

Regional Convention on the European Integration of the Western Balkans

VISEGRAD GROUP AND THE WESTERN BALKANS COUNTRIES

June 2018



European Movement
Montenegro



**VISEGRAD GROUP AND
THE WESTERN BALKANS
COUNTRIES**

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INTRODUCTION

European integration process is one of the most important priorities for all Western Balkans countries, despite of their differences. Although using different paths, all 6 WB countries strive towards the same goal. Extremely valuable tool in the process is partnership with EU member states and ensuring their support.

This partnership and cooperation is even more important when it comes to relations with neighboring countries, especially those that were experiencing similar problems of social transformation and transition, as the countries of Visegrad group did.

Such need for establishing closer relations between neighbors and similar entities was the corner stone for building up gradually some great results in cooperation over the past two decades. This period, when cooperation with countries of Visegrad group intensified had delivered numerous business opportunities and social and economic funds for social, political and economic assistance both from the individual level of Visegrad countries and from the level of their joint, regional initiatives.

Concrete experience of many CSOs from the region, including the European Movement in Montenegro and its partners in regional initiative called “Regional Convention on European Integration of Western Balkans”, proves that V4 financial and expert support has immense effects on both public and civil sector in the region.

However, even though we had many reasons for praising of the Visegrad 4 influence and work, many of the stakeholders were posing questions about possible improvement and strengthening of the influence of Visegrad group countries in our region. These questions and the need of improvement of old and definition of some new models of cooperation has strengthened our intentions to research and analyze V4 presence in the Western Balkans.

Our research at following pages comprises of the analysis of what has been done up to this point in time, in terms of already existing connections, programs, projects and different individual and group activities. It encompasses all aspects of these connections between two regions: cultural, economic, social, political etc. At the basis of such analysis, we have tried to deliver recommendations on how to improve V4 presence in general and, in particular, on how to improve cooperation of both public and civil sector of the WB and the V4 group.

In general, this research encompasses the inputs from all four Visegrad group countries, showing a rich set of arguments that the partnership and support from V4 to WB6 is indeed the strongest partnership which emerged in the last decade when it comes to EU integration process of the Western Balkans countries.

At the end, we would like to underline that we are looking forward strengthening of this cooperation and improvement of all aspects of empowering of social, political and economic ties between the countries of Visegrad group and the countries of the Western Balkans and we hope that this analysis is our modest contribution to this goal.

Momčilo Radulović

President

European Movement in Montenegro

CZECH REPUBLIC AND THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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From the perspective of post-communist country, region of Western Balkan (further as WB) was and still is the high priority for the Czech foreign policy. Considering the long term emphasis of foreign policy on democratic transition of former communist countries and given cultural and geographical closeness, WB region is a natural interest of Czech foreign policy on both bilateral and European level. Nevertheless, after the Czech Republic joined the EU, there was constant decline of mainly political interest.

This fact has two explanation: firstly, it is generation change of those who brought the Czech Republic to the EU and understood that the EU integration process is primarily transformative tool. Secondly, the WB was dismissed from the political agenda on the EU level after the EU enlargement in the 2004 and 2006. Due to the fact past decade since 2006 was a time of severe political turbulences within the EU, the contribution of the Czech Republic to the EU enlargement aims was rather limited.¹

As was mentioned above, rhetorically remains Western Balkan priority of the Czech foreign policy but constant decline of political support constantly declines. After the 2017 general election, only two political parties explicitly mentioned EU enlargement towards WB as a key element of the Czech foreign policy. Nevertheless, both KDU-ČSL (Christian Democratic Party) and TOP 09 barely entered the parliament gaining less than 6 % of electoral support. In the current composition of Lower Chamber of the parliament, there is not any member of parliament having EU enlargement or WB region as such as among his/her priorities.

To underline this realistic picture, the political leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,² any strong sign for political cooperation has abstain too. Looking at the political priorities of the Czech government composed of ANO Movement and ČSSD (social democrats) with tolerance of KSČM (communist party), there is missing any specific emphasis towards WB as well.³

This development is particularly dangerous in context of rising complexity of international politics in territory of WB. Rising interest of China, Gulf countries as well as unclear aims of Russia in the region trying to replace or to be complementary to already existing presence of the EU countries and the US. Said that, this requires solid knowledge of the current political development as well, and political and economic interest towards the WB region.

It also means that there is only limited analytical ability to distinguish relevant and rather rhetorical involvement of above mentioned countries. However recently published analysis of Bulgarian think tank Centre for the Study of Democracy shows in multiple cases significant involvement of Russia and Russian financial capital in economic structures of individual Balkan countries.⁴ This is the case mainly of petroleum industry⁵ and in some areas also railway system and few single projects such as coal power plants.⁶

At the same time, there are several indicators that real and economic presence of Russia in WB does not correspond the very vocal fears of de facto Russian presence in the region.⁷ This underline the fact it is hard to determine any comprehensive strategy of Russia towards WB region. However, the rhetorical interest aims to create imagination that such a policy exists and is very effectively executed. In this context,

1 Different perspective can be found here: <http://www.iir.cz/article/ceska-republika-s-szbp-sbop-od-pasivni-absorpce-k-aktivni-transformaci-ceske-zahranicni-politiky>

2 See more details here: <http://www.iir.cz/article/ceska-republika-s-szbp-sbop-od-pasivni-absorpce-k-aktivni-transformaci-ceske-zahranicni-politiky>https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/analyzy_a_koncepce/koncepce_zahranicni_politiky_cr.html

3 Details can be found here: <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/jednani-vlady/programove-prohlaseni-vlady-162319/>

4 For more details see: <http://www.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=18228>

5 Such as involvement of Gazprom company in NIS company more detailshere: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-24/gazprom-neft-s-nis-sees-difficult-2016-as-cheap-oil-hurts-profit>and more detailshere: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russia-investments-face-losses-in-bosnia-04-16-2018>

6 Examples of presence of Russia in Balkans here: NIS and Gazprom cooperation <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/1686151/nis-and-basf-sign-agreement-on-cooperation-aiming-to-improve-oil-lubricant> power plant Ugljevik in Bosnia <https://seenews.com/news/comsar-energy-past-deadline-to-find-contractor-to-build-ugljevik-3-tpp-in-bosnia-report-572856> or involvement of Russian railways in construction of railway between Novi Sad and Stara Pazova here <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/1940879/new-annex-to-russian-loan-for-stara-pazova-novi-sad-railway-worth>

7 See solid analysis of Russian presence in the region here: <http://carnegie.ru/2017/12/12/ru-pub-74975>

it is important to add that there is significant lack of interest and knowledge of significant economic stakeholder in the WB region – China. Given fact that China continuously develops its activities and in to some extent also soft power in Central and East European region is the interest towards China very limited. Since China is engaged in Central European countries in both high level political projects and through private joint ventures of private capital, there should be also interest to analyse what China's involvement means for WB. At this point, one very important element should be underlined: China is synonym for real money that local political elites will benefit from.⁸

This is something that limits Visegrad involvement significantly and therefore seeks different framework of rather political cooperation. Nevertheless, this cooperation will never become crucial for WB countries in order to be motivating for economic and political reforms.⁹

Hand in hand with migrant crisis the need for finding new modus operandi with WB countries became needed. Starting from day to day business like protection of the borders or boosting political cooperation such as very frequent presence of Czech political representatives in Macedonia starting from 2015.¹⁰ Starting from 2014 the scope of security affairs cooperation has significantly increased – not just as a matter of bilateral cooperation but also regional joint approach of V4 towards Western Balkans.¹¹

Beyond police cooperation there has been strategy adopted in the 2013 summarizing Czech foreign policy towards Western Balkan. Its main scope of interest focus on correlation of the Czech foreign policy with goals of the EU enlargement policy tackling such as increasing rule of law, economic cooperation, activities of civil society as well as assistance provided through Czech Development Agency (as an institution of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic).¹² The overall political strategy of the Czech Republic towards Western Balkan became part of political and economic initiative of Germany launched in the 2014 under title Berlin Process. The Czech Republic hand in hand with other V4 countries has accommodated the foreign policy strategy its policy within framework of Berlin Process supporting political and economic assistance to Western Balkan countries.¹³

When it comes to economic cooperation between WB and Czech Republic as a spillover of integration of mutual cooperation, one should be aware of followings: despite proclaimed political support based on shared cultural similarities, there exist only very limited economic exchange for example only 1 % of the Czech export heads to Serbia.¹⁴ Just for illustration, the Czech Export Bank (EGAP) evaluate potential investments of private sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina and no eligible for insurance.¹⁵ In addition to this, no significant investment of the Czech companies has been executed in past years.

The Czech energy concern ČEZ has recently withdrew its investments in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina and no Czech billionaire finished any investment in the region in past 5 years.¹⁶ The only new investment and takeover of Telenor assets in the region as a part on insurance business of the PPF Group.¹⁷ Despite the fact the Czech Development Agency (CDA) operates via projects conducted by private companies in Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the overall economic results are under relevant threshold.

8 More details here: <http://www.europeum.org/articles/detail/1677/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans>

9 For better context see <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/china-s-balkan-gifts-come-with-strings-attached-03-19-2018> or here http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm

10 See for example <https://domaci.ihned.cz/c1-65216850-cesko-posle-sto-milionu-na-pomoc-zemim-postizenych-migraci-prvnich-20-milionu-ziska-recko-a-makedonie>

11 Details here: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/10/11/visegrad-group-supports-eu-membership-bid-western-balkans/>

12 More details here: https://www.mzv.cz/representation_brussels/en/news_and_media/czech_aid_for_western_balkan_countries.html

13 See more details here: https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/cr_v_evrope/zapadni_balkan/index.html

14 See more details here: <http://www.businessinfo.cz/cs/zahranicni-obchod-eu/teritorialni-informace-zeme/srbsko.html>

15 See details here: <https://www.egap.cz/cs/zeme/ba>

16 See more detailshere: <https://www.motejlekskocodpole.com/definitivni-rozlucka-cez-v-bosne-a-hercegovine-s-prodlouzenou-arbitrazi-o-padesat-milionu-eur/>

17 See details here: <http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/ppf-koupila-aktiva-telenoru-ve-ctyrech-zemich-za-71-miliard-kc/1600294>

Projects conducted by CDA targets projects like waste management in Serbia and Kosovo. As a follow up of these project, companies often continue their works on projects conducted by local municipalities. These projects are rather low profile with very limited possibility for significant extension and rely on cooperation with public administration. From this perspective, WB region has very little relevancy for the Czech private sector as well as for mutual trade as such. Since there is no specific element of foreign policy strategy towards WB in terms of support of economic exchange, the trade relations remains low.

Cooperation on border protection between Western Balkans and V4

Since 2015 there is increased bilateral cooperation between the Czech Republic and Serbia/Macedonia. It is the case of cooperation between Police of the Czech Republic and Serbian and Macedonia police authorities as a results of joint cooperation endeavour of V4 countries and Austria. In case of Serbia and Macedonia it is matter of bilateral agreement of ministries of interior and comprehensive assistance of V4 countries to Macedonia and Serbia.

These bilateral agreements result in regular presence of approximately 20 police officers in Serbia (Negotin) and 40 police officers in Gevgelia (Macedonia). In addition to this, there is a regular participation of Czech police officers within Frontex assisting with guarding of external border the EU.¹⁸ With a closer perspective on the police cooperation, one should raise a question what kind of impact do both cooperation frameworks have.

In this context, the most important issue relates to know how transfer provided to Serbian/Macedonian police. First of all, it is matter of equipment provided by Czech police officers. Secondly, it is experience with border control and strategy of tackling organized crime in on site locations. Thirdly, it is international context raised by presence of police officers in both regions.

However, broader impact of such a cooperation would exist if there was joint approach within FRONTEX framework. One can argue that there is only limited legal space for joint approach outside Schengen/EU area. Nevertheless, the activity of organized crime networks go beyond external border of the Schengen/EU area and therefore there should be political will to enlarge police cooperation beyond “strict” border of the EU.

Given the fact that there is significant number of police officers participating on missions to Serbia and Macedonia, but broader strategy how to cope with this experience is in to significant extend missing.¹⁹

The cooperation focused on police assistance and remained in the security area also with limited engagement of civil society. Despite the fact that migrant crisis provided excellent opportunity for increasing political matter of cooperation, there is only limited progress when it comes the EU integration process.²⁰ This shows broader implications for EU enlargement process as well as assistance of V4 countries to Western Balkans. Firstly, there has developed lack of political narrative when it comes to EU integration.

The EU related issues have been replaced by system of bilateral cooperation with dominance of security needs instead fulfilling political narrative of mutual cooperation resulting in political progress of EU enlargement. Secondly, there is lack of political interest of the Czech Republic towards Western Balkans. It means that currently there is no significant “track of record” when it comes to cooperation of representatives of political parties. Thirdly, there is only limited civilian control when it comes to police cooperation and its implications for domestic politics in both V4 and WB.

18 See more details here: <http://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/ministri-vnitra-ceske-republiky-a-srbska-podepsali-smlouvu-o-police-jni-spolupraci.aspx>

19 For details ee <https://data.europa.eu/euodp/data/dataset/ra-2018>

20 Se efor example: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/02/06/how-to-manage-the-migrant-crisis>

There is almost no discussion about impact of this cooperation on political cooperation V4 and Western Balkan countries. Considering fact that migration crisis has played crucial role in reshaping of political competition in European democracies, this lack of interest is very surprising. This also shows that especially V4 states lack mid and long term strategy of political cooperation that would incorporate both migrant crisis and the EU integration process.

This point can be perceived from two different perspectives: firstly, there is only limited interest of V4 countries to fully use the experience of police cooperation towards strengthening capacities in case of fighting organized crime; secondly, there is no political strategy how use this experience in political cooperation within integration process. In this context, there should be also raised question about civilian control when it comes role of V4 countries. Since role of civil society is understood as a key element of European integration process, there should be stronger pressure also from side of V4 to raise these questions.

