation of the Visegrad Group was interpreted differently among members. For instance, Poland saw it as "the instrument of balancing between Russia and Germany, while for Slovakia, it was an instrument for reducing political isolation." As Bagoly noted, overall the "dynamics of the Group were significantly determined by competition of its member states for acquiring leadership."[71]

The partnership between the signatory countries was built on two commitments: Economic and security cooperation. In order to facilitate security cooperation, the member states signed bilateral military cooperation agreements, creating a platform for dialog on defense matters.[72]

As for economic cooperation, even though Visegrad Four was not primarily an economic project, they maintained strong economic ties. In order to stimulate trade among them and stabilize their economies, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia established the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which was signed in 1992. It was intended to be a transitional organization that prepared countries for full membership of the European Union.[73] Eventually, after achieving accession to the EU, Visegrad Four left the organization in 2004.

Still, the period between 1993-1998 was marked by stagnation in Visegrad cooperation, with each member focusing on their own efforts to achieve EU/NATO accession.[74] This was partially because of the authoritarian regime of Slovakia at a time, which hindered the efficient operation

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[70] Enikő Bagoly, "30 Years of Cooperation: Aims and Success of the Visegrad Group." (Danube Institute, March 2021), 2, https://www.30yearsofv4.com/30-years-of-cooperation-aims-and-successes-of-the-visegrad-group/.
[71] Bagoly, 2.
[72] Bagoly, 3.
[73] CVCE. Serge Thines, "The Visegrad Group and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)" (CVCE.EU by UNI.LU, August 7, 2016), https://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/02bb76df-d066-4c08-a58a-d4686a3e68ff/201e6e1f-b36b-4f9a-978f-401942c778a6/Resources.
[74] Council of the European Union, "The Visegrad Group (V4)," accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/library/library-blog/posts/the-visegrad-group-v4/.

of the group and led to a deterioration of relations with the EU. In October 1998, in a trilateral summit of Presidents of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, the three countries expressed support to revitalize Visegrad cooperation and, by doing so, declared commitment to traditional European democratic values, civil rights and market economy.[75]

In 1999 all four countries joined NATO. As for the EU membership, Slovakia, which was economically less developed, was supported by the other three partners, which resulted in the accession of all four countries to the EU in 2004. Slovakia joined NATO as well in 2004.

Finally, it is important to note that the only institutionalized body created by the Visegrad cooperation is the Visegrad Fund, an international donor organization established in 2000 by the governments of the member states. Visegrad Fund facilitates to strengthening common Visegrad identity.[76] The aim of the fund is to promote regional cooperation between the group members as well as other countries. The fund has an annual budget of €8 million annually provided by the Visegrad Four governments, which is spent on grants, scholarships and cultural projects.[77]

## 4.2. The institutional side of Associated Trio

In comparison to Visegrad Group, there is little "natural" in the formation of the Associated Trio format. Even though Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia share a Soviet past, historically their partnership has been weak, especially compared to the Visegrad group countries. Instead, as noted previously, the format was born in the context of lack of initiatives from the EU institutions and it has not emerged on the basis of historical or cultural ties. The Associated Trio's formation was a strategic choice, driven by the stagnation in their relationships with the EU and can be considered to be an attempt to create a proactive agenda, a reminder for the EU of these countries' ambitions.

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[75] Webra International Kft, "The Visegrad Group: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia | Selected Events in 1998 and Earlier:," text ((C) 2006-2010, International Visegrad Fund, August 9, 2011), https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/1998-and-before.
[76] Bagoly, "30 Years of Cooperation: Aims and Success of the Visegrad Group.," 5.
[77] "Visegrad Fund," Visegrad Fund, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.visegradfund.org/about-us/the-fund/.

According to its founding document, the Memorandum of Understanding[78] of Foreign Ministers of the respective countries signed on 17 May 2021, the Associated Trio is "a format of enhanced cooperation and dialogue" among the Foreign Affairs ministries of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, "as well as with the European Union on matters of common interest related to European integration." The document states that this partnership also entails cooperation within the Eastern Partnership format. It is evident that these countries are not rejecting the Eastern Partnership - EU's main format of cooperation with the Eastern neighbors, but rather distinguishing themselves from the other EaP states as more ambitious countries in terms of relationship with the EU. Similar to the Visegrad Group, the Associated Trio was formed to speak with the European institutions in one voice, which is why the partnership entails "conducting regular and/or ad-hoc trilateral consultations to review ongoing developments or discuss specific issues in the framework of their integration with the EU."[79]

Besides, similar to the Visegrad Group, Associated Trio countries acknowledged the need to address their security challenges; however, they don't seek cooperation on security issues amongst each other like the Visegrad Four countries did. Instead, their goal is "enhancing security and defense cooperation with the EU." The salience of security issues is currently underpinned by Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. Besides, all three countries have breakaway regions which are under the de-facto control of Russia.

As for their other goals, the Associated Trio countries seek to enhance cooperation in the areas of transport, energy, digital transformation, green economy, justice and home affairs, strategic communications, and healthcare, which, similar to the Visegrad Group's experience, aims to strengthen their interconnectivity.

Just like in the field of security, what also distinguishes Associated Trio from Visegrad Four is that the former doesn't put outstanding efforts into facilitating economic ties amongst

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[78] "Association Trio: Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine," accessed May 20, 2022, https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/association-trio-memorandum-understanding-between-ministry-foreign-affairs-georgia-ministry-foreign-affairs-and-european-integration-republic-moldova-and-ministry-foreign-affairs-ukraine.

[79] "Association Trio: Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine."

themselves. Instead, the three countries have agreed to facilitate the acceleration of their integration into the EU internal market. Currently, the economic relationship between them is very poorly developed and imports and exports between them make up only a fraction of their overall economic exchanges.

## 4.3. Summary

To sum up, Associated Trio and Visegrad Group represent weak institutional formations, however, the latter established stronger ties amongst members which makes it a relatively stronger institutional entity compared to the other.

Firstly, this is because the Visegrad Group sought not only promotion of their interests in the European communities, but also developed cooperation on several levels, be it economic, cultural or security, amongst themselves.

Secondly, the Visegrad Four is underpinned by shared identity as Central European countries, whilst the shared identity of "Eastern Europe" never crystallized in the Associated Trio and its members don't promote their union as the cooperation of Eastern European states.

Finally, unlike Visegrad Group which established Visegrad Fund, Associated Trio hasn't forged an institutionalized body, which would foster their interconnectedness. However, because Associated Trio is such a young formation, it has yet to be seen how this partnership develops and whether their strategy of European integration will entail stronger ties amongst themselves. As the Visegrad Group didn't manage to achieve strong cooperation at the very beginning of their partnership, it is possible that Associated Trio members too will consolidate their partnership after the European Commission issues its opinions on the membership applications of the three countries. After all, the Visegrad Group partnership was the most successful after its members received the candidate status from the EU.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the European aspirations of the member states of the Associated Trio and how the stances of their populations on the minority rights can be problematic on the path to accession in  the EU. This is to contextualize the gap between the European aspirations and the European values of the Associated Trio countries.

# 5. Gaps in Europeanization: Aspirations of membership vs. Public opinions on EU values

From the sociological perspective, the EU is a community organization based on a culture that is shaped by interrelated identity, values and norms.

Sociological Institutionalism argues that non-member states "that share the community identity, values, and norms will strive for membership in the community organizations even if it incurs net material costs."[80] Their admission is conditional upon the adoption of the community rules, which in the case of Western communities such as the EU and NATO are mainly liberal values and norms.

From the sociological perspective, for the enlargement of the EU, it is necessary for the states to internalize the liberal values and norms of the community, which happens through socialization,[81] also known as isomorphism. The EU seeks to disseminate its liberal community rules internationally and in the case of its Eastern neighbors, through its Eastern Partnership format to which the Associated Trio countries are members.

One of the tools for the non-member states to internalize the community rules is the association with the community organization. In the case of Associated Trio countries, they have all signed Association Agreements with the EU and are in the process of fulfilling obligations taken under the agreements. In this process, the aspiring countries demonstrate their commitment to downloading the community rules. As Schimmelfennig put it, the association "serves to teach the community rules to the aspirant state and to put to the test its ability and willingness to learn them."[82]

Besides, it should be emphasized that commitment to the community values needs assertion against competing values. Because of this, the debate on the Associated Trio countries' values can be conceptualized as the battleground between Western liberal values and anti-liberal

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[80] Schimmelfennig, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe*, 74.
[81] Schimmelfennig, 71.
[82] Schimmelfennig, 75.

values. The prevalence of the latter is often attributed to Russia and its attempts to regain influence over the region.

Between 2012-2015, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine adopted Anti-discrimination laws. The reforms were part of a larger package of rules the Associated Trio countries were tasked to adopt under the Visa-liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) designed by the EU. As a result, the citizens of the three countries were awarded visa-free travel in the Schengen zone. However, unlike other reforms, the adoption of the Anti-discrimination laws proved to be controversial in all three countries, mainly because it awarded protection to minority groups such as LGBTQ+ people.

The protection of minorities, equality and human rights are among the core values of the EU. Even though the adoption of the Anti-discrimination law is a gesture of willingness to conform to the EU's norms, it doesn't necessarily reflect whether the values that the norm entails are internalized by the citizens of a country. How well the citizens of the aspiring countries have internalized these values can be measured through the public opinion polls. In this chapter, I will review the polls on the acceptance of minorities carried out in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine by different pollsters and contrast the findings with the surveys on the support of EU membership.

In order to explain the gap between the support of EU membership and the internalization of equality as a value, I further observe the motivations of the Associated Trio citizens as to why they support EU membership.

## 5.1. Strong support for EU membership and perceptions of EU

Various polls carried out in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova indicate that the overwhelming majority of these countries' citizens support accession to the EU.

The National Democratic Institute's (NDI) March 2022 poll[83] revealed that a sizable majority of Georgians (82 per cent) support Georgia's EU membership. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the support for Georgia's political and economic cooperation with the EU has also

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[83] NDI and CRRC Georgia, "Taking Georgians' Pulse. Findings from February and March 2022 Surveys, and March 2022 Focus Groups," 2022,
https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202022%20poll_public%20version_ENG_VF.pdf.

significantly surged (42 per cent up from 29 per cent and 40 per cent up from 30 per cent, respectively).

The poll also revealed that among those who support Georgia's EU membership, 62 per cent support it because they believe it will improve Georgia's economy, 32 per cent support it because of believing that it will provide greater security and 20 per cent endorse it because they believe it will strengthen Georgia's democratic development.

Furthermore, 69 per cent of Georgians believe that Georgia will benefit more from joining the EU and NATO, versus 10 per cent who believe that their country will benefit more from abandoning Euro-Atlantic integration (that is, the EU and NATO membership) in favor of better relations with Russia.

In Ukraine, according to the Raiting polling agency's March 2022 survey,[84] the support for EU membership amongst Ukrainians surged significantly after the Russian invasion, reaching a record high of 91 per cent at the end of March.

The International Republican Institute's (IRI) November 2021 poll[85] asked Ukrainians which economic union should Ukraine be a member of, to which 58 per cent responded that it should be the EU and 21 per cent said it should be Customs Union with Russia (also known as Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)).

Similarly, in IRI's November 2021 poll,[86] 64 per cent of Moldovans said that they supported their country's EU accession.

Moldovans were also asked to name their country's most important economic and political partners, to which 66 per cent and 60 per cent of citizens, respectively, responded it was the EU.

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[84] "The Seventh National Poll: Ukraine during the War (March 30-31, 2022)," accessed May 20, 2022, http://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/sedmoy_obschenacionalnyy_opros_ukraina_v_usloviyah_voyny_30-31_marta_2022.html.
[85] International Republican Institute and Center for Insights in Survey Research, "Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine. 6-15 November 2021," survey, November 6, 2021, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/FOR-RELEASE-2021-November-Survey-of-Residents-of-Ukraine_ENG.pdf.
[86] International Republican Institute and Center for Insights in Survey Research, "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova. September 16, 2021 – November 1, 2021," Survey, Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova, n.d., https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/IRI-2021-Moldova-Poll-Sep16-Nov1.pdf.

Interestingly enough, almost the same percentage of people also said that it was Russia: 65 per cent and 57 per cent, respectively.

The Russian war on Ukraine has significantly affected public opinions. To further research the motivations of Georgians, Moldovans and Ukrainians for why they support EU membership, a survey carried out before the war is instrumental. It was conducted by the EU Neighbours East in March 2020 in all three countries, with the same methodology.