Since migrant crisis raised many ground touching questions regarding its impact on individual societies of Western Balkans²¹ V4 countries should not omit this issue just because Serbia and Macedonia help to stop the flows of migrants. This short sightedness of V4 countries could be also perceived as a sort of corruption provided by Western Balkan countries and could significantly harm EU integration process as an exchange of democracy for stability.

The experience of migration crisis on the edge of Schengen and EU territory showed two divergent perspective of development. From the EU and its member states, it is rising quest to protecting the EU external border. It requests trust in both national and EU (Frontex) authorities that are supposed to be guardians of national and European security. On the other hand rising sentiments against migrants are coming from different cultural background. Looking at the current and requested role of Frontex agency, both diverging perspective fit very hard to develop hand in hand. It means rising tensions between legality of measures introduced on external border in order to protect the EU territory effectively.²² There is enormous misfit of requested norms and standards by the EU and international law which mirrors the strong anti-migrant sentiments within CEE member states.²³

Framework of Visegrad cooperation

What does V4 and the Czech Republic specifically do about support of WB region? The V4 countries can serve as a good example for WB when perceiving region cooperation as key element for integration process - use of regional cooperation. Looking back what has been achieved shared political and economic commitment in the past 25 years has been basic for institutional and economic stability of the V4 region.

In order to use this example, one can define shared similarities serving as model for WB as follows:

I) further develop political commitment of integration of WB into the EU: this is the case of intensified political commitment of V4 countries within the EU to seek for partners and strengthen the idea of enlargement further. In the context of proclaimed 2025 year as possible enlargement of Serbia and Montenegro, it is necessary to keep the political commitment as credible as possible. It means that integration process will be fulfilled by concrete actions and political engagement from perspective of V4 and the Czech Republic.

II) identify policy areas for boosting regional cooperation based on cultural and social similarities: as migrant crisis showed, there are multiple areas in which both regions can benefit from mutual

21 See for example <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/world-s-displaced-squeeze-through-balkan-route> or here <http://europeum.org/articles/detail/1388/what-price-do-serbia-and-macedonia-have-to-pay-to-save-the-eu> and here <http://europeum.org/articles/detail/1203/the-western-balkans-on-their-way-to-the-eu-status-quo-regardless-of-refugees>

22 See detail analysis here: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780754673590>

23 See more details here: <http://kki.hu/en/projects/civpol/civpol-analytic-papers/16>

cooperation. Nevertheless, there is a preference of still ongoing process of “fixing” problems instead effective joint actions such as tackling organized crime and smuggling.

III) provide external assistance both from the EU as from the CEE region as well: the focus on low politics to boost broad social and economic progress. On account of this situation, in the region it is fairly difficult to encourage private sector’s new economic activity, which concludes into high rate of unemployment (between 25 to 30 % depending on methodology), high percentage of state employees, many families financially dependent on migrant diaspora. Development of information technologies in the Czech Republic and their global market entry has shown how vital is to set a detailed cooperation plan among the public and local administration, companies and academia. Experience of setting up a cooperation framework of companies, universities, public administration and political representation can be considered as very valuable know-how, which can also be broadly applicable after adjusting to local conditions of WB.

Despite the fact that the success of the integration process rely on political reforms followed by social transformation, the integration process should be taken a key modus operandi of domestic politics of each WB country. This is by definition the task for national stakeholders, into what extend they share the commitment of the European integration.

The role of V4 countries should be to enable and effectively execute exchange of good practices. Doing so, the local level of decision makers should be targeted. In particular, the need of coordinated integration support on micro and macro level as to be emphasized. Having in mind low efficiency of public administration on national level, the cross border as well as regional level of exchange has to be boosted by different tools instead policy ones – such as supporting economic exchange within regional frameworks, or increasing transport connectives.

Nevertheless frequently used model of V4 being example, one should pay attention to recent development that makes V4 less supportive framework for cooperation:

Firstly, there is very limited rational basis for boosting cooperation when it comes to economic dimension – WB countries and locked into well-established system of national oligarchy controlling majority of economic turnout. Naturally expected spill over effect of boosted economic cooperation into political cooperation simply does not work.

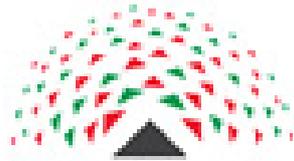
Secondly, political basis of cooperation of V4 towards WB is very divergent and driven by short term goals. As migrant crisis showed, political leaders of V4 countries prefer to support local autocratic leaders instead promote democratic stability in the region.

Thirdly, there is increasingly divergent political and security trajectory as a result of security cooperation. As praxis of cooperation under framework of Frontex shows, there is extremely little political motivation to tackle serious problems effectively. This is the case of illegal crossing external EU border in situation when EU member states and EU institutions tolerates violation of international and EU regulations in favour of stability.

Fourthly, there is very little knowledge and awareness about increasing role of China in the region and its impact for EU integration process.

Fifthly, the position of the Czech Republic and seriously diverging from Hungary’s policy towards WB and de facto crashes the V4 policy. Considering fact that there exists only limited political space for booting cooperation, the V4 framework will become less and less useful as a guardian for EU integration process.

Sixthly, V4 cannot compare its economic attractiveness with China which means limited transformation strength. This means that mutual relation will be based mainly on political cooperation which oscillates between short political goals and latent support of EU integration with vague commitments on both sides.



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HUNGARY AND THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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Introduction

The relation of Hungary and the Western Balkans shall be observed through very sophisticated lenses as it is impacted by various contexts and factors. As a neighbouring country to the region Hungary shares historical ties with the region where also big Hungarian minority communities live and which region's security situation directly impacts the one of Hungary. The wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s highlighted this clearly.

For this reason the Hungarian foreign policy-makers has always handled the Western Balkan region as a priority area. Beyond security concerns, increasing economic interests influence Budapest's approach to the region. The primary framework for the Hungarian relations with the Western Balkans is the Euro-Atlantic integration process that is considered to be the most important guarantee of peace, security and stability of the region. Consequently, Hungary strongly supports the region's Euro-Atlantic integration process both within NATO and the EU as well as through other bilateral and international cooperation frameworks like the Visegrad Group. The Hungarian Government also developed a complex institutional framework and set of tools that aim to strengthen diplomatic/political, economic and social ties with the region.

During the last few years, bilateral relations became even more intensive as the government decided to strengthen the Hungarian political, economic and cultural presence in the Western Balkans. Accompanied by strengthened institutional capacities, the Hungarian relations became more articulated and resulted in higher level of Hungarian investments, especially in Serbia with which the historical reconciliation process reached a breakthrough and confidence between governments significantly increased. In case of other Western Balkan countries the Hungarian presence also strengthened but more tangible results are only expected to come.

The following report will elaborate in more details on the above mentioned aspects of the Hungarian foreign policy toward the region, including the development of institutional and legal framework, as well as the main achievements and contexts that are influencing the evaluation of the relations of Hungary and the Western Balkans. Furthermore, shortly we will highlight what other actors contribute to the EU integration process of the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans in the Hungarian foreign policy framework

After the change of regime, the Hungarian foreign policy formed the following three strategic priorities:

1. the Euro-Atlantic integration process (accession NATO and the EC/EU)
2. strengthening good neighbourly relations; and
3. the support of the Hungarian minorities living out of the territory of Hungary.

The fall of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - which was accompanied by several wars and conflicts and which resulted in the foundation of seven new states - put the Hungarian diplomacy in a very sensitive and challenging situation. On the one hand, the newly formed democratic Hungarian Government foremost wanted to sustain peace and stability and also to protect the Hungarian minorities mainly living in Serbia and Croatia but also tried build friendly relations with the new leaderships that were in serious conflicts with each other. Meanwhile Budapest also tried to form a diplomatic position under very turbulent circumstances that was also in line with its efforts to build alliance with the NATO and the European Community/European Union. (For example, Hungary's NATO membership was immediately tested in 1999 by the NATO intervention into the Kosovo conflict which was also harmful for the Hungarian community living in Vojvodina.) As a consequence of the wars and conflicts in the region,

Hungary became a host of thousands of refugees and also suffered from the conflicts' negative impact on its economy and tourism.

This experience underscores the Hungarian approach towards the region that puts high emphasis on security and stability and pursues strong and friendly relations with all states of the Western Balkans, although the biggest attention is paid to Serbia and Croatia with whom interconnections are the strongest.

Hungary has recognised all the Western Balkan countries, including Kosovo and opened diplomatic mission in each capital. The department for the Western Balkans within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade belongs to the most stable institutional unit of the ministry where significant expertise has been collected that also facilitate the proper and complex understanding of the multiple processes that influence the situation in the Western Balkans.

The legal framework regulating the relations of the Western Balkan countries and Hungary mainly relies on EU and bilateral legal documents. The Stabilization and Association Agreements and the Interim Agreements on trade and trade-related issues signed by the respective Western Balkan country and the European Communities and its member states were ratified by the Hungarian Parliament too and define legal requirements regarding bilateral relations too. The agreements between the Hungary and the Western Balkan countries cover various aspects of bilateral relations, including

1. economic affairs and economic cooperation (preventing double taxation, mutual protection and support of investments, cooperation among chambers, cooperation among investment agencies);
2. cooperation in the field of education, research, culture; and
3. cooperation in combating organized crime, civil protection, etc.

After 2004 as a member of NATO and EU, Hungary continued to be a strong advocate of EU enlargement towards the region. As the Hungarian Foreign Policy Strategy after the Hungarian EU Presidency (2011)¹ underlined, the EU integration provides the best opportunity for the region to overcome the stagnation following the wars and conflicts and this concept is the main driver of the Hungarian Balkan policy. The latter aims to support the Western Balkan countries in better utilising IPA funds by sharing experience regarding the EU integration process, institution-building, and democratic transformation. The stabilizing role of Hungary in the region was also reconfirmed in the Hungarian National Security Strategy (2012)². Similar understanding stands behind the support of NATO membership of the Western Balkan countries.

The Hungarian foreign policy efforts have been accompanied by institutional and financial means too. Institutional network supporting cooperation in the field of trade, economy and investments has significantly broadened. Hungary agreed with each Western Balkan state about the establishment of joint economic committees that support intergovernmental economic cooperation. The Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Hungarian Investment Promotion Agency and the Hungarian Trading House contribute to the development of economic relations. A network of trading houses was set up in the region: offices were opened in Serbia, Croatia, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. This network aims to explore and facilitate business opportunities in the region and support the presence of Hungarian companies. The Hungarian Exim Bank also opened an office in Belgrade.

The Hungarian Eximbank also opened significant credit lines for encouraging Hungarian investments and business cooperation with the Western Balkan countries: among others 61.5 million euro was offered for Serbia³, Kosovo⁴ and Bosnia and Herzegovina⁵, and 45 million forint for Montenegro⁶. In 2016

1 Available on the following link: http://eu.kormany.hu/download/4/c6/20000/kulpolitikai_strategia_20111219.pdf

2 Available on the following link: http://2010-2014.kormany.hu/download/f/49/70000/1035_2012_korm_hatarozat.pdf

3 <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/page/ketoldalukapcsolatok>

4 <http://www.kormany.hu/hu/kulgazdasagi-es-kulugyminiszterium/hirek/magyarorszag-jelentosen-fokozza-nyugat-balkani-diplomaciai-aktivitasat>

5 <https://www.mkik.hu/hu/kulpiaci-tevekenyseg/cikkek/magyar-bosnyak-gazdasagi-forum-es-uzletember-talalkozo-98960>

6 <http://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/the-economic-joint-committee-consulted-on-the-de>

the Hungarian government could launch its economic development programme for Vojvodina in the value of 50 milliard forint. The financial framework that is provided for the period 2016-2018 consists of two component: a credit line of 30 milliard forint and 20 milliard forint of non-refundable state-aid. Later the financial framework was extended to 65 milliard forint.

Last but not least, cultural diplomacy of Hungary is also very active in the region supported and carried out by the Balassi Institute and the missions in the region. Two cultural institutes can be found in the Western Balkans: one in Belgrade and the other one Zagreb. These institutes play an important role in sharing cultural heritage and traditions of Hungary and support cooperation with the region in the field of education and science.

Contribution to the security of the region

Hungary's contribution to stability and security is mainly performed through its contribution to the missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo, and its support to NATO accession of the Western Balkan countries.

Compared to the other Visegrad countries which are also present in these missions (Slovakia withdrew from KFOR), Hungary sent the largest number of troops. In case of EUFOR Althea mission, Hungary counts as the third biggest contributor (more than 150) while approximately 400 Hungarian troops take part in KFOR. These numbers are significantly higher than the ones of the rest of the V4 (more than two and three times higher than Poland's). Furthermore, the Hungarian government re-confirmed its readiness to increase its presence if it is required.

Hungary also strongly supports the NATO accession process of the Western Balkan countries, although it also accepts the fact that some countries like Serbia doesn't want to join the alliance and limits its relation to a close cooperation with it. In 2008 it encouraged the accession of all three Western Balkan countries, namely Croatia, Albania and Macedonia and continued to emphasize the need to accept Macedonia after the veto of Athens. Beyond political support to NATO enlargement agenda, Hungary also took an active role in the NATO-Western Balkans relations. The Hungarian Embassy in Podgorica served two times as NATO contact point for Montenegro and specialist diplomats supported Montenegro's preparation for membership. Since 2014 based on NATO mandate, Hungarian Air Navigation Services has provided air navigation services in the upper airspace over Kosovo.

The migration crisis and the way in which the Hungarian managed the situation caused temporary tensions with Croatia and Serbia. In the former, the dispute became part of the election campaigns which further burdened bilateral relations. This negative tendency partly changed as the conservative HDZ government started its mandate and the positions on the migration crisis of the two EU member states started to get closer to each other.