The respondents were asked open-ended questions to name the first issues that come to their minds when thinking about the EU.

In Georgia, 14 per cent of citizens mentioned economic prosperity/high standards of living. It was followed by development and progress (7 per cent), peace and stability (7 per cent), democracy (5 per cent), freedom (4 per cent), the rule of law/human rights (4 per cent) and education (2 per cent).[87]

In Moldova, 29 per cent mentioned "economic prosperity/high standards of living," "confidence in the future," "good working conditions," "peace and stability," and "freedom" (around 5 per cent for each category).[88]

Lastly, in Ukraine, 26 per cent mentioned "economic prosperity/high standards of living" and "rule of law/human rights and equality" (11 per cent). Around 5 per cent of citizens also linked the EU with "peace and stability," "development and progress," "employment," and/or "great opportunities for personal growth and development" (5 per cent).[89]

These findings indicate that among the citizens of the Associated Trio countries, the EU is mostly perceived as the opportunity to boost the economic conditions of their countries, while more value-oriented qualities, such as human rights, come second in their perceptions.

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[87] Eu neighbours East, "Annual Survay Report Georgia. OPEN Neighbourhood — Communicating for a Stronger Partnership: Connecting with Citizens across the Eastern Neighbourhood," 2020.
[88] Eu neighbours East, "Annual Survay Report: Republic of Moldova. 5th Wave (Spring 2020) OPEN Neighbourhood — Communicating for a Stronger Partnership: Connecting with Citizens across the Eastern Neighbourhood," 2020.
[89] Eu neighbours East, "Annual Survay Report: Ukraine. 5th Wave (Spring 2020) OPEN Neighbourhood — Communicating for a Stronger Partnership: Connecting with Citizens across the Eastern Neighbourhood," 2020.

## 5.2. European values in the Associated Trio countries

Despite high support for EU membership, the three countries' citizens largely don't share the same liberal values on minority rights compared to their western counterparts. Pew Research Center conducted a Europe-wide survey[90] between 2015-2018, which revealed that people in Central and Eastern Europe are less accepting of Muslims and Jews as well as same-sex marriages compared to citizens of Western European nations.

In Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, disapproval of gay marriages were 95 per cent, 85 per cent and 92 per cent, respectively.

When asked whether they'd accept Muslims and Jews into their families, in Georgia, only 17 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively, said that they would. In Ukraine, it was 25 per cent and 43 per cent respectively, and 30 per cent and 40 per cent respectively in Moldova.

The scholarship built on the data provided by the chronicles of the European Values Study (EVS) shows the temporal as well as the special dynamic of convergence/divergence from EU values among the EU member states and their Eastern non-EU member neighbors.

Akaliyski, Welzel and Hien tracked the change in the publics' acceptance of the EU values from 1990 to 2017 based on the EVS data.[91] They found that Eastern nations, whether EU members or not, "are completely off the cultural trajectory of the EU majority" and that their cultural distance from the bulk of the EU has increased over the course of the past three decades.[92]

They concluded that between 1990 to 2017, across four cultural zones the support for EU values was the highest among Protestant Western nations, followed by the Catholic Western states, then Ex-communist Western states (including Visegrad Group countries) and lastly, the

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[90] Pew Research Center, "Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues," October 29, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/.
[91] Plamen Akaliyski, Christian Welzel, and Josef Hien, "A Community of Shared Values? Dimensions and Dynamics of Cultural Integration in the European Union," *Journal of European Integration* 44, no. 4 (May 19, 2022): 569–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1956915.
[92] Akaliyski, Welzel, and Hien, 586.

Orthodox Eastern non-member states (among other states, from the Associated Trio countries, only Georgia was included in the survey).[93]

Most relevant for this thesis is the revelation that in 1990, ex-Communist western states had higher acceptance of EU values than Orthodox Eastern non-member states had in 2017.

> The strongest supporters of EU-values also make the biggest gains, thus further increasing their lead. Catholic Western and Ex-communist Western nations increased their support of EU-values but more slowly than among Protestant publics – by 1.66 and 4.11 scale points (on a 100 point scale), respectively. Orthodox Eastern nations, for their part, have not significantly increased their anyways lower support for EU-values.[94]

The authors divided values into seven categories, including two categories discussed above: 1. Personal Freedom, - entailing acceptance of homosexuality, abortion and divorce and 2. Ethnic Tolerance, - entailing acceptance as neighbors of people of a different race, Muslims and immigrants/foreign workers.

The analysis showed that between 1990 and 2017, ex-Communist western states had progressed significantly faster than Orthodox Eastern states in both value categories: Personal Freedom and Ethnic Tolerance. In the case of ex-Communist states, the growth in acceptance was more than ten points on a 100 point scale for both Personal Freedoms (from 34.2 to 48) and Ethnic tolerance (from 65 to 76.1), while for Orthodox Eastern states, it was marginal in both cases (From 31.1 to 32.7 and from 65,6 to 66.4 respectively).

As it becomes evident from this data, the overall conclusion stated above is true for these separate categories as well. Namely, ex-Communist states had higher acceptance for Personal Freedoms and Ethnic tolerance in 1990 than Orthodox Eastern states had in 2017.

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[93] Akaliyski, Welzel, and Hien, 586.
[94] Akaliyski, Welzel, and Hien, 586.

## 5.3. Summary

These findings demonstrate that Visegrad Group countries had had stronger cultural proximity to Western Europe when they applied for EU membership than Eastern European countries may now have. Even though the cluster of Orthodox Eastern States in this study did not include two research subjects of this thesis, - Moldova and Ukraine, it can be presumed that among them, acceptance of EU values would be, to a certain extent, similar to that of Orthodox Eastern states. This is firstly because, as the previously discussed survey indicated, the acceptance of minorities in Moldova and Ukraine is somewhat similar to that of Georgia. Secondly, even though Moldova and Ukraine were not surveyed, they belong to the same traditional religious sub-group - the Orthodox East.

The high support for EU membership and a low tolerance for minorities illustrates the gap between these countries' western aspirations and their EU values. This can be explained by the fact that the citizens of these three countries see the EU first and foremost as means for economic prosperity and development. However, it should also be noted that the strong association of the EU with economic development rather than with equal rights and other values may be determined by the fact that economic issues are the most pressing issues in their societies.