According to the understanding of the government, the migration flows might destabilise the region and for this reason, it supports the closure of the Western Balkan migration route. In this way the impact of the migration crisis on Hungary could have been also decreased. Hungary together with its V4 partners offered support of their police to Macedonia and Serbia in order to strengthen their capacities to tackle the increasing migration pressure. Hungary sent a police contingent of 30 personnel and also provided technical support to its Macedonian counterpart. Beyond Macedonia, contingents were sent to Greece, Slovenia, and Serbia too.

As part of the Hungarian Presidency Programme of the Visegrad Group, Hungary continued to reinforce border control cooperation with the countries on the Western Balkans migration route; management of

the EU external borders and protection of the Schengen area; support to Western Balkan countries, if necessary, by sending additional forces, equipment and sharing expertise.⁷

Reconciliation of bilateral disputes

Before continuing the analysis of main cooperation areas between Hungary and the Western Balkans, it is important to draw some attention to disputes that burdened or still burdens bilateral relations. While Hungary has no open issue with most of the Western Balkan countries, there have been couple of sensitive questions with Serbia and Croatia.

Hungary's relatively high interest towards the region is underpinned by the presence of Hungarian communities in some Western Balkan countries. In Serbia, although the ratio of Hungarians is decreasing, it is still around 3.5 percent whose majority lives in Vojvodina. In Croatia, the Hungarian community composes the 0.33 percent of the total population. In much smaller number but Hungarians live in the other Western Balkan countries too. Accordingly, the minority component of the Hungarian foreign policy is significant. In case of Croatia, the situation and representation of minorities is settled but in Serbia, the Hungarian minority was target of hostile actions for many years which caused tensions in bilateral relations time to time. There were also sensitive disputes about the interpretation of historical happenings (mainly around the WWII) that claimed significant human losses on both sides.

The historical reconciliation process reached a breakthrough and a positive turn in autumn 2011. Exceptionally, Hungary warned the Serbian side that it might veto its EU integration process if it doesn't amend the discriminative part of its restitution law that foresaw a collective punishment and discrimination of Hungarians.⁸ The Serbian Parliament finally supported changes to the rehabilitation law after which bilateral relations developed dramatically. A symbolic moment of the appeasement process was the visit of the Hungarian President János Áder to Serbia on 25-26 June 2013 when he held a historical speech in the Serbian national assembly.

Since then, Hungary provides constant support to Serbia in its EU integration process. The improving political relations changed significantly the perceptions about Hungary and the Hungarians that concluded decrease of nationalist rhetoric and physical attacks against Hungarians. Representatives of Hungarians could strengthen their position in the government structures too by gaining influence in areas relevant for the community (e.g. education, infrastructure development, agriculture). Political and sectoral cooperation of the two governments broadened significantly and common government meetings became regular. Confidence-building also resulted in tangible results in economic relations, investments and trade (see later).

The nature of tensions between Hungary and Croatia was different. Despite the fact that two countries sustained very friendly relations, the corruption scandal around the purchase of shares of the Croatian oil company, INA by the Hungarian oil company MOL that gained also management control within the former seriously poisoned the bilateral relations. The situation became even worse when party politics got involved (on the Croatian side social democrats were in power)⁹ and the deepest point were reached during the peak of the migration crisis in August-September 2015. The change in the government party in Croatia somewhat eased this tension and readiness to resolve the dispute strengthened on both sides. However, because of the lack of progress and the new steps that were taken against MOL and its lead-

7 <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/2017-2018-hungarian/20172018-hungarian>

8 Hungary rarely uses such veto power. For example, in case of Croatia, Budapest did not block the EU accession process despite the increasing tensions related to MOL, the Hungarian oil company that got under fire as it gained control over INA under scandalous circumstance.

9 It has to be added that party relation is not determinant factor in the bilateral relations of Hungary. Although it might contribute to smoother cooperation or ease tensions (like in case of Croatia under the HDZ-led governments and Macedonia under the era of Nikola Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE) but the Hungarian government also cooperates

ership made the Hungarian government to veto the OECD-application of Croatia in 2017. Since then negotiations have continued with MOL in order to find the way how Croatia could purchase back INA-shares.

Support of the EU integration process

After its EU accession, Hungary became an important EU member state partner of the Western Balkan countries that was strongly committed to support the region's EU integration process. To the contrary of Slovenia that blocked the accession process of Croatia for a long period of time, Hungary did not apply such veto power, although it almost happened when Serbia put tough measures against the Hungarian minority. Hungary also withdrew from abusing its member state position against Croatia, although tensions were increasing as a consequence of disputes about MOL's role in INA. The last phase of the accession process of took place during the Hungarian EU Presidency that put great emphasis on the support of Croatia.

The EU's appetite to take in new members decreased significantly after the enlargement in 2004 and 2007. The internal problems of the EU that occurred as a consequence of the economic and the financial crisis put great reform pressure on the EU. Later the migration crisis increased the differences within the EU that also questioned the common understanding of basic European values. Public opinion in the Western European countries toward EU enlargement deteriorated and accordingly, many member states like Germany and France became interested in a much slower accession process. At the same time and also as a consequence of the above mentioned developments, the new European Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker decided to put the accession process on halt. Such a negative message – although stating the obvious – threatened the credibility of the membership perspective of the Western Balkan countries. In addition, the unprecedented referendum on Brexit challenged the positive picture of the European Union as well as its future functions.

Under such circumstances, Hungary took steps to keep the EU enlargement toward the Western Balkans on the EU agenda and continued to lobbying among the EU partners for supporting a faster accession process. The Visegrad Group whose members also support the EU integration process of the region became one of those frameworks through which the Hungarian government could provide better visibility and larger representation to this question. The Visegrad Group after EU enlargement in 2004 decided to provide political and more technical support to the region by supporting EU enlargement agenda and by sharing EU integration and transformation experience.

Among others the International Visegrad Fund served as a good example for the Western Balkan countries that also decided to establish the Western Balkans Fund in order to encourage cooperation projects in the region. Furthermore, the Think Visegrad programme supports exchange about the Western Balkans in various fora (for example in EU institutions) as well as capacity-building through providing trainings and study trips of civil servants as part of the Civil Servant Mobility Program.

The Hungarian Presidency programme of the Visegrad Group in 2017-2018 put great emphasis on the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and accordingly, the V4 expressed its support to the region in European political fora and in the form of joint projects. As 2017 was a year when the European Commission did not publish any assessment of the EU integration process, the Presidency decided to fill this gap by organizing a meeting with the Western Balkan countries' representatives to discuss the state of affairs. The meeting covered the following issues:

- questions related to the Western Balkan countries' Euro-Atlantic integration, including the Connectivity Agenda, stability and security;
- coordination of the V4 positions on EU and NATO enlargement and Western Balkan issues;

- sharing of V4 expertise in EU-integration to support capacity building,
- supporting events in the Western Balkans dealing with European orientation & integration;
- supporting the effective functioning of the Western Balkans Fund; and
- organising a thematic ‘Western Balkans Diplomatic Days’ programme in Budapest via e.g. the V4 Civil Servants Mobility Program.¹⁰

Last but not least the Hungarian state institutions cooperate with their counterparts within the framework of various twinning programmes and TAIEX supported by the European Union. National assemblies, ministries being in charge of topics of mutual interest (agriculture, rural development, veterinary, minority questions, etc.) actively cooperate and take advantage of such programmes and facilitates the harmonization of the legal systems of the Western Balkan countries with the *acquis*. Beyond the above mentioned, the Hungarian government agreed with all Western Balkan countries to send professional diplomats as advisors to the EU integration ministries of the Western Balkan countries on its own cost to support the accession process.

Nonetheless, it is to be mentioned that the political approach of the Hungarian government that fosters a faster track for enlargement is widely debated, especially in the light of achievements of the Western Balkan countries in the field of rule of law, fighting against corruption and the support of independent democratic institutions as well as the in the light of internal disputes about the compliance of the Hungarian government’s measures with democratic standards. The sensitive balance between the two approaches (1. providing clearer time perspective vs. 2. pushing for quality implementation of reforms) toward enlargement was clearly apparent in the Western Balkans Strategy of the European Commission published in February 2018. The more ambitious – at least compared to the original stance of the European Commission’s President – strategy of the Commission, however, does not seem to get a unanimous support from the member states. The Council in March decided to decline the enlargement issue from the agenda of the EU- Western Balkans Summit held in May 2018 in Sofia.

Developing economic relations

Hungary’s economic cooperation with the region was always strong as a consequence of geographical closeness and the presence of the Hungarian communities. Although Hungary does not represent such a political and economic power like Germany or Russia, through its investments and trade relations counts as an important economic partner of the region. In addition, as it was mentioned in this report, Hungary took increased efforts in order to strengthen the economic cooperation with the Western Balkan countries.

The biggest increase in trade volume was realized with Serbia. In 2016 it reached 1.8 billion euro which meant an annual increase by 4 percent and in 2017 this value increased even further. Hungary is the 5th most important trade partner of Serbia¹¹. As Table 1 clearly shows the volume of trade also increased with the other Western Balkan countries too, although in a smaller or a more hectic scale.

In terms of investment, Hungary and the Hungarian companies belong to the most important partners of the region. It is among the biggest investors in Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia. Until the first half of 2011, Hungary was the biggest capital investor in Montenegro too but still it is among the five most important ones.

Hungarian investments target mainly the following areas: agriculture, tourism, energy sector, health sector, bank and financial services, water management, infrastructural development, transport and environ-

¹⁰ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/2017-2018-hungarian/20172018-hungarian>

¹¹ <http://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2018/PdfE/G20181142.pdf>

mental protection. Among others the most important investors are the MOL (Hungarian oil company), OTP (one of the biggest banks in Hungary), the Hunguest Hotels (hotel chain in Hungary) and Richter (medicine company).

Among infrastructural development projects the biggest one is the development of railway line between Belgrade and Budapest that will be implemented with the support of Chinese loans. The project is part of the Belt and Road initiative of China and the two governments hope the increase of their economic significance and performance through becoming part of the value chain that China builds towards EU markets. Hungary also aims to develop its railway and highway connection with Sarajevo. Connectivity the region was further developed by the launch of Wizzair flights to Pristina, Tirana, Podgorica, Skopje and Sarajevo that are hoped to increase mobility between the Western Balkan and Hungary and accordingly, increase the level of tourism.

Regarding energy projects, the Croatian LNG-terminal enjoys the political support of the Hungarian government as it hopes to get access to a new energy source while Budapest is also working on the diversification of supply routes with Serbia too.

Beyond bilateral economic cooperation, Hungary also contributes to other development programs supported by other international financial institutions. For example it supports the Western Balkans development program of the World Bank by 20 million USD.

Table 1: Volume of Hungarian foreign trade with Western Balkan countries in million HUF (2009-2017)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Albania	422.3	342.5	257.1	293.7	312.3	631.3	4 384.90	5 368.90	6 809.50
Bosnia and Herzegovina	13 772.30	21 744.20	25 210.10	21 091.30	25 386.30	29 776.80	31 146.60	33 894.00	48 007.30
Croatia	48 646.40	67 359.00	81 824.60	99 149.90	100 737.50	129 592.90	133 715.40	145 916.80	181 946.40
Kosovo	49.6	15.9	58.1	41.3	78.9	71	104.3	147.7	506.1
Macedonia	865.7	1 718.00	1 880.80	2 466.30	1 912.70	3 670.80	5 275.30	13 650.00	25 509.80
Montenegro	3 684.20	7 555.60	13 677.60	15 187.50	1 076.50	211	878.5	11 964.40	10 157.00
Serbia	65 091.10	77 023.60	100 646.90	102 763.70	138 700.30	133 205.40	166 398.30	194 956.10	271 923.90

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

Cultural diplomacy and cooperation in education

Beyond political and economic cooperation, Hungary also put great emphasis on cultural diplomacy and the support of cooperation in education. Although there are EU level frameworks like the Horizon 2020 and the Erasmus+ supporting cooperation among higher education institutions and research centre, Hungary also launched other programmes that foster such cooperation.

The Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme was launched in 2013 with the mission to increase the number of foreign students in Hungary and to encourage Hungarian higher education institutions to attract top foreign students. The Western Balkan countries are also involved into this initiative and the number students benefiting from it is steadily increasing (although the programme can hardly compete with the attractiveness of Western European institutions).

Table 2: Number of StipendiumHungaricum students by country of origin

Country	Study period			
	Fall 2015/16	Spring 2015/16	Fall 2016/17	Fall 2017/2018
Albania				12
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8	7	8	14
Kosovo			17	57
Macedonia	11	9	22	32
Serbia			10	19

Source: Tempus Közalapítvány, Oktatási Hivatal, Felsőoktatási Információs Rendszer

In the field of cultural diplomacy, it is to mention that Hungary decided in March 2018 about the implementation of the concentrated cultural presence programme in the Western Balkans in 2018 and 2019 which aim to further strengthen the image of Hungary as an important supporter in the region and aims to facilitate exchange in areas where the Hungarian experience is relevant and is welcomed by the respective Western Balkan country.

The role of other non-governmental actors in the EU integration process of the Western Balkan region

Beyond government and state institutions, other actors also plays an active role in the EU integration process of the Western Balkan region. Many universities like the EötvösLoránd University, the Corvinus University of Budapest, the Central European University, the University of Pécs and the National University in Public Service carry out research on the Western Balkans and its European integration path and provide venue for exchange of views and findings with expert and decision-makers from the region. At the National University of Public Service a research group was formed that operates as a hub for researchers and experts who actively follow and analyse the situation in the Western Balkans.

Beyond higher education and academic institutions, think tanks and NGOs are also engaged in various cooperation with partners from the region. Among the most active ones can be found the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Center for European Neighbourhood Studies at CEU, the Center for Strategic and Defense Studies at the National University of Public Service and the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy. These institutes and think tanks take part in projects on a regular basis that are dealing with issues that concern the Western Balkan countries and encourage critical thinking about the EU integration process, democratization, and security questions. The International Visegrad Fund provides significant financial support to projects that aims networking of NGOs from the Visegrad and the Western Balkan countries.

Conclusions

As it was elaborated above, the Hungarian government has extended significantly its relations with the Western Balkan countries since 2011. While the Euro-Atlantic integration process remained the main framework and target of that cooperation, Hungary built strong bilateral bases with these countries in

order to pursue its foreign policy targets. The institutional and financial framework that were put in place contributed a strengthened presence of Hungary in the region.

The Hungarian government put great emphasis on building confidence and trust with the governments in the region that was an important prerequisite for further cooperation. The most important breakthrough was achieved with Serbia. The success of the reconciliation process between Hungary and Serbia provides an example for that how the resolution of bilateral disputes can give momentum to cooperation in diplomatic and economic relations too. The development of relations is visible from the increasing number of high level visits, the improving economic cooperation as well as the broadening cooperation in the field of culture, education and science.

Hungary's efforts to support the region's fast EU and NATO integration contributes its friendly relations in the region but do not meet the concept of some EU member states like Germany that expects much higher compliance with democratic standards regardless to the required time. The debates within the EU about the content of democratic standards and Hungary can harm Hungary's ambitions to have bigger influence on the general approach of the EU towards the Western Balkans but it cannot be expected that Hungary will change its general political position regarding enlargement. Addressing security concerns and the connectivity agenda might open new opportunities to overcome some of the differences existing in the standpoints within the European Union and that is likely to be supported by the Visegrad Group too.



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POLAND AND THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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This report is an updated and modified version of the 2016 Report Poland and the Western Balkans prepared by Spasimir Domaradzki for the Center of Analysis of the Jagiellonian Club. Tomasz Fronczak contributed to the report's second version with updated information on the bilateral and multilateral activities between Poland and the Western Balkans states in the period 2016-2018.

Introduction

During the last thirty years the Balkan peninsula was never considered among the Poland's foreign policy priorities. After 1989 the main Poland's foreign policy priorities are embedded in the East – West axis. The “turn towards the West” determined the secondary importance of the Polish relations with the countries from the Balkans. The war-torn Yugoslavia spotted the international attention and led to the active involvement of the United Nations, the European Communities/EU and eventually of NATO. Poland contributed to the NATO, and subsequently EU led peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and the NATO mission in Kosovo. The driving motives for these involvements were beyond the pursuit of any unique Polish foreign policy objective towards the countries from the region. Instead, they were driven by the recognition of the need to prove Poland's position as a reliable partner and the determination to contribute to the international actions aiming at restoring peace and stability in the region.

The detachment from the Soviet block and the subsequent pursuit of prompt membership in NATO and the EU was accompanied by active Eastern policy pursuing democratization and modernization of the newly independent former Soviet republics. The underestimated position of the Balkan peninsula in Poland over the last quarter of a century is determined by a set of objective and subjective aspects. Among the objective are the priority given to membership in NATO and the EU, the pursuit of prompt integration to the western European economic bloodstream and the social demand for a “return to the West”. Subjectively, the Western

Balkans were considered as a “trouble maker” and a source of security concern; a rival for the attention of Western Europe and as of secondary relevance from economic perspective. This combination of factors framed the Poland decision-makers approach towards the countries from the Western Balkans for a quarter of a century. Consequently, the Western Balkans were not considered as a priority region of foreign policy activity.¹

Today, twenty-eight years after the collapse of communism in Central Europe and twenty-seven years since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the two regions share rather different experiences. The countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) went through a period of peaceful and generally uninterrupted economic development and political stability. On the other hand, the countries of former Yugoslavia went through differing experiences varying from prompt consolidation and stabilization like in Slovenia to internationally supervised independence as in such countries like Bosnia or Kosovo.

Having in mind the relations with the EU, today the territory of former Yugoslavia remains the most diversified region in Europe. On the territory of 255 000 sq. km. there are two EU member states, two countries with a candidate status and negotiating their membership – Serbia and Montenegro, one country with candidate status, but not negotiating – Macedonia and two countries that expect to obtain the status of candidate states sooner or later (Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina). Adding the non-former Yugoslavia country of Albania to the equation as a non-negotiating yet, candidate country completes the picture of existing challenges in the western part of the Balkan peninsula.

1 Probably the most apparent example of Poland's ambiguity towards the Western Balkans was the abandonment of the opportunity to sign the Croatia's accession treaty in Poland during the Poland's presidency in the Council of the European Union. A small but significant gesture that could have strengthened Poland's appeal towards the region.

1. Acknowledging the Western Balkans in the Polish Foreign Policy

Attempts to focus the Polish government potential to the potential of the Balkan countries were made already in the eve of Poland's presidency in the European Union. In 2010 Grzegorz

Gromadzki and Adam Balcer underlined seven arguments for the need to pay appropriate attention to the region. The successful completion of the Balkans integration will strengthen the

EU's position towards Russia and the United States. Poland's Eastern policy is dependent on the developments in the Balkans; the energy cooperation with the Balkans is fundamental for the EU's energy security; the Common Security and Defense Policy is intertwined with the Western Balkans; enhanced Poland's involvement can win new allies in the EU; the countries from the Western Balkans are also Poland's potential allies and finally, the introduction of a new dimension to the Polish Foreign Policy will challenge the argument that Poland is only "Eastern" oriented.²

Although Poland's recent perception of the European integration has evolved, the EU's soft power has weakened, and the global challenges became more pressuring, some of the arguments raised by Gromadzki and Balcer are still valid. Most importantly, any negative scenarios in the Western Balkans will have direct impact on the Polish economy and political position.

Secondly, the decreasing Polish dependence on Russia's energy resources opens also new perspectives for the Western Balkans. Simultaneously, after a period of stagnation the pro-European approach starts to prevail across the Western Balkans. The over quarter of a century old Poland's Eastern policy offers experience and expertise that can be implemented in the region. Especially, that the Balkans remains a geopolitical battlefield where the Western/EU/US interests clash with the Russian growing assertiveness.

Potential distraction of the Western Balkans from an EU membership perspective can lead to political destabilization and reemergence of national and ethnic tensions. Such scenario will require more attention to the region by the EU member states, the EU institutions and the neighboring countries. Having in mind the recent internal and external pressures, this process can further weaken the EU unity and fuel arguments for disintegration. While the EU pursues its new integration formula after the Brexit, potential destabilization of the Balkans can lead to another disintegrational undertones threatening the whole process.

Successful completion of the Western Balkans integration process will increase the security environment for the whole Visegrad Group and its neighborhood. It will consolidate the region from the Baltic to the Adriatic and the Black Sea around shared values, principles of cooperation and increased predictability. It will boost also regional consolidation among the V4 partners opening new perspectives for political, economic and social cooperation. Strengthening EU's integrity and eliminating the alternative political scenarios offered by the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, China and Turkey in the Balkans will also reinvigorate the Brussels position towards the non-Western regional challengers.

Furthermore, having in mind the geopolitical confrontation in Europe, the region retains its strategic importance. In that respect, the recent Polish-Croatian Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is an intellectually challenging project with high potential. However, due to its financial heterogeneity and strong dependence on internal political priorities of the participating countries its implementation is characterized by relatively high level of uncertainty. Regardless of these weaknesses TSI embraces tangible political, economic and social activities that offer more egalitarian cooperation perspectives than the existing "traditional" dependencies and external influences in the Western Balkans observed so far. The paternalist model of "financing and guiding" can be replaced by more nuanced approach where mutual projects can treat local political elites as partners rather than beneficiaries. Embedding this vision in the EU enlargement process will substantially increase its value. Finally, there seems to be a general agreement among Polish decision-makers on the economic potential of the Western Balkans and the emerging opportunities for Polish investments.

2 Docenimy wreszcie Balkany, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 27 października 2010 r. http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8579180,Docenimy_wreszcie_Balkany.html

Case studies

Before drafting a proposed framework agenda for the Polish mobilization in the region, it is worth identifying the nature of the German and Hungarian foreign policies towards the Western Balkans. These two countries have a long experience in persistent pursuit of their aims in the region through alternative methods and tools. They are also important blueprints of fostering change through cooperation. Germany applies a model of influence based on sound pro-European agenda and substantial financial resources, whereas Hungary serves as an interesting example of a country's regional policy determined by the presence of own national minority in some of the neighboring countries (Serbia, Croatia) and a country applying economic expansion in support of its national interests.

Germany

Germany plays an important role in the Balkans. Apart from the old – traditional – influence in such countries like Croatia or Bulgaria, Germany strongly promotes European integration in the Western Balkans with very strict accent on conditionality. For most of the countries Germany remains the main economic partner. Germany is also among the most active foreign direct investors in the region. Finally, for most of the countries in the region Germany is the first choice for economic migration.

Table 1: Germany as an economic partner – exports:

Country	% of total exports	Position
Macedonia	33,4	1
Kosovo	5,4	5
Montenegro	No data	Not among top 3
Serbia	12,6	2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	12,1	3
Albania	No data	Not among the top 5
Croatia	11,4	3

Source: CIA World Factbook 2016

Table 2: Germany as an economic partner – imports:

Country	% of total imports	Position
Macedonia	15,9	1
Kosovo	11,9	1
Montenegro	No data	Not among top 3
Serbia	12,4	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	13,9	2
Albania	5,2	5
Croatia	15,5	1

Source: CIA World Factbook 2016

The Balkans constitute a priority for Germany. Unlike in many other cases the German activities towards the region are not solely left to the Foreign Office, but the Chancellery closely following the most important dossiers.³ Furthermore, the German regions/Lands also establish direct connections with the countries

3 http://aei.pitt.edu/66050/1/pub_5832_eu_member_states_and_enlargement_towards_the_balkans.pdf.

and put together mutual projects, training programs and exchange of experience. German diplomats and politicians pay frequent visits to the Western Balkans. The region is subject to particular attention by Berlin, which promotes a common European approach and fosters shared responsibility for regional promotion.⁴ As a consequence, Germany takes advantage of any single EU related initiative towards the Balkans.

Julia Wanninger argues that “Germany’s policy towards the Western Balkans is marked by continuous commitment that put different emphasis in different phases: reconstruction, stabilization, consolidation of rule of law and market economy as well as member state-building and is embedded in the notion of commitment to the EU enlargement policy.”⁵ This pro-active approach is counterbalanced by the policy of strict conditionality requiring noticeable progress in adopting policies and activities bringing the countries from the region closer to membership in the EU. The division of the association process into a **sequence of small units** allows Berlin to exercise pressure and provide perks for progress in the implementation of the relevant legal, political, social or economic standards at national level.⁶

For the sake of the recent research, the German political foundations and their activities in the region deserve special attention. Once called the most effective and well-established instruments of German foreign policy, the political foundations appear ostensibly as independent and non-government organizations.⁷ Veiled behind the image of civil society institutions their activities are coordinated by the Foreign Office. Generously supplied by the Federal budget, these foundations target a wide range of activities, institutions and individuals that can contribute to the pursuit of German interests in the host country. Simultaneously, *they were able to make lucrative and non-politically appearing offers*. Their activity ranges from ordered publications emphasizing particular viewpoints to supporting cultural events or even important national celebrations. The foundations can cooperate with political forces which have a potential “to be important for German foreign policy, but with whom official contacts are not advisable for diplomatic reasons.” Furthermore, “due to their long-term presence in the ‘gray zones’ of politics in the project countries”, these foundations are able to provide information

(...) „which would not be available in official diplomatic relations.”⁸ Last, but not least these foundations play profound role in shaping the accents of the internal political debate and building equivocally positive narrative associated not with the German state, but with the Germans and the process of European integration.

Konrad Adenauer and Friedrich Ebert foundations have their field offices in every country of the Western Balkans. The Adenauer Foundation runs thematic programs covering the whole region and offers links to study trips and fellowships at German public institutions. Its strategy is emphasizing on the needs of the hosting countries, rather than on pursuing strict foreign policy agenda as long as it matches the foundation’s slogan “Mission: Democracy”. Among others, Friedrich Ebert Foundation Sarajevo office coordinates Dialogue Southeast Europe project advancing democratic consolidation, social and economic justice and peace through regional cooperation.⁹

The main aim of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation’s work in South-East and Eastern Europe is to promote democracy, the rule of law, pluralism and free markets. The toolset used for this purpose contains of: political education, political consulting and political dialogue in the form of conferences, seminars or study trips. Unconventional activities, such as theatre performances or liberal forums for debate, are

4 <http://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/notes-cerfa/western-balkans-touchstone-german-and-european-foreign>.

5 <http://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/notes-cerfa/western-balkans-touchstone-german-and-european-foreign>.

6 http://aei.pitt.edu/66050/1/pub_5832_eu_member_states_and_enlargement_towards_the_balkans.pdf.

7 Heinrich Böll Foundation (Greens), Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Social Democrats - SPD), Friedrich Naumann Foundation (Free Democrats - FDP), Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Christian Democratic Union - CDU), Hanns Seidel Foundation (Christian Social Union - CSU).

8 <http://www.german-foreign-policy.com/en/fulltext/31500>, see the German language version of the text Svetlana W. Pogorelskaja: Die parteinahen Stiftungen als Akteure und Instrumente der deutschen Außenpolitik, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 6-7/2002, 29-38, <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/27121/die-parteinahen-stiftungen-als-akteure-und-instrumente-der-deutschen-aussenpolitik?p=all>

9 <http://www.fes.rs/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=455&Itemid=147>

used when political conditions warrant it.¹⁰ The catalog of activities includes among others young leaders debate skills, incitement of innovations and start-ups, organizing meetings, fostering closer relations of the host countries with others.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation runs two offices in the region covering four of the Western Balkan countries. *“The main emphases of their work are on supporting democratic and legal reforms within the region, as well as on bolstering civil society. For this, the offices collaborate with journalists, lawyers, and political scientists, and they host debates and workshops.”*¹¹

Additional activities cover the introduction of green agenda into the democratic political process as an alternative to the model of the state dominated by just one ethnic group and tackling the region’s troubled past through European policies based on solidarity and sustainability.