Finally, these findings indicate that in order to make a successful rhetorical action, for the Associated Trio countries, only normative convergence won't be enough. In order to make a successful claim, they will need to demonstrate their proximity with the EU not only in terms of the legal framework, but also in the cultural sense.

# 6. Normative Europeanization: Examining EU's progress reports

After reviewing the Europeanization of the Visegrad Group and Associated Trio countries in the domains of European identity and European values, this chapter discusses the normative convergence of the respective groups of countries and how they compare with each other.

This will be achieved through the analysis of the Association implementation monitoring reports produced by the European Commission. The goal is to identify the proximity of normative

conditions in these countries in the fields of Democracy, Human rights and the Rule of Law approximately at the time of filing their EU membership applications.

This particular timing was chosen because the Associated Trio countries have recently filed membership applications that allow research into their convergence only up to this point. Secondly, guided by the assumption that the process of normative convergence should speed up once a country is granted a candidate status, it renders post-application convergence of the Visegrad Group countries incomparable to pre-application Associated Trio group. Thirdly, before filing membership applications, both Visegrad Group and Associated Trio countries signed Association Agreements (also known as Europe Agreements in the case of Visegrad Group countries) with the EU with the aim to harmonize their legislations with EU's rules.

While the reports on Associated Trio countries assess the implementation of Association Agreements, the reports on Visegrad Group countries examined below represent the European Commission's opinions on these countries' membership applications. However, they describe convergence in terms of fulfillment of European Agreements, which is the precursor of modern Association Agreements, making the comparisons compatible.

## 6.1. Normative convergence of Visegrad Four

**Poland**

The European Commission described Poland as a democracy, with stable institutions guaranteeing the rule of law, human rights and respect as well as protection of minorities.[95] It described the country's political institutions as well-functioning and stable, respecting the limits of their competencies and engaging in cooperation with each other.

The legislative elections in 1991 and 1993, as well as the presidential elections of 1995, were described as free and fair, whereas alternation of power was achieved smoothly. Parliament's

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[95] European Commission, "Agenda 2000 - Commission Opinion on Poland's Application for Membership of the European Union. DOC/97/16," July 15, 1997, 18,
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/DOC_97_16.

functions were described as satisfactory, whereas its powers are respected and the opposition plays a full part in its activities as well as in the operation of other institutions.[96]

Despite the positive assessment of the functioning of central institutions, the use of contract civil workers and their recruitment for political reasons was described as "still rife" despite the adoption of a Civil Service Act in 1996. On the other hand, corruption was named as a source of concern "despite the Government's efforts to curb it, notably through the adoption in 1995 of detailed legislation on public procurement."[97]

Despite public authorities retaining a considerable degree of influence over TV channels, the freedom of expression was described as, broadly speaking, guaranteed. However, the law threatening the imprisonment of journalists for slander and abuse of the state authorities with sentences up to eight years, was described as an "outstanding problem." The 1995 ruling of the Supreme Court, which required journalists to reveal their sources at the request of a prosecutor, was further described as a cause for concern.[98]

Telephone tapping without judicial control and house search without a warrant was named among other concerning matters.[99]

The report said that the independence of Polish judiciary vis-a-vis other institutions appeared secure[100], however, efforts to improve the operation of the judiciary needed to be sustained.

The main problem affecting the Polish justice system was named to be the time taken to process cases and the difficulty in enforcing decisions. Low salaries of judges were identified as a problem as many had left jobs to join the private sector, which as a result, affected the effectiveness of the judiciary.[101]

The European Commission said that there were no major problems in terms of respect for fundamental rights and that minorities did not experience any specific difficulties in Poland. However, the report also said that Roma minorities were sometimes victims of violence and

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[96] Commission opinion on Poland's Application, 12.
[97] Commission opinion on Poland's Application, 14.
[98] Commission opinion on Poland's Application, 16.
[99] Commission opinion on Poland's Application, 17.
[100] Commission opinion on Poland's Application, 14.
[101] Commission opinion on Poland's Application, 15.

discrimination, frequently living in situations of social hardship as a result of a combination of sociological factors and a failure by the authorities to take sufficient account of the special nature of their situation.[102]

## Czech Republic

The Czech Republic was described as a democracy with stable institutions guaranteeing the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities.[103]

The Czech Republic's political institutions, according to the report, functioned properly and in conditions of stability, respecting the limits on their competencies and cooperation with each other. According to the report, Parliament operated in a satisfactory manner whereas its powers were respected, and the opposition played its normal part in the operation of the institutions.[104]

Legislative elections in 1992 and 1996 were described as free and fair. The absence of civil service regulation and low salaries were identified as causes for hindering public service and the difficulty of combating corruption.[105] The secret service was reported to operate in a manner apparently respecting essential rules of democracy.

It was also noted that despite the evidence of freedom of expression in terms of media pluralism, limits were imposed under the criminal code, which allowed imprisonment for defamation of the President. Journalists' limited access to administrative documents was also noted as problematic.

According to the report, the situation of the courts constituted a major challenge for the country's integration into the European Union. Overloaded courts and prolonged delivery of judgments were named among the results of the lack of qualification on the part of judges, who had to apply "totally new" legislation, for which there were no established legal precedents at the time. However, it was also noted that there was adequate opportunity for access to the courts.[106]

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[102] Commission opinion on Poland's Application, 17.
[103] European Commission, "Agenda 2000 - Commission Opinion on the Czech Republic's Application for Membership of the European Union. DOC/97/17," July 15, 1997, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/DOC_97_17.
[104] Commission opinion on Czech Republic's Application, 10.
[105] Commission opinion on Czech Republic's Application, 11.
[106] Commission opinion on Czech Republic's Application, 12.

There were no major problems over respect for fundamental rights, and there have been no reported cases of inhuman or degrading treatment.[107] A law introduced in 1992 to combat racism and anti-Semitism was reported to be strengthened in 1995 with the imposition of stiffer penalties to curb such actions.[108]

It was also noted that even though Slovaks, who had chosen to remain in the Czech Republic, didn't encounter special difficulties in living there, the situation with regard to Roma people was much more difficult. "They are the target of numerous forms of discrimination in their daily lives and suffer particular violence from skinheads, without adequate protection from the authorities or the police," the report said, noting that Roma people also faced discrimination from the population over access to jobs or housing.[109]

## Hungary

Overall, the report described Hungary as a country with the characteristics of democracy with stable institutions which guarantee the rule of law, human rights and respect for, and the protection of minorities.[110] It said that the Hungarian institutions worked smoothly, and the various authorities were mindful of the limits of their powers and of the need for cooperation.

It noted that elections took place in free and fair conditions and that Hungarian democracy allowed peaceful alternation of political power. The Parliament's work was described as satisfactory, whereas its powers were respected and the opposition played a full part in its activities.[111]

The report questioned the constitutionality of some provisions of the law on the police and noted that there had been a number of cases of corruption in the Hungarian police in the past few years.[112]

The report noted that at a time, the Justice system did not operate in a satisfactory way at all levels in Hungary. Among the challenges the Hungarian judiciary faced were overloaded courts

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[107] Commission opinion on Czech Republic's Application, 15.
[108] Commission opinion on Czech Republic's Application, 15.
[109] Commission opinion on Czech Republic's Application, 16.
[110] European Commission, "Commission Opinion on Hungary's Application for Membership of the European Union. DOC/97/13," July 15, 1997, 20–21, http://aei.pitt.edu/43455/1/Hungary.pdf.
[111] Commission opinion on Hungary's Application, 14.
[112] Commission opinion on Hungary's Application, 15.

and the low qualification of judges. However, it was also mentioned that the government had launched a designated training program to address the issue.[113]

Overall, it was reported that access to justice was guaranteed in Hungary, albeit certain categories of foreigners and Roma people faced difficulty in asserting their rights before the law.

According to the report, there were no major problems regarding the observance of fundamental rights in the country and the rights of minorities were guaranteed and protected.

A number of organizations had reported cases of inhumane, degrading treatment by the police; however, no steps had been systematically taken to punish the perpetrators. The report elaborated that there had also been instances of such treatment in prisons, despite the steps taken by the Hungarian authorities.[114]

The report cited the Hungarian Government's conclusion that the national Roma population was frequently subjected to attacks and discrimination. Inequality of opportunities, unemployment, discrimination in the labor market and ten years less life expectancy compared to the rest of the population were identified among some of the most pressing problems facing the Roma community.[115]

## Slovakia

The report on Slovakia noted that the government paid insufficient respect to the powers devolved by the Constitution to institutional bodies and too frequently disregarded the rights of the opposition. It elaborated that the stability of institutions was threatened, and the government ignored the decisions of the Constitutional Court.

The report also noted that the Parliament didn't carry out its duties in conditions that comply with the normal rules for the operation of democracy. It elaborated that the rights of the opposition were not fully respected, particularly with regard to membership in Parliamentary committees. "From September 1994 to January 1997, there was no provision for the opposition

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[113] Commission opinion on Hungary's Application, 16.
[114] Commission opinion on Hungary's Application, 18.
[115] Commission opinion on Hungary's Application, 20.

to have a proportional share of the seats on the Parliamentary committees of inquiry responsible for monitoring the secret services and the armed forces' intelligence services", the report noted.[116]

Inadequate control of secret services was identified as a pending problem; particularly the lack of parliamentary oversight, as it was noted that such control was exercised only by the government.[117]

The report further noted that because of the poor definition of the rights and obligations of civil servants in the civil service code, combating corruption was made difficult.

It was further noted that the government didn't fully respect the role and responsibilities of other institutions and that it frequently adopted an attitude that went beyond the confrontations traditionally accepted in a democracy.[118]

It was also noted that the government exercised considerable influence on the public radio and television networks and that despite the substantial variety in the press, the government-inclined "Slovenska Republika" received substantial public finance.

The report said that access to the judicial system was largely guaranteed in Slovakia; however, it was marked by excessive delays, and judges would benefit from stronger guarantees of their independence.[119]

According to the assessment, the judicial system in Slovakia was impeded in a number of respects, including the appointment of judges by the parliament on a "probationary period," which restricted the independence of judges.[120]

As for human rights, the report said that a number of cases of the police inflicting inhuman and degrading treatment on persons in preventive detention had been reported.

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[116] European Commission, "Agenda 2000 - Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application for Membership of the European Union. DOC/97/20," July 15, 1997, 15, https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/slovakia_EC%20Opinion%20on%20SK%201997_en.pdf.
[117] Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application, 17.
[118] Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application, 16.
[119] Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application, 19.
[120] Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application, 18.

The report elaborated that while the minorities lived harmoniously alongside the rest of the population of Slovakia, there were nevertheless some tensions between the government and the Hungarian minority.

Roma populations were reported to be suffering from considerable discrimination in daily life, often being violently targeted by skinheads and receiving inadequate protection from the police. Their access to employment, housing and public services were reported as major issues faced by the Roma people.[121]

## 6.2. Normative Convergence of Associated Trio

**Georgia**

According to the European Commission's report on Georgia, the 2020 parliamentary elections of Georgia were competitive and overall; fundamental freedoms were respected, however, the international observers noted that the conduct of the elections was impacted by pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state throughout the campaign. The opposition questioned the results of the first round and boycotted the second round of the majoritarian elections as well as the opening session and early proceedings of the new Parliament.[122]

The report noted that the Georgian parliament adopted electoral reform, including regulation of campaigning rights of employees on the public payroll, a 25 per cent gender quota and the improvement of conflict-of-interest rules for the election commission members, however recommendations to address voter intimidation, dispute resolution and electoral commission compensation were not fulfilled.[123]

According to the report, the Georgian media landscape remained competitive, but highly polarized. The report said that overall, tackling the polarization in Georgian politics and media remained a challenge.

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[121] Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application, 22.
[122] European Commission and High Representative of the Union For Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Joint Staff Working Document. Association Implementation Report on Georgia. SWD(2021) 18 Final," February 5, 2021, 3, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021_association_implementation_report_in_georgia.pdf.
[123] Association Implementation Report on Georgia, 3.