Concluding, this multitask and multilayered approach towards the region provides Germany with a wide plethora of tools allowing not only to shape its image and strengthen its interests, but more importantly to shape the political discourse at national and regional level and indirectly to shape the national political priorities.

Hungary

After the collapse of communism, the main Hungarian foreign policy priorities were Euro-Atlantic integration, good neighborly relations, and support for the Hungarian minorities living abroad. Since Hungary joined the EU, it grounded its approach towards the countries from the Western Balkans in the logic that the EU membership provides the best guarantee of lasting stability and security in the region. The presence of Hungarian ethnic minorities and economic interests additionally determined the Hungarian position.¹² Hence, backing the European perspective for the Balkan countries improves bilateral relations and thus benefits the Hungarian minorities living there. Regardless, of the changing rhetoric of the Hungarian government towards the EU and the emergence of new dimensions of economic relations with the Russian Federation, the Western Balkans remain a top priority for the Hungarian foreign policy. Budapest is a staunch supporter of the EU enlargement towards the countries of former Yugoslavia particularly accenting on Serbia and Croatia.

Hungary’s policies towards the Balkans are grounded in the conviction that the conditions for the countries from the Western Balkans should not be harsher than for the countries that joined in 2004. Special attention is paid to softening the edges of harsh condemnations by some EU member states with more rigid stand on such issues as the rule of law, human rights or justice. Although the Hungarian government underlines the importance of minority rights, the idea of unconditional support is understood as the fact that “bilateral issues should not burden the accession process.”¹³

Simultaneously, Hungary’s economic activity in the region deserves attention. Serbia is Hungary’s strongest economic and commercial partner in the Western Balkans. In 2015 the trade flow between the two countries reached 1.8 billion euros – 1,57% of Hungary’s export and 0,57% of its import.¹⁴ Hungary’s main economic activity is concentrated in the Serbian capital and the northern parts of the country with significant Hungarian minority. The Hungarian Eximbank opens credit lines to facilitate cooperation between Hungarian enterprises and partners from the region. Hungarian companies invest in the banking and energy sectors and IPA funds are regularly assigned for trans-border cooperation projects. Hungary pressures also for the completion or restauration of infrastructural connections as railroads and highways throughout the region and emphasizes the importance of North-South infrastructure. In light of the corruption scandals in Croatia related to the former Croat President and Prime Minister Ivo

10 <http://fnst.org/content/east-and-southeast-europe>

11 <https://www.boell.de/en/2015/06/22/belgrade-sarajevo-and-zagreb-offices-south-eastern-europe>

12 <http://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/notes-cerfa/western-balkans-touchstone-german-and-european-foreign-p.117>

13 Op.cit.

14 <http://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/hungary/tradestats>

Sanader and the role of the Hungarian company MOL, the prioritization of the Western Balkans in the Hungarian foreign policy becomes even more apparent.

Conclusion

The German and Hungarian examples underline two distinct active approaches towards the Western part of the peninsula. The German activities are strongly linked with the government's vision of the process of European integration and the idea of united Europe. Linking the process of internal reforms with soft setting of the discourse agenda together with active involvement of youth leaders builds long lasting connections and establishes similar perception of contemporary challenges. The Hungarian approach is simultaneously pragmatic and efficient. The softer, in comparison to the remainder of EU countries, attitude towards the Western Balkans is grounded in the logic that the region is inhabited by significant Hungarian national minorities that the government in Budapest considers as primary priority. Therefore, the membership of these countries in the EU constitutes a guarantee that these minorities will be able to share the profits of integration. Simultaneously, the role of borders will diminish, and the closer connections will defuse potential tensions. Finally, the membership of the countries from the Western Balkans will move away the EU's external borders, thus increasing Hungary's security. In order to achieve that, Budapest underlines the need for applying the same criteria as during the 2004 enlargement and its position towards the countries is comparatively softer than the EU and German visions of strict conditionality. Budapest acknowledges that the countries from the region have no other alternative but membership in the EU.

2. Diagnosis of Poland's current presence in the Western Balkans

Foreign policy

Despite the geographic proximity and intense interpersonal relations, Poland's role in the Western Balkans is rather ambiguous and characterized by episodic mobilization. Poland's diplomatic missions are present in almost all countries of the region excluding Kosovo, where despite the official recognition of country's independence already in 2008, there is still no official diplomatic mission. More surprisingly, although Polish Institutes are located in most of the neighboring countries, there is no single Polish Institute on the territory of former Yugoslavia and Albania. In each of the countries small Polish communities are gathered around the Polish embassies and several Polish associations operate in Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. Poland contributes also to two military missions in Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina and recently Polish Border Guard backs up the Macedonian efforts to seal its borders.

The image of Poland in the region is also rather ambiguous. Despite the positive nature of mutual relations throughout the history and the continuing tourist interest in the region as a whole, the perception of Poland is a weird symbiosis of stereotypes originating in the nineteen eighties of the past century and the lack of information on Poland's development and achievements over the last quarter of a century.

At this point Poland's foreign activity in the region is mostly organized around three main currents: **bilateral cooperation, V4 initiatives towards the Western Balkans and partnership in EU projects towards the region.**

Bilateral activities are limited by the minimum possible diplomatic and administrative personnel in the Polish embassies and determination for action within the possible existing budgets. The Polish authorities finance and support small projects related to the widely understood democratization and Europeanization efforts and over the past several years annually support small grants through Polish Aid. Poland's political contribution to the region's

European aspirations includes bilateral initiatives such as the already held for ninth time, Polish-Macedonian consultative-expert forum “Skopje Conference” aiming at exchange of pre-membership experience and the Enlargement Academy. It is worth stressing that over the last two years, the Skopje conference rank was increased by the participation of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs and the visit of the Macedonian president in Poland in 2017. The same format was extended to Serbia, where in 2017 the first “Belgrade conference” was organized and, as stated by the Polish foreign minister J. Czaputowicz, a “Tirana conference” might be launched.¹⁵

The Visegrad group continues to operate in the Western Balkans through two main channels: initiatives directly addressed towards the Western Balkan’s countries and through efforts to sustain the enlargement agenda in the EU.¹⁶ The V4 orientation towards the Western Balkans provides new opportunities for the pursuit of Poland’s priorities in the region, particularly through the, to be operative, Western Balkans Fund (WBF) supported by the V4. Within the framework of the Visegrad Group Poland initiated the V4 project in support of Balkan states rule of law and fundamental rights with the involvement of the Poland’s Ombudsman Office.¹⁷

Poland’s presidency of the group allowed to stress the importance of the region. Poland pursuit institutional and functional synergy in the region that will contribute to the stronger voice of the V4 in the EU. A good example of the existing opportunities within the V4 activity in the region was B. Jaczewska’s visit to the Western Balkans countries with the newly appointed director of the Western Balkans Fund attracting the attention of regional stakeholders.

In 2018 the Western Balkans Fund announced its first grants call awarded projects.¹⁸ Positively, the grants are equally distributed among the WBF member states and they embrace a wide variety of topics in numerous areas of regional cooperation. On the other hand, the total amount of 230 000 Euro for this call and the 12 000 Euro cap per application clearly draw the financial limits of this mechanism. This should become a burning issue that has to be tackled with no delay by the donor states.

During last two years, it became clear that support for Western Balkans is needed in few crucial areas, namely security and Euro-Atlantic integration. The present Hungarian presidency of the V4 is putting a special emphasis on those areas. It is planned to support states of the western part of peninsula in management of migration crisis, by sending support to their borders. If it will be necessary, it can go as far as sending men, equipment and sharing of expertise¹⁹. Poland would probably participate in such mission as well. Second crucial area of support is Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. Most important activities here include V4 - WB consultations on levels of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Political Directors. They touch such topics as the integration process, energy and transport infrastructure development or regional stability. Polish officials take part in those talks as part of Visegrad Group. Sharing experience and knowledge concerning European integration is also part of the agenda. Flag example is “the V4 Civil Servants Mobility Programme”, where civil servants from Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership are improving their skills during a study visits in Visegrad countries., Furthermore, the V4 countries actively advocate for the membership of the remaining countries from the Western Balkans.

The Polish activity within the EU project devoted to the Western Balkans is rather patchy. The Polish Parliament is occasionally involved in Twinning projects in Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo and Polish experts are often invited as junior partners to other EU countries led Twinning endeavors. Most recently, Poland’s border guards participate in joint operations aiming at strengthening the borders of Macedonia.

15 Minister Jacek Czaputowicz na konferencji skopijskiej, 12.3.2018, TVP Info, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wg-BUY9YZMmk>

16 Program polskiego przewodnictwa w Grupie Wyszehradzkiej 1 lipca 2016 – 31 czerwca 2017 r. p.18 <http://www.msz.gov.pl/resource/9de2bb30-b55d-4ea7-843e-59f22d437bbe:JCR>

17 https://www.mfa.gov.pl/pl/p/msz_pl/polityka_zagraniczna/unia_europejska/obszary/rozszerzenie/zaangazowanie_polski/tanowisko_i_zaangazowanie_polski;jsessionid=9305F79E843960A3133A68C7397D4123.cmsap4p

18 Western Balkans Fund, <http://westernbalkansfund.org/grants-projects/>

19 <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/2017-2018-hungarian/20172018-hungarian>

NGO cooperation

Although majority of Polish activity within the region is concentrated around aforementioned areas, it is worth noting that not only Polish government and politicians are active. One of the most visible dimensions of Polish - Western Balkans relations, is activity of Polish Non-Governmental Organizations. Over the last decade various Polish NGO's were present across the region. Their activity covered among others media freedom, reform of education, civil education and public involvement, social entrepreneurship, rescue services training, economic self-support in times of transition, patient's rights, women's rights, or EU funds training.

Among the main donors were and still remain Polish Aid, the Polish American Freedom Foundation, International Visegrad Grants, Batory Foundation and National Endowment for Democracy. The bilateral self-government cooperation was financially supported by the EU CARDS program. For already over two decades the Polish Humanitarian Action provided humanitarian aid during the conflicts in Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo. Recently Polish Humanitarian Action and Caritas provided relief during and after the 2014 floods in Bosnia and Hercegovina and Serbia. However, most often this cooperation was not coordinated with the relevant government institutions.

Since 2017 new Polish organizations start their presence in the region. On 18th May 2017, the Centre for Eastern Studies (a Polish governmental think-tank), in cooperation with Analytica, a Macedonian think-tank, organized a conference dedicated to the Visegrad Group and its interactions with the Western Balkan countries. The event was attended by experts from all region, as well as Polish ambassador to Macedonia Jacek Multanowski. Regional Convention on European Integration of the Western Balkans is another project in which Poland takes part. Its last meeting in Skopje was attended by ambassadors from all four Visegrad Group states, apart from think-tank experts. As far as NGO stage is concerned, Polish side was represented by the Centre for Analyses of the Jagiellonian Club. This shows new quality in the discussed relations, where public authorities and NGOs act together to provide the best possible outcome of certain initiatives. As German example proves, such a collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors can bring about very positive results.

New forums of foreign policy

The Last decade saw birth of new regional initiatives with the involvement of non-western partners. Poland's and Western Balkan countries' presence in these formats creates new opportunities for dialogue and economic growth.

16+1 Initiative

The first format is the 16+1 Initiative, established by China in 2012. Its aim is increasing mutual economic and cultural exchange between China and Central European countries. Chinese involvement in this part of Europe creates numerous economic opportunities, but also challenges associated with fostering dialogue and finding common interest between members of this forum. These issues are most often addressed during annual summits of the group, which make a chance for politicians to meet and exchange ideas concerning the region.

Apart from a political one, the project has also an institutional dimension. Coordinating Secretariats assigned to different areas (such as maritime or investment), as well as other organizations, were established in China and across Central Europe (both in Poland and Western Balkans).

One Belt One Road Initiative

16+1 format may be perceived as a prelude to a more significant Chinese endeavor: the One Belt One Road Initiative. It is a project of significant infrastructural investments and trade agreements. The aim of this ambitious venture is to create a net of new commercial routes spreading across Eurasia and Central Europe is of a vital importance to this project. It is a chance for all players due to numerous reasons. From Chinese perspective, success or failure of One Belt One Road determines whether the Central State will sustain its incredible economic growth and therefore if it will remain economic superpower in this century. For Western Balkan states, it is mainly a new source of investment and an opportunity to increase trade volume and prosperity. It is also yet another option of strategic partnership, next to traditional European and Russian. From Polish perspective participation in this project is viewed as a possibility of strengthening economy and another tool to balance Russian influence in Eastern Europe, traditionally perceived as dangerous.

In order to grasp this chance and benefit as much as possible from it, dialogue and coordination of actions between states in the region will be required. First institutions and practices which would help to achieve this goal already exist in 16+1 formula. With gradual advancement of works on the One Belt One Road Initiative, we can expect creation of more institutions encouraging multilateral dialogue and cooperation on multiple levels.

Three Seas Initiative

The Three Seas Initiative was initiated in 2015 by the president of Poland Andrzej Duda and the president of Croatia Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. It unites Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland,

Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia. Therefore, two Western Balkan states are included in the group. The aim of this initiative is mainly to increase cooperation in such areas as creation of energetic, logistical and telecommunication infrastructure, as these are the fundamentals for modern, strong economy.

However, these actions are just means for bigger objectives. **The ultimate goal is to help the whole Central Europe, gain stronger position in the international stage as well as in the integration process.** However, such effects can be obtained only through multidimensional cooperation.

Concluding this part, until 2016 Poland's involvement is most apparent within the Visegrad Group's regional activities. However, the general picture was rather piecemeal mobilization around randomly connected ideas and activities. Although the areas of activity were soundly defined, their implementation lacked noticeable coordination across the region. The nation state-oriented approach towards the countries from the region was apparent, but it could be subordinated to a wider regional agenda of the Polish foreign policy.

However, since 2016 the Polish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans evolved in three dimensions. Firstly, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reached for NGO's and think-tanks as partners in regional projects. Secondly, the model of bilateral cooperation launched in Skopje is further extended through the "Belgrade" and most probably "Tirana" format. Thirdly, the TSI became an interesting additional perspective in the context of the prospective EU membership. Firstly, because the countries from the Western Balkans do not get only the perspective of EU membership, but also obtain the option to participate in the strengthening of an intra-EU regional block. The logical extension of the TSI to the new EU members offers a more tangible perspective of swift integration into the region. Secondly, because despite the hostile comments towards the initiative, its aim is to emancipate the region in the EU without undermining the basic principles of European integration. Finally, a noticeable intensification is visible on political and expert levels that provides more opportunities for cooperation. However, in order to push the process further the WBF should be open to accept also applications in consortiums between countries from the Western Balkans and the TSI states.

Economic relations

Among the biggest Polish investors in the Western Balkans are ASSECO, Tele-Fonika, OT-Logistics or Press Glass SA. ZGH Bolesław invested in the extraction and processing of polymetallic ores in Montenegro in 2010. PKP Cargo's agreement with HZ Cargo aiming at exploiting the expanding potential of the seaports in Rijeka and Ploče is in line with the intensification of the North-South transportation corridors. Interestingly, the size of Croatia's Foreign Direct Investments in Poland is twice the size of the Polish in the country.

Generally speaking, Poland's economic presence in the region is rather meager, but since 2016, few changes in economic dynamics can be noticed. Despite the fact that with all the countries from the region Poland has a positive trade balance, it is possible to name few countries with whom more palpable exchange exists.

Croatia is an interesting example of economic relations with Poland. Exchange between those two countries has doubled since Croatia's accession to the EU. In 2016 it reached 700 million euro²⁰, and during 2017 increased by 14.2%²¹. However, relations are not limited only to the simple exchange of goods but include also bilateral cooperation on many levels. A good example is Forum of Polish and Croat Regions, which took place sixth-time last year. The forum aims to exchange experience on regional development or use of European funds, which in long-term results in economic growth and mutual trust.

Similar but even more ambitious project in which Poland and Croatia are among participants is called URBACT²². This project, supported by the EU, is aimed at cooperation of cities in achieving common goals. It is also supposed to facilitate exchange of experience and amelioration of competence in managing personnel. Long-term results are visible in respective countries economy. Another example of more ambitious Polish – Croat cooperation on economic stage is the creation of gas pipeline from Świnoujście in Poland to Croatia²³. Investment is still being built and gradually new stages of project are completed. The aim is to create new gas corridor running from north to south to diversify gas supply among project's partners. Such partnership is more than simple economic cooperation, as project aims at achieving objective of strategic importance.

The positive trend in mutual exchange exists also with regard to Albania. In 2015 first increase of volume in trade was noticed. This index continued to grow during next years of 2016 and 2017, eventually reaching value of over 45 million euro. Although trend is very optimistic, for Poland, still it is not the most important economic partner in Western Balkans.

According to data from the Polish Ministry of Development Polish investments in Macedonia for 2014 was 6.3 million euro. Macedonia open list of Western Balkan states, where most probably trade statistics have not changed significantly during last three years, as finding of any newer data is difficult. This shows that those partners are of low priority for each other.

Having in mind the Croat example, where the membership led to a tangible intensification of economic cooperation, it seems reasonable to pursue more noticeable economic presence in the region prior to the enlargement. Such presence will contribute also to the improving image of Poland as economically advanced and innovative country.

Poland's image in the region

Poland's image in the region remains a prisoner of a cognitive dissonance. Historically equivocally positive relations with the particular nations of the Western Balkans and former Yugoslavia are overlaid by

20 Croatia estimations based at: <https://croatia.trade.gov.pl/pl/wymiana-handlowa> and <http://www.informatorekonomiczny.msz.gov.pl/europa/chorwacja>

21 <https://www.miiir.gov.pl/strony/aktualnosci/handel-zagraniczny-polski-po-8-miesiacach-2017-roku/>

22 <https://www.miiir.gov.pl/strony/strategia-na-rzecz-odpowiedzialnego-rozwoju/kluczowe-projekty/partnerska-inicjatywa-miast/> and <http://urbact.eu/urbact-glance>

23 <https://www.miiir.gov.pl/strony/aktualnosci/kluczowa-inwestycja-w-infrastrukture-gazowa-z-zatwierdzonym-dofinansowaniem-unijnym/>

ambiguous attitude and low intensity of interpersonal relations. It also overlaps with the memoirs of “trade tourism” constituting an additional source of income during the 1980ies. The interrupted relations, diminishing Polish presence after the Cold War and the post Yugoslav reality, sealed this image. Regardless of the fact that there is an increasing interest in the Adriatic coast and Albania and Montenegro become rediscovered and attractive tourist destination, there is no reciprocity in tourist visits and Poland is not considered as an attractive tourist destination. The already mentioned fact, that there is no single Polish Institute in the Western Balkans substantially limits the possibility to promote Polish culture, and in particular transformation, scholar and intellectual achievements over the last quarter of a century.

Conclusions

1. Among the recognized priorities of the Polish involvement in the region are
 - 1.1) strengthening Poland’s image as reliable partner in the process of EU integration;
 - 1.2) intensification of economic cooperation; improving Poland’s image in the region;
 - 1.3) development of transportation corridors;
 - 1.4) securing Poland’s energy interests and
 - 1.5) constraining organized crime, terrorism and illegal migration threats to Poland.

These aims should be subject not only to inter-institutional coordination but offered as a possible priority to be pursued by the Polish civil society, self-government, cultural and economic organizations.

2. The crucial question remains into what extend the pursuit of these goals is in accordance with the current Poland’s government priorities. Should the priority be strengthening Poland’s image abroad over the effectiveness of regional integration, it is apparent that V4 and bilateral relations should be a priority. However, if the European integration remains highest priority for the current government, Poland should pursue not only more active participation in regional EU grants, but also to come up as a leader in the implementation of such projects. The Polish efforts then can be only supplemented by targeted financing from the national budget.

As it was mentioned above, Poland’s policy towards the Western Balkans is implemented through three main channels: bilateral relations, within the V4 and within the EU projects devoted to the Western Balkans. The pursuit of the proposed pillars should be creatively adjusted to the existing channels of cooperation. Whereas the promotion of regional peace and security is an all-European priority and V4 and EU funded activities seem to be most appropriate, it can be skillfully supplemented by the Polish reconciliation experience through encouragement of the establishment of regional foundations and their support and encouraging mutual projects on difficult questions of mutual relations.

3. The outdated image of Poland throughout the region and the poor economic presence remain pressuring challenges. Their improvement requires activities that should be primarily and clearly identified with Poland, soundly defined financial resources and clearly expressed determination. Establishing new flight connections to the region, intensification of scholar, intellectual cooperation and youth exchange are among the activities that can be most productive. Their pursuit seems to be much more effective in bilateral or V4-Western Balkans format. The pursuit of these goals within EU projects often results in a smeary image of EU/countries hotchpotch and it requires reinforcement through targeted contribution by the Polish government to emphasize the Polish component.
4. Concluding, if the Western Balkans are to become one of the Polish foreign policy priorities, the current policies require consolidation and fine tuning. The existing Polish priorities towards the region need to be organized in sound pillars. Their pursuit needs to be secured by relevant financial resources and clearly defined tools. Without the establishment of Polish proposals and opportunities for the region’s civil societies and close cooperation between the government bodies and the third sector in Poland and in the host countries, the efforts to achieve these priorities will remain only with the Poland’s diplomatic missions in the region.

5. Recent years show however that there is a basis for a moderate optimism in this area. Above-mentioned lack of consolidation of strategy has its roots in the fact that Polish strategic thinking was fixed in east-west axis for decades. This mindset was formed by the fact, that most threats and opportunities came from those directions. Last thirty years were no different for Poles. Focus on this dimension of foreign policy was aimed mainly at safeguarding basic security of state, both economic, military and political.

Now, since Polish western and eastern foreign policies have achieved most of their goals, Poland has gained enough security, time and resources to face new challenges. This is the moment when the government starts to redefine its foreign policy priorities. This task requires from authorities to open a new dimension of strategic thinking: north-south. Objectives on this direction complement with previous goals and are thought to position Poland as a part of politically and economically viable region. New initiatives seem to indicate that Polish leaders are realizing the importance of Western Balkans and begin to undertake very first steps to ameliorate and intensify relations with this region. It is a small but important improvement of the situation during the last couple of years, yet still, it is too early to say that any sound regional strategy has been adopted.

The nature of Poland's potential contribution

1. While shaping Poland's foreign policy priorities towards the Balkans and encouraging closer cooperation of the civil societies, it is of crucial importance to clearly identify the conceptual limits of such involvement.
 - 1.1) It is apparent that regardless of the substantial turbulences in the process of European integration caused by the migrant crisis, Brexit, economic hardships and alternative visions on the future nature of relations within the Union, Poland remains a sound supporter of **the integration process**. This constitutes the natural junction of Western Balkan countries aspirations and the Polish experience.
 - 1.2) Simultaneously, Poland can pursue building up mutual regional solidarity and **shared vision of contemporary security challenges**, which will bind the countries from the region. All the Western Balkan states share similar concerns about their security and constitute a battleground of the present day geopolitical confrontation between the Russian Federation and the West, with less visible, but as important involvement of such states as Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the Balkans. In each of these countries the seeds of anti-western alternatives were clumped. Hence, building up common understanding of the contemporary security challenges and shared future is necessary to diminish the perspective of undesired developments.
 - 1.3) Furthermore, two of the current Poland's foreign policy priorities, namely **strengthening the role of Central Europe** and **improving North-South connections** in the region are in line with the needs of most of the countries. The Western Balkans are a subject of active interest by most of the European and global powers. To avoid becoming "one of the rest", Poland's policy towards the Balkans should continue to be grounded in the logic of "partnership" rather than "mentoring". Without rejecting the EU pressured conditionality, the Polish activity can accent much more on mutual interests and cooperation.
2. Poland's involvement in the Western Balkans should be clearly defined and meticulously implemented. Understanding region's specific is of crucial importance for the pursuit of appropriate navigation of the mutual relations. Succinctly described, the region is dominated by a nostalgia for the past, frustration with the present day and uncertainty about the future. Despite the common past and numerous similarities among the countries, the Polish activity must be peer to peer oriented and case sensitive. The mutual relations among the Western Balkans countries are still characterized by frequent nationalist and antagonist attitudes that does not correspond with the ideas of united Europe. **Therefore, the Polish involvement should not lose its European integration, regional consolidation and bilateral intensification components.**

3. Poland's involvement in the Western Balkans should be concentrated around four essential pillars:

Promoting regional peace and stability;

Encouraging pre-accession mobilization and promotion of the EU perspective; Improving Poland's image as a transition success story and reliable partner;

Exploring Western Balkans economic potential.

Their pursuit requires creative agenda and skillful selection of the existing possible tools at European, regional and bilateral levels. Taking into consideration the fact that the European level of Polish involvement is unsatisfactory, the regional (V4) is in process of activation and the bilateral is underdeveloped, substantial improvements are necessary in all dimensions. While contributing to the European future of the region, the Polish accent to it should be made explicit both in the regional and bilateral dimensions.



SLOVAKIA AND THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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The countries of the former Yugoslavia have always been in the focus of Slovakia's foreign policy. Besides numerous social ties that originated before the year 1989, the existence of the Slovak minority in Serbia (Vojvodina) and Croatia, together with economic opportunities and the overall aim to guarantee the stability and prosperity of the region could be mentioned as the most important factors underpinning Slovakia's interest in the region.

Even though before becoming the European Union and NATO member Slovakia was preoccupied with the fulfilment of pre-accession criteria, Slovak diplomacy made an imprint in the region even before the year 2004. Just to mention the former minister of foreign affairs Eduard Kukan, who had been a special envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations for the Balkans in 1999-2001. Though the term Bratislava Process is recently connected with the initiative that started under Slovakia's EU Presidency in 2016 and is aimed at the EU itself, it is worth to remember that the same name was given to the series of conferences that included the representatives of anti-Milošević political opposition, NGOs and media from the "small" Yugoslavia before October 2000. The importance of the Bratislava Process was also highlighted by the new Yugoslav president Vojislav Koštunica, who assured the counterparts in Slovakia that the process had played an irreplaceable role in the democratization of Yugoslavia.¹ The establishment of the so-called Bratislava-Belgrade Fund, which can be perceived as an extension of a process of democratization rooted in Bratislava's own process, was supposed to build up on the experience of cooperation between the Serbian/Montenegrin and Slovak stakeholders. The aim of the Fund was to support joint projects focusing on NGO activities, local self-government, small and medium enterprises, education and EU approximation.

The real breaking point in terms of the intensification of relations of Slovakia with the Western Balkan countries was nevertheless the accession of Slovakia to the EU in 2004. Just after the accession to the EU and NATO Slovakia identified two key territorial foreign policy priorities: Eastern Europe (namely Ukraine) and Western Balkans. In 2003 the then prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda openly declared that "Slovakia has the ambition to become an advocate of Ukraine and countries of the Western Balkans in the EU and NATO and to help them in pursuing reforms and the development of a civil society"². Post accession priorities were also identified in the mid-term Slovakia's foreign policy strategy.³ Slovakia anticipated that NATO and EU policies towards the Western Balkans and Ukraine can contribute to enforcing its national interests towards given countries. The inclusion of the Western Balkans among top territorial foreign policy priorities of Slovakia in the post-accession period was therefore very much in line with the EU enlargement policy, but also in line with the priorities of the Visegrad Group.

In light of the above, relations of Slovakia with the Western Balkan countries can be assessed on three levels – bilateral, regional (V4) and multilateral (EU) levels.