It was reported that key journalists were gradually dismissed from the Adjara Public Broadcaster following the stand-off between the new director and journalists, who warned about attempts to change the channel's editorial policy to a government-leaning one.[124]

Stagnation in the anti-corruption measures was also flagged in the report, pointing out that "undue partisan influence over the law enforcement agencies has rendered them effectively incapable of investigating cases of possible high-level corruption."[125]

The European Commission noted that important challenges remained with regard to the independence and accountability of the judiciary.[126] Public trust in the High Council of Justice remained low, as the Parliament adopted further legislative amendments in relation to the nomination process of Supreme Court judges without awaiting the relevant Venice Commission opinion and not fully addressing the continued shortcomings in this process.[127]

Finally, the EU's annual report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World noted that Georgia's democratic consolidation was challenged by, among other things, reports of widespread wiretapping of parts of Georgian society and the diplomatic community as well as violence against journalists and the LGBTQ+ community without ensuring effective investigations. It elaborated that the mobilization of aggressive far-right forces was another issue of concern.[128]

### Moldova

The report noted that there were increasing concerns in several areas, including backsliding in the rule of law standards, and negative developments in the fight against corruption and money laundering.[129]

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[124] Association Implementation Report on Georgia, 3.
[125] Association Implementation Report on Georgia, 8.
[126] Association Implementation Report on Georgia, 7.
[127] Association Implementation Report on Georgia, 1.
[128] European External Action Service, "EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2021. Country Updates," 2022, 32, https://euneighbourseast.eu/news-and-stories/publications/eu-annual-report-on-human-rights-and-democracy-in-the-world-2021-country-updates/.
[129] European Commission and High Representative of the Union For Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Joint Staff Working Document. Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova. SWD(2021) 295 Final," October 13, 2021, 23, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/swd_2021_295_f1_joint_staff_working_paper_en_v2_p1_1535649.pdf.

The presidential and parliamentary elections were described as well-administered and competitive, in which voters had a choice between political alternatives and fundamental freedoms were respected. However, it was also noted that a negative and polarizing election campaign, lacking effective financial oversight and legal remedies was an issue.[130] The election campaign was further described as negative and divisive, involving personal attacks and polarizing, intolerant rhetoric. Allegations of undue influence on public officials and voters that continued throughout the campaign and the concerns over possible vote-buying and organized transportation of voters on election day were also noted.[131]

It was also reported that the new parliament adopted several laws in a hasty manner, disregarding parliamentary procedures, as a result of which the opposition boycotted several parliamentary sittings, which were described by civil society groups as degradation in governance and of institutional sabotage.[132]

Even though Moldova's ranking in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index had improved, it still remained low due to lack of editorial independence and control of media institutions by economic and political groups, barriers to access to information, as well as attacks on and intimidation of journalists, among other reasons. [133]

It was noted that the justice sector overall stagnated, however, there was still some progress with the adoption of the new Strategy for Ensuring the Independence and Integrity of the Justice Sector. "After six years of proceedings in the investigation of the 2014 bank fraud, none of the major culprits are currently behind bars and the assets lost in the fraud have not been recovered", the report said.

The report also noted that the selection procedure of the members of the Superior Council of Magistracy was not in line with European standards and that issues of disciplinary proceedings and the evaluation and promotion of judges and prosecutors were still problematic.[134]

[130] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 1.
[131] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 3.
[132] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 4.
[133] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 5.
[134] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 9.

In terms of human rights, no positive change was observed, whereas problems such as limited access to healthcare, access to information of public interest, the right to work and decent life, freedom of movement and freedom of expression remained.[135]

The parliament had failed to adopt legislation to increase the capacities of the National Council for Preventing and Eliminating Discrimination and Ensuring Equality and an increase in the number of complaints on non-observance of human rights, most of which related to gender discrimination, it was reported. European Court of Human rights found Moldova in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights in 32 cases.

Hate speech, including at the highest political level and by religious leaders, remained an issue of concern, mainly targeting women and LGBTQ+ people. However, the government adopted an action plan promoting a culture of tolerance.[136] Women facing gender inequality in the labor market and age-based discrimination were reported as pending issues.

Finally, the report said that Moldova remained a source for trafficking in human beings for sexual and labor exploitation.[137] Infant mortality, child labor, trafficking and sexual exploitation, particularly of Roman children, were reported as issues of serious concern.[138]

## Ukraine

In the European Commission's 2020 report on Ukraine, the nationwide local elections were described as competitive, although with various irregularities and legal shortcomings. Even though the new Electoral Code was adopted, enfranchising Internally Displaced Persons due to which they were able to vote in the elections, they continued to face difficulties in terms of exercising a number of civil rights, including access to employment and healthcare services. [139]

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[135] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 6.
[136] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 7.
[137] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 12.
[138] Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova, 7.
[139] European Commission and High Representative of the Union For Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Joint Staff Working Document. Association Implementation Report on Ukraine. SWD(2020) 329 Final," October 27, 2020, 6, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-staff-working-document-association-implementation-report-ukraine_en.

The 2020 report noted that Ukraine introduced a High Anti-Corruption Court; however, despite improved cooperation between designated anti-corruption institutions, the rate of conviction from cooperation investigations remained low.[140]

It was also noted that the freedom of media remained broadly respected in Ukraine; however physical attacks and acts of intimidation of journalists continued to occur. The report also said that oligarch-owned outlets dominated the media landscape, while the Public Broadcasting Service remained underfinanced, which hampered its functioning.[141]

The report said that the procedure of appointment of judges was carried out in a transparent manner; however, the anticipated law on the judiciary was put on hold due to a negative opinion of the Venice Commission and that new legislation addressing these reservations had been submitted in the parliament.[142]

The report said that Roma minorities continued to remain particularly vulnerable due to a lack of access to identification documents, adequate education, or poverty reduction actions.[143] It was further reported that Ukraine had not adopted a Law on National Minorities, whilst some minority groups continued to voice concerns regarding the diminishing space for their linguistic identity in the absence of dedicated law that regulates these rights.[144]

According to the EU's 2021 Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World, human rights were generally respected and fundamental freedoms overall upheld in Ukraine.[145] It noted that in 2021 Ukraine adopted Roma Strategy, which was recognized as a welcoming development, although it was emphasized that "law enforcement agencies continue classifying hate crimes as hooliganism rather than labeling them as crimes with xenophobic undertones, affecting, inter alia, the Roma and the sexual minorities."[146]

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[140] Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, 1-2.
[141] Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, 6.
[142] Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, 2.
[143] Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, 6.
[144] Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, 7.
[145] European External Action Service, "EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2021. Country Updates," 35.
[146] EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2021, 36.