Bilateral relations after 2004

Increasing importance of the Western Balkans for Slovakia's foreign policy can be demonstrated through the opening of Slovak embassies and representation offices in the region. While in the year 2004 Slovakia only had two embassies in the region (Belgrade and Zagreb), ten years later Slovak embassies can also be found in Podgorica, Sarajevo, Skopje and Tirana. Since Slovakia does not recognize the declaration of Kosovo's independence, it does not have an embassy in Prishtina. However, a branch embassy is located there.

1 Bratislavský proces prispel k návratu Juhoslávie medzi demokratické krajiny, 2 September 2002, domov.sme.sk/c/649398/bratislavsky-proces-prispel-k-navratu-juhoslavie-medzi-demokraticke-krajiny.html.

2 "Appearance of Prime Minister of Slovak Republic Mikuláš Dzurinda", in: Peter Brezáni (ed.), Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2003, Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava 2004, pp. 11-17.

3 *Stredno dobá stratégia za hraničnej politiky Slovenskej republiky do roku 2015*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava, 2004, [www.foreign.gov.sk/App/wcm/media.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_D9D5A743A2CE0A4FC12578950037A688_SK/\\$-File/strategia%20ZP%20SR.pdf](http://www.foreign.gov.sk/App/wcm/media.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_D9D5A743A2CE0A4FC12578950037A688_SK/$-File/strategia%20ZP%20SR.pdf).

The non-recognition of unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo distinguishes Slovakia from its Visegrad neighbours, as well as from the vast majority of EU countries. Out of all relevant political parties only two either recognize or at least have a neutral position towards the issue – SMK and Most-Híd. Both of them tend to represent Hungarian community in Slovakia, which means that the issue of recognition/non-recognition of Kosovo de facto divides Slovak political scene along ethnic lines. All the respective Slovak governments, including the ones with the participation of above mentioned (Hungarian) parties, have therefore been consistent in their negative attitude towards the independence of Kosovo.

The above mentioned position, however, does not prevent Slovakia from developing cooperation with Kosovo on a technical level, which also includes projects supported directly by the Slovak ODA. Though meetings with official representatives of Kosovo are held only on unofficial level, Slovakia considers Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244/99) to be an integral part of the Western Balkan region with a clear European perspective. Also, though Slovakia differs from its Visegrad neighbours in the issue of Kosovo's independence, projects supported by the International Visegrad Fund are open also for applicants from Kosovo.

Continuous political support for the European perspective for all the countries of the region has been one of the most important vectors of Slovakia's foreign policy. Dozens of meetings held on different levels can serve as a proof of the commitment to assist the Western Balkan countries on their paths to the EU and NATO. In a number of cases this support contributed to the adoption of political decisions on both EU and NATO levels – since 2012 Albania and Croatia have been the NATO members, joined by Montenegro in 2017, while Croatia became the 28th EU member state in 2013.

Nevertheless, bilateral relations of Slovakia with the Western Balkan countries could have been characterized by certain unbalance, especially before and soon after the accession of Slovakia to the EU. The main focus of Slovakia's foreign policy and diplomacy was Serbia. It was so due to the importance of Serbia as the biggest country in the region, the presence of Slovak minority in Vojvodina, as well as potential for the development of economic cooperation. Serbia-Montenegro Union also became the first programme country of Slovak development assistance just after the accession.⁴

The relations with Croatia had also been different compared to the rest of Western Balkan countries. Croatia was the most advanced of all in integration processes, which also had impact on the areas of cooperation between the two countries. Political support for Croatia's EU membership was strengthened by a friendly relationship between the Slovak Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda and his Croatian counterpart. Croatia also profited from know-how and experience transfer, especially through different twinning projects.

After the split of the Serbia-Montenegro Union in 2006, the focus of Slovakia's foreign policy was also shifted to Montenegro. The main reason for this shift was a significant presence of Slovak diplomacy in the process of the preparation of a referendum on the status of Montenegro. The most important roles in this process were played by two Slovak diplomats – Miroslav Lajčák, who was a special envoy for the referendum and František Lipka, head of the referendum commission. Together with Serbia, Montenegro also became the programme country of Slovak ODA. Slovakia also intensively supported the ambition of Montenegro to become a NATO member.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Albania also appeared on the list of project countries since the very beginning of the existence of the Slovak ODA, though they did not become programme countries. As of 2018, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244/99) are eligible for technical assistance. The focus of the Slovak Aid is therefore on those countries where the integration process to the EU is expected to take a longer time.⁵ The less advanced countries in the integration process are also encouraged by the representatives of the Slovak government to implement reforms that would bring them closer to the membership. Slovakia itself lagged behind its Visegrad neighbors in integration processes back in 1990s, so it can serve as a good inspiration for catching up with the integration leaders.

Within the framework of ODA, Slovakia also used innovative measures in order to develop cooperation

4 Though the program country was the Union of Serbia and Montenegro (including Kosovo), the main emphasis was given on Serbia. See *Medium Term Strategy for Slovak Republic's ODA*. (Bratislava: MFA SR 2003).

5 See www.slovakaid.sk/sk/technicka-pomoc/albansko.

with WB countries. The Centre for Experience Transfer in Integration and Reforms, which focuses primarily on the training of civil servants from countries aspiring for the EU membership, can be mentioned as an example, since the WB countries have been among its beneficiaries.⁶ Another example could be twining projects that also aim at the transfer of know-how and experience, especially in sectoral cooperation.

Among the projects that have been supported by the SlovakAid one deserves a particular attention – the National Convention on the European Union. The aim of the project was to institutionalize the public debate on EU related issues based on the partnership of governmental, non-governmental and business organizations, as well as to strengthen the expert capacities on negotiations on EU integration. The National Convention on the EU can be considered as a unique model of cooperation between the governmental and non-governmental sectors in Slovakia and Western Balkan countries and as such as an important part of Slovakia's know-how transfer from transformation and integration processes. The project was successfully developed by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association between 2003 – 2007. According to the Slovak model, the project was applied in Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and currently it is being implemented in Macedonia.⁷

Nevertheless, the area where the ambitions of Slovakia in the region materialized only to a limited extent is economy. The Western Balkan countries neither occupy significant positions among Slovakia's trade partners, nor have become important target countries for investments of Slovak companies (with some exceptions). The only continuously working bilateral chamber of commerce is the Slovak-Serbian one.⁸

Regional dimension – V4+WB

Slovakia has been actively participating in several regional initiatives that tended to intensify cooperation with the Western Balkan countries. As a part of Czechoslovak federation it became a member of the Pentagonal, where Yugoslavia was also a member. The Pentagonal later developed into the Hexagonal and then it was transformed into the Central European Initiative. CEI includes altogether 16 countries, including Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, so the focus on the Western Balkans is not predominant in this particular initiative.

Together with Austria, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland Slovakia took part in the Regional Partnership initiative for some limited period of time. The Regional Partnership was initiated by Austria in 2001 and one of its main focuses was to develop closer cooperation with Western Balkan countries and assist them on their way to the EU. Later, however, Regional Partnership merged with the V4 + format of cooperation.

Another kind of regional initiative – developed on a macro level – that encompasses Slovakia and the Western Balkan countries is the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The aim of macro-regional strategies is to intensify different types of sectoral cooperation, so their focus is on concrete sectoral projects, with only limited outreach to political dimension.

Still another format of cooperation was introduced by China in 2012. The so-called 16+1 initiative encompassing China and 16 countries from Central and Southeastern Europe aims mostly to strengthen cooperation in investments and finances, with special focus on the transport infrastructure.⁹ It is also supposed to create favourable conditions for the implementation of the Chinese "One belt, one road"

6 CETIR www.slovakaid.sk/en/cetir.

7 The Regional Convention on European Integration led by the European Movement in Montenegro and supported by the International Visegrad Fund was also inspired by the National Convention on the EU project.

8 <http://www.ssok.eu/>.

9 China's Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries, 26 January 2012, www.china-ceec.org/eng/ldrhw_1/2012hs/hdxw/t1410546.htm.

initiative¹⁰, which aims to build transport infrastructure between China and Europe. The practical results of this initiative, however, are rather modest for the time being.

Among all the formats of regional cooperation, the so-called V4 + instrument that includes the four Visegrad countries and their counterparts from the Western Balkans turned out to be the most liveliest and efficient one. At the same time, V4 is the only regional grouping in the EU that maintains a regular dialogue with the Western Balkan countries.

Out of three dimensions of cooperation between the V4 and Western Balkans, political cooperation has been particularly intensive. Also, some examples of procedural know-how transfer between the two regions can be found. However, the potential of sectoral cooperation remains unexhausted.¹¹

Political cooperation

The Visegrad Group became one of the most active lobbying groups on the EU level in terms of the support of integration ambitions of Western Balkan countries. In this regard, it is important to note that among the Visegrad countries Slovakia always belonged to the most enthusiastic advocates of the “Western Balkans agenda” on the group level. The accession of Croatia to the EU in July 2013 would not have been possible without the political support of the Visegrad countries, both on a regional and a bilateral levels.¹² The strong support of the Visegrad Group for the continuation of EU integration and the enlargement process is also embedded in the joint declaration of the V4 and Croatian foreign ministers, which was adopted on the occasion of Croatia’s accession to the EU.¹³

The support of the integration of Western Balkan countries in the EU embodied in a number of other V4 documents, including the Kroměříž and Bratislava Declarations, Presidency programmes or ministerial statements.¹⁴ Regular summits of the foreign ministers of the Visegrad countries and their counterparts from Western Balkans countries have been taking place in the autumn since 2009, when the Hungarian V4 presidency introduced this informal practice. Representatives of other like-minded countries, including Austria, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania also take part in the meetings. It is worth to mention that these annual summits are usually attended by the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and/or High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which also underlines their importance and impact on the EU level.¹⁵

Though the regular meetings of the representatives of the V4 and Western Balkans countries are held primarily at the level of foreign ministers, it is also worth highlighting the importance of the meetings of political directors in the V4-WB6 format. Such meetings allow the V4 and Western Balkans countries representatives to discuss political issues from a more detailed perspective. The participation of the V4 Presidency representative in a regular WB6 Foreign Ministers meeting can be also mentioned as an instrument of cooperation on the political level. A very specific attempt to address the public of the Western Balkan countries was the article of the V4 ministers of foreign affairs, which was published in the main regional dailies on the occasion of the publication of the EC’s country reports. Though such an initiative

10 Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, 28 March 2015, en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html.

11 See also Tomáš Strážay, “Visegrad Four and the Western Balkans: A Group Perspective,” *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 21, 4 (2012).

12 The support for Croatia’s accession to the EU is directly mentioned in a number of statements available on the official website of the Visegrad Group, www.visegradgroup.eu.

13 “Joint Declaration of the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Countries and Croatia on the Occasion of the Croatian Accession to the EU,” 26 June 2013 www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2013/joint-declaration-of-the.

14 “The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group,” 15 February 2011, www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava. For more documents see the official webpage of the Visegrad Group, www.visegradgroup.eu.

15 The last meeting of V4 and Western Balkans foreign ministers took place in Budapest on 11 October 2017 and was also attended by the representatives of Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Romania and Slovenia. See V4 Foreign Ministers’ Joint Statement on the Western Balkans, www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/selected-events-in-2017-170203/v4wb6-joint-statement.

has more symbolic than practical value, it is a good example of the demonstration of the V4 countries joint interest in the integration of the Western Balkans to the EU.¹⁶

Institutional know-how sharing

Though the Visegrad Group is characterised by weak institutionalisation - its institutional structures are basically limited to the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) – during more than 23 years a number of informal institutional structures has been developed. These include regular meetings of the high representatives of the V4 countries, expert meetings on sectoral level, as well as regular meetings of government representatives before the EU council meetings. The way how the V4 developed its “informal institutions”, as well as the International Visegrad Fund as the only standing institutions turned out to be inspirational for the Western Balkan countries as well.

The establishment of the free trade area in the Western Balkans under the name Central European Free Trade Agreement in 2006 (CEFTA 2006) proves that a model that was originally born in V4 countries can also be implemented in the Western Balkans region. CEFTA enabled the Visegrad countries (and other countries of a ‘wider’ Central Europe – Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia) to prepare themselves for entering the EU single market.¹⁷ CEFTA 2006, now encompassing Western Balkan countries, has exactly the same goal.¹⁸ CEFTA itself can therefore be considered as one of the most efficient examples of know-how export of the Visegrad Group in the Western Balkans.

The establishment of the Western Balkans Fund with a similar focus as the Visegrad Fund can be used as another example of institutional know-how transfer from the V4 to the Western Balkans. The idea of establishing such a fund in the Western Balkans was initially developed by the International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT) in Budapest. An international group of experts on civil society and regional cooperation developed the feasibility study in the first half of 2011.¹⁹ Similarly to the IVF, the Western Balkans Fund is financed by the governments of the Western Balkans countries and mainly supports people-to-people contacts and cooperation among civil society organisations. The WBF was established in 2015 with the seat in Tirana. Until nowadays, the first call for projects has been successfully executed.²⁰

Sector cooperation

On the group level, the most intensive cooperation was in the area of justice and home affairs. Before the year 2015, when the migration crisis erupted, the discussed issues included the fight against corruption²¹ and judicial training.²² However, already the Czech V4 Presidency 2011-12 managed to organize the 2nd Ministerial conference of the Prague Process,²³ which focused primarily on issues related to asylum and

16 V4 Ministers in Joint Article: We Offer You Our Helping Hand on the EU Path, 11 November 2015, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/v4-ministers-in-joint>.

17 For Slovakia and other countries from ECE the membership in CEFTA became irrelevant after they acceded the EU in 2004 or 2007.

18 The contracting parties of CEFTA 2006 are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia*, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and UNMIK (on behalf of Kosovo*). For more details see www.cefta2006.com.

19 International Centre for Democratic Transition, “Non-Paper on the Feasibility study on the possible creation of a ‘Western Balkan Fund’ for regional cooperation based on the International Visegrad Fund model,” 2011, www.icdt.hu/documents/events/WB_Fund_nonpaper.pdf.

20 See the website of the Western Balkans Fund www.westernbalkansfund.org/.

21 The seminar on the experiences of the fight against corruption among experts of V4 and Western Balkans justice ministries was organised during the Hungarian V4 presidency in 2006. See 2005/2006 Hungarian Presidency: Report, www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports/2005-2006-hungarian-110412.

22 The meeting of V4+ Croatia justice ministers (plus Slovenia and Germany), at which a memorandum of cooperation regarding judicial training was signed, was organised by the Slovak Presidency (2010-2011). See Annual Implementation Report of the Program of the Presidency of the Slovak Republic, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports>.

23 The first Ministerial Conference of the Prague Process was held in Prague in April 2009. The ministers responsible for migration issues then adopted a Joint Declaration, which set long-term priorities for cooperation in the field of migration

migration. The joint declaration was signed by the ministers from EU countries, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Western Balkans and Turkey.²⁴

In January 2014 the V4 Ministers of Interior signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of the V4 Good Governance Forum. The aim was to promote cooperation with third countries, including those from the Western Balkans, in the field of public administration development. Particular attention was paid to the promotion of the exchange of information and sharing best practices.²⁵

Another initiative with similar focus – public administration – was the so-called Enlargement Academy. The aim of the program developed by the Polish MFA was to prepare its participants to cooperate with EU structures and to share experiences from the accession process.

Yet another platform of cooperation is the “V4—*Western Balkans* Expert Network on Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights”. In the framework of this platform the previous Slovakia’s V4 Presidency (2014-15), for instance, organized a seminar focusing on judicial training.²⁶

The eruption of the migration crisis in 2015 intensified more the cooperation of the V4 and Western Balkans, especially due to the significance of the so-called Balkan route for migrants. To discuss the issues related to the protection of the borders and flows of migrants, the V4+ format was used as the primary channel of communication. The meeting of the V4 ministers of interior with their counterparts from Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia can serve as an example.²⁷

Cooperation in other sectors would include especially defence and energy. For instance, the meeting of the V4 ministers of defence and their counterparts from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia took place in October 2009, during the Hungarian V4 Presidency, with the purpose to discuss in detail the NATO and EU integration process of the Western Balkans countries, as well as a possible V4 contribution.²⁸ Though cooperation in energy included mostly Croatia alone (due to its role in the development of the North-South energy corridor), the V4+ Energy Summit held in Budapest in January 2010 counted on the participation of representatives of several Western Balkans countries as well. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia were also co-signatories of the Summit Declaration, together with the Visegrad countries, Austria, Bulgaria and Romania.²⁹ The Summit initiated the creation of several working groups, including a V4 working group on the north-south interconnection.

Strong sectoral focus is apparent in the Civil Servants Mobility Program supported by the IVF and operated by the Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform. Though the program supporting mobility of civil servants from the Eastern partnership and Western Balkan countries was established already back in 2014, only in 2017 it acquired a Western Balkan dimension. The first target country was Serbia, while for 2018 it is Montenegro.³⁰

management. See www.pragueprocess.eu/english/prague-process/.

24 Report on the Czech Presidency in the Visegrad Group July 2011 – June 2012, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports>.

25 Report of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group July 2013 – June 2014, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports>.

26 Report of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group, July 2014 – June 2015, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports>.

27 Joint Declaration of Ministers of the Interior, Meeting of Interior Ministers of the Visegrad Group and Slovenia, Serbia and Macedonia, 19 January 2016, www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-declaration-of.

28 See 2009/2010 Hungarian Presidency—Annual Report, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports/2009-2010-hungarian-110412>.

29 Ibid

30 Civil Servants Mobility Program, <https://think.visegradfund.org/civil-servants-mobility-programme/>.

EU level

Together with its Visegrad partners Slovakia managed to create a coalition of like-minded countries that have been supportive to the enlargement policy of the EU. The significance of the role of the V4 and its impact on the EU is also underlined by the fact that annual V4 ministerial summits are regularly attended by high-ranked EU officials (commissioner for enlargement or high representative for foreign and security policy).

The direct involvement of Slovak diplomats in the stabilization of the Western Balkans has probably been the most visible proof of Slovakia's interest in the region. Besides the engagement of former minister of foreign affairs Eduard Kukan – as a special envoy of the Secretary General for the Balkans in 1999-2001, the participation of Miroslav Lajčák and František Lipka in the process of the dissolution of the Serbia-Montenegro Union can be considered as second large contribution of the Slovak diplomacy to the stabilisation of the Western Balkans, with the added value for the whole EU. While Miroslav Lajčák worked as an envoy of the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy for the whole process of the referendum, František Lipka was appointed the chair of the referendum commission.³¹

In 2007 M. Lajčák was appointed the High Representative and EU Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Though he remained in the office only a little bit more than one year, he obtained reputation of being one of the most skilled diplomats and experts on the entire region. Lajčák's presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina also helped to shift the focus of Slovak diplomacy on Bosnia and Herzegovina, too. After having served as Slovak foreign minister between 2008 - 2010, Miroslav Lajčák was appointed to one of the most important positions in the European External Action Service, as a EEAS managing director for Russia, Eastern neighbourhood and Western Balkans. He remained in office until 2012, when he was appointed for the second time the minister of foreign affairs of Slovakia.

After being elected to the European Parliament in 2009, Eduard Kukan became a rapporteur for the Western Balkans in the EP. Currently he is chairing the Delegation to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee.

Since the year 2015 Katarína Mathernová, has served as a Deputy Director-General at the Directorate-General Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). Though her focus is particularly on the relations with the Eastern Partnership Countries, and on migration/refugee issues, she is the high set positioned Slovak in the European Commission - at the department that focus is also on the Western Balkans. To some extent, EU enlargement policy was shaped by the members of the Committee of the Regions (e.g. former mayor of Košice, František Knapík, became the rapporteur of the opinion on the Western Balkans' European perspective) and European Economic and Social Committee (the EESC member Patrik Zoltvány was the rapporteur for EU-BaH relations and Transport policy in the Western Balkans).

The most recent EU-Western Balkans gathering, the summit in Sofia, is perceived positively by Slovakia. It is also due to the fact that it was the first meeting of this kind after Thessaloniki, which means after 15 years. Slovakia as a traditional supporter of the enlargement policy has appreciated that the enlargement is back in the agenda of the EU. The participation of the Slovak prime minister Peter Pellegrini in the summit was a clear sign of Slovakia's support of the European perspective of the Western Balkans. The Slovak prime minister encouraged the countries of the region to continue the reforms that would bring them closer to the EU, but in the same time he asked member states and EU leaders to "behave correctly to these countries, and that if they are given conditions to join the organization, they must "see the light at the end of the tunnel"³². According to Pellegrini, EU needs to play a major role in the Western Balkans, especially when taking into the consideration increasing activities of Russia and China in the region. In relation to the announcement of Croatia that it will organize a similar summit in 2020 under its EU presi-

31 Later on, František Lipka also became the first Slovak head of mission in Podgorica.

32 Premier Pellegrini at Summit in Sofia: Slovakia Supports EU Enlargement, 17 May 2018, <http://newsnow.tasr.sk/foreign/premier-pellegrini-at-summit-in-sofia-slovakia-supports-eu-enlargement/>.

gency, the Slovak PM emphasized the fact that such a summit will definitely need to bring concrete results.³³

In relation to the Sofia Summit it is worth to mention that the adopted declaration mentions directly the Western Balkan Fund. This proves that the V4 countries were able to include a project with their ownership in an important EU document.³⁴

The Sofia EU Summit was preceded by the meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of the V4 countries and four Balkan EU member countries – Greece, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania in Cape Sounio, Greece (the so-called “Visegrad-4 Plus Balkan-4 Plus Meeting”)³⁵. The representatives of the Western Balkan countries, as well as Slovenia and Cyprus were also invited to discuss the future of the enlargement process, as well as future of the EU in general and energy security as observers.³⁶ Though the ministerial meeting was held in quite unusual format, it was the proof that the V4 countries and EU neighbours of Western Balkan countries take their commitment to support European future of the region seriously.

However, when speaking about the initiatives of EU member states towards the Western Balkans it should not be forgotten that Slovakia is not an integral part of the so-called Berlin Process. Since the Berlin Process encompasses several important EU members (including Germany and France), the fact that Slovakia, but also the Czech Republic and Hungary are excluded can be considered as disadvantage. Still, the Visegrad Group can continue to play a role of an important supporter of the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU. The invitation of Poland to the Berlin Process can rather be taken as an opportunity to enrich the whole process with some useful ideas originating in the V4, as well as a possibility to look for additional synergies between the two initiatives.

Conclusions and final remarks

The relations of Slovakia with the Western Balkan region can be characterized as intensive on all three examined levels of cooperation – bilateral, regional and European (EU). Especially after the accession to the EU the Western Balkans has played an important role in Slovakia’s foreign and European policy. The support of the European perspective of the WB region has been continuous, regardless of the changes of the governments in Slovakia. On both regional (V4) and EU levels Slovakia rather occupied the role of a policy-mover than policy taker in relations to the Western Balkans.

The presence of Slovak diplomats in the region in the positions of EU envoys/representatives raised the reputation of Slovak diplomacy both on regional and EU levels. The minister Miroslav Lajčák, as well as MEP Eduard Kukan are the living proofs of such engagement. Nevertheless, in order to maintain the reputation of Slovakia as an “expert” in WB affairs it would definitely be positive if more Slovak diplomats become active as representatives of EU institutions in the region.

Continuity is also apparent in Slovakia’s position towards the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo. Slovakia has remained to be among five EU members that have not recognized Kosovo’s independence unless there is an approval of the UN Security Council and/or an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on the issue. The reason for this position can be found in domestic politics and can be explained by the

33 Ibid

34 Sofia Declaration, 17 May 2018, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf.

35 The first ministerial meeting in this format had taken place in Budapest in December 2007, with the participation of these eight countries and of observers from the Western Balkans. The May 2018 meeting was initiated by the Greek and Hungarian foreign ministers.

36 From the Western Balkan region only Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro were present. Slovakia was represented by the state secretary of the MFA – and de facto acting minister of foreign affairs – Ivan Korčok. See, for instance, also Korčok at the foreign affairs ministerial meeting of V4, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, Cyprus and the Balkan partners, 10 – 11 May 2018, https://www.mzv.sk/web/ateny-en/news/-/asset_publisher/olsKsIdtEfpB/content/i-korcok-na-stretnuti-ministrov-zahranicnych-veci-krajin-v4-bulharska-rumunska-slovinska-chorvatska-cypru-a-balkan-skych-partnerov/10182.

lack of political consensus on that issue, supported also by (legally not-binding) declaration of the Slovak Parliament. On the other hand, this fact does not prevent Slovakia to maintain and intensify contacts with the representatives of various institutions in Kosovo and support joint projects, also through the Official Development Assistance. Slovakia has also developed technical tools for cooperation with Kosovo, which includes opening of a branch embassy in Pristina and recognition of Kosovar passports. Taking into consideration the current political spectrum, it is, however, difficult to predict whether Slovakia will decide to change its position towards Kosovo's independence.

Though the focus of Slovakia's ODA has partially moved to other geographical regions, selected Western Balkan countries remain to be the target countries. Taking into the consideration the length of the accession process to the EU for some countries of the region, Slovak ODA will remain to be an important instrument of Slovakia's foreign policy in the Western Balkans for a while.

The V4 + format represents the most efficient instrument for intensifying cooperation with the Western Balkan countries on a regional, but also on EU levels. The maintenance of a close cooperation with other V4 countries, as well as with some other like-minded countries from the EU, is in the vital interest of the Slovak Republic. The V4 countries not only can 'give a lecture' to the Western Balkan partners, but can also provide them with some concrete information and lessons learned about problematic issues they faced on their way to the EU.

It will be a challenge for Slovakia, together with the V4 countries and other like-minded countries to maintain the enthusiasm for EU membership in some of the Western Balkan countries. The role of Slovakia and its partners will be to explain that the reforms that are the prerequisite for EU membership have to be implemented without a firmly set date of their EU accession. On the other hand, it will also be challenging to maintain the interest of other EU countries for the enlargement process, especially of those that have always been holding a sceptical view.

Certain continuity is – regrettably - noticeable also in the case of economic performance of Slovakia in the Western Balkan region. The increased diplomatic presence of Slovakia in the Western Balkans in more than a decade has not been matched with rising importance as a trade partner or investor. In none of the Western Balkan countries Slovakia ranks in the top 10 among the most important trade partners or investors, while all other Visegrad partners – the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland – rank higher on such lists. One of the preconditions to strengthen Slovakia's economic presence in the region is the intensification of internal coordination of all the involved stakeholders.

Recommendations

In light of the above, the following recommendations to the relevant stakeholders can be put forward:

In the Western Balkans:

- continue the implementation of necessary reforms even if the progress in the integration process with the EU is slower than expected. The reforms as such are helping to modernize the countries and are beneficial for the societies.
- intensify the exchange of experience and best practices from the integration process with other countries in the region both on governmental and non-governmental levels,
- strengthen existing forms of regional cooperation and bilateral ties with other countries in the region. Particular attention should be paid to further support of the Western Balkan Fund, which was inspired by the International Visegrad Fund.

- initiate and/or support joint projects aiming at European integration with partners from Visegrad countries. Though the experience of V4 countries from the integration process might seem outdated, the V4 countries can still provide WB countries with adequate experts that have direct experience from the accession process. In addition, V4 countries have more than ten years of experience with working inside EU institutions.

In Slovakia:

- continue supporting the Western Balkan countries on their integration to the EU and explore the ways of engaging Slovak diplomats more intensively in the region of the WB, especially as representatives of EU institutions,
- maintain the Western Balkans as a target region of the official development assistance. Implement flexible measures in terms of know how transfer that would be responsive to the changing situation on the ground and needs of individual countries.
- use the presidency in the Visegrad Group to intensify cooperation with the Western Balkan partners on the Visegrad Group level, with particular attention paid to the development of sector cooperation. Consider the extension of the Civil Servants