Finally, it was noted that Pride Parade took place in different cities, but while no clashes were reported in Kyiv, far-right extremists had attacked law enforcement officers protecting parades on Odesa. It elaborated that despite the proactive cooperation of the authorities, smaller assemblies of the LGBTQ+ community and women human rights defenders were frequently targeted. In February, Ukraine also lifted a ban on blood donation of the LGBTQ+ people.

## 6.3. Summary

The European Commission delivered mostly positive assessments of Europeanization for Visegrad Group countries, with the exception of Slovakia. The reports delivered an overall positive assessment in terms of Democracy, the Rule of Law and Human rights in three countries.

Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary were described as democracies, with stable institutions, guaranteeing the rule of law and protection of human rights. Elections in these countries were assessed as free and fair and the performance of institutions as satisfactory.

**Table 1. Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights in Visegrad Four (1997) and Associated Trio countries (2020-2021)**

|  | **Democracy** | **Rule of Law** | **Human Rights** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Poland* | - Democracy with stable institutions, guaranteeing the rule of law and human rights;<br><br>- Elections - free and fair;<br><br>- Parliament's functioning – satisfactory, whereas opposition plays its role;<br><br>- Corruption – a matter of concern;<br><br>- Freedom of expression is guaranteed, but the state influences TV channels;<br><br>- Outstanding problem - law on slander affecting journalists;<br><br>- Court judgment can oblige journalists to reveal sources; | - Overall, courts are independent, however, need to be sustained;<br><br>- It takes a long time to proceed cases. | - Fundamental human rights overall respected;<br><br>- No specific difficulties were reported for minorities;<br><br>- The Roma population faces discrimination and the government failed to take necessary measures. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Hungary** | - Wiretapping without a warrant. | | |
| | - Democracy with stable institutions;<br><br>- Elections are free and fair;<br><br>- Work of parliament - satisfactory, whereas opposition plays its role;<br><br>- Cases of corruption were reported in the police. | - The Justice System is not satisfactory on all levels;<br><br>- Overloaded courts, low qualification of judges;<br><br>- Access to justice was guaranteed, but the Roma population faced difficulties. | - No major violation of human rights;<br><br>- Rights of minorities guaranteed;<br><br>- Inhuman treatment by police was reported and no adequate steps were taken in response;<br><br>- Roma people are frequently attacked. |
| **Czech Republic** | - Democracy with stable institutions, guaranteeing the rule of law and human rights;<br><br>- Institutions work properly, cooperating with each other;<br><br>- Work of Parliament - satisfactory, whereas opposition plays its role;<br><br>- Elections - free and fair;<br><br>- Secret services respect Democracy;<br><br>- Low salaries make it hard to fight corruption;<br><br>- Imprisonment of journalists for defamation reported;<br><br>- Limited access to administrative documents. | - The situation of courts remained to be the main challenge for accessing the EU;<br><br>- Overloaded courts resulted in  prolonged delivery of judgments;<br><br>- Low qualification of judges was reported, however, access to courts were guaranteed. | - No major problem were reported in terms of protection of human rights;<br><br>- The Roma people were discriminated and no adequate protection was offered to them. |
| **Slovakia** | - The government didn't respect the powers of other institutions and disregarded the rights of the opposition;<br><br>- Stability of institutions threatened;<br><br>- Government ignores constitutional court decisions;<br><br>- Parliament's performance was not suitable for Democracy;<br><br>- Inadequate control of secret services;<br><br>- Difficulty in combating corruption;<br><br>- The government's influence on media was reported. | - Access to the judicial system overall guaranteed;<br><br>- Need for more guarantees for judges' independence. | - Inhuman treatment in prisons;<br><br>- Tensions between the government and Hungarian minorities were;<br><br>- Discrimination against Roma population. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Ukraine** | - Elections were competitive but with irregularities;<br><br>- Need for more anti-corruption efforts reported;<br><br>- Broadly, freedom of media is respected;<br><br>- Attacks on journalists remained. | - The appointment of judges was transparent, but the law on the judiciary was put on hold due to negative assessment. | - Human rights are generally respected;<br><br>- Pride parade took place, but LGBTQ+ people and human rights defenders are frequently attacked;<br><br>- The Roma population remained particularly vulnerable. |
| **Moldova** | - Backsliding in the rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering;<br><br>- Elections were well administered, but within polarized election campaign;<br><br>- Influence on voters and vote-buying reported;<br><br>- The opposition boycotted parliamentary sittings;<br><br>- Lack of editorial independence of media reported. | - Justice overall stagnated;<br><br>- The appointment of judges was reported as problematic. | - No positive development in terms of human rights;<br><br>- Hate speech targeting women and LGBTQ+ people was reported;<br><br>- Source for human trafficking, particularly of Roma children. |
| **Georgia** | - Elections overall competitive, however allegation of pressure on voters, blurred lines between party and state;<br><br>- The opposition boycotted the election's second round;<br><br>- Voter intimidation recommendation not addressed despite the adoption of electoral reform;<br><br>- Media reported to be competitive, but highly polarized;<br><br>- Politics is also reported to be highly polarized;<br><br>- Stagnation in anti-corruption measures was reported. | - Important challenges with regard to the independence of the judiciary were reported. | - Reports of widespread wiretapping;<br><br>- Violence against journalists and LGBTQ+ people was reported. |

However, challenges remained in terms of overloaded courts, which resulted in prolonged times of delivery of judgments. This was also linked with low salaries and competencies of judges.

Even though no major violations were found in terms of protection of human rights, Roma minorities were reported to face discrimination in all three countries, whereas authorities failed to take measures for their protection.

While freedom of expression was reported to be mostly guaranteed, laws still allowed the prosecution of journalists on charges of slander.

Slovakia, however, received a mostly negative assessment in all three criteria. It was reported that state institutions didn't operate in a suitable manner for democracy, judges lacked independence and inhuman treatment by police was evident. The government's inability to protect the Roma minority was prevalent in Slovakia as well, similar to its other Visegrad Group counterparts.

In contrast, in Associated Trio countries, the European Commission's assessments, in general, were less positive. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine received more or less similar feedback; however Moldova stood out for receiving mostly criticism in all three markers. It was reported that Moldova had stagnated in terms of Democracy, protection of Human rights and Judiciary.

The European Commission emphasized that the political environment was polarized in Georgia and Moldova and despite well-administered elections, the allegations of vote-buying and influence on voters persisted. The opposition boycotting parliaments was reported in both countries.

The need for intensified efforts in combating corruption was reported in all three countries.

In terms of the judiciary, while the appointment of judges was problematic in Georgia and Moldova, it was reported to be carried out transparently in Ukraine. However, in the latter, the reform of the judiciary wasn't satisfactory.

Finally, in terms of human rights, attacks on LGBTQ+ people were reported in all three countries. Notably, the Pride parade took place in Ukraine, mostly in a peaceful environment.

These assessments by the European Commission indicate that Visegrad Four and Associated Trio countries faced similar problems within their groups. This can be seen as an opportunity for addressing these issues with mutual efforts.

Overall, however, the assessments showed that the Visegrad Group had more positive convergence compared to Associated Trio, even though Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had a shorter time to transform themselves from the Soviet dictatorship into a parliamentary democracy.

## 7. Conclusion

In order to compare the processes of Europeanization in the Visegrad Four and Associated Trio, I have examined developments in the involved seven countries in light of three elements of the third wave of Europeanization, namely identity, values and normative convergence.

To answer my first research question, - how does the Europeanization progress in the Associated Trio compare to that in pre-accession Visegrad Four, - I have to first note that Europeanization has not been a linear process and differences were evident in the levels of Europeanization in each country. This being said, this research has identified trends that allow generalization.

First of all, Sociological Institutionalism has helped to explain why Central and Eastern European countries strived for integration into the "European family." All seven countries have framed their determination to integrate into the Western European institutions as a "return to Europe," emphasizing that they uphold European identity. Mostly similar discursive patterns have been observed in both Visegrad Group and Associated Trio countries in terms of articulating their European aspirations. For the most part, their choice was underpinned by rejecting competing values associated with the "East." This was more salient in the case of the Visegrad Group, as for them the "East" represented not only Russia, but the whole post-Soviet world. The negative connotation of "Eastern Europe" from which Central European countries distanced themselves, is still relevant, however Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have no means to rebrand it; therefore, Eastern Europeanness as a sub-regional identity never crystalized amongst them. Both groups of countries use rhetorical action to convince the EU that they are deserving members of the European community. However, even though the claims of having European identity is a shared attribute of Visegrad Four and Associated Trio, normative convergence between them is uneven, meaning that Associated Trio needs to progress faster in this regard in order to make a stronger case with rhetorical action.

The Visegrad Group countries had relatively higher rates of convergence and the state of Democracy, Human rights and the Rule of Law, the key components of Europeanization, were more positively assessed by the European Commission in the 1990s compared to Associated Trio's current performance. The relatively poor performance of Slovakia explains why it didn't succeed in the first round of negotiations with the EU.

Albeit some differences, overall, Associated Trio countries face similar difficulties in upholding democratic principles, human rights and rule of law. From the standpoint of Sociological Institutionalism, these difficulties in Europeanization can be attributed to the lack of collaborative culture in these countries. In light of this, political polarization and dysfunctional institutions which were evident in the Associated Trio group, can be considered to be the main stumbling blocks for Europeanization.

So far, it can be concluded that because of the poor normative convergence (in comparison to the Visegrad Group), the Associated Trio's approach to the EU doesn't make a strong case for rhetorical action. Speaking from the viewpoint of Sociological Institutionalism, while, the logic of appropriateness explains their aspirations, it still can't fully comprehend the lack of progress in terms of normative convergence.

Secondly, this thesis has reviewed the European values of the involved countries and revealed that the eastward one moves, the more internalization of EU values decreases. In fact, the studies demonstrated that Visegrad Group countries had higher acceptance of EU values in the 1990s than Associated Trio countries currently have. Besides lower normative convergence, poor internalization of EU values in the Associated Trio can be considered to be the second stumbling block on their path to EU membership.

As this thesis has demonstrated, the Associated Trio countries have a gap between the aspirations of EU membership and the internalization of EU values. This gap can be attributed to the perception of the EU as primarily an economic project which can resolve the economic hardships of the three countries. Still, this doesn't rule out the possibility that citizens of these countries perceive the EU as a community of values. The fact that these citizens affiliate the EU mostly with economic prosperity can be explained by their most pressing economic needs.

All in all, the comparison of adherence to EU values in the Associated Trio and Visegrad Group countries explains why the latter managed faster integration into the EU. This is because internalization of values and, in general, cultural proximity to Europe is a strong indicator of convergence - the key to successful rhetorical action.

As for my second research question, - what kind of institutional formation is Associated Trio and how does it compare to Visegrad Group in this regard, this thesis found that Visegrad Four had a stronger institutional setup, albeit both groups represent weak, or flexible institutional entities.

The weaker institutionalization of the Associated Trio is, first and foremost, determined by the fact that it's not backed by the shared identity and its formation was not such a natural phenomenon as it was in the case of the Visegrad Group. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova share common aspirations; however, beyond that, their relationship is limited as they are poorly interconnected, be it politically, economically or culturally. The poor institutionalization of Associated Trio can partially be attributed to the fact that in the 1990s the Visegrad Four countries didn't see external forces that would foster their transition, whilst in the case of Associated Trio, they have a long-established relationship with the EU. The key difference is that whilst Visegrad Four countries saw the solution in uniting their efforts, for Associated Trio countries, the solution lies within the EU, not within the unification of their efforts.

This being said, it should also be noted that the Visegrad Group didn't achieve a high degree of cooperation at the very beginning and it took time for the four countries to reach the kind of unity they demonstrated later on. Given that the Associated Trio is still in its infancy, it has yet to demonstrate what it can grow into.

Finally, the ongoing war in Ukraine has further destabilized relationships between the three countries, even though it could be used as an opportunity to speak in one voice. Despite all three countries applied for EU membership almost simultaneously, they haven't so far displayed signs of close cooperation. As Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova await the European Commission's assessments on their membership bids, the feedback they receive can create opportunities for the three countries to demonstrate unity, regardless of whether that feedback is a positive or negative one. In the meantime, the flexible institutionalization of the Associated Trio allows it

to continue to exist. Even if the three countries don't make the most of it at the moment, the experience of Visegrad Four has demonstrated that, at the right moment, members of such communities are able to unite their efforts to achieve their shared goals.

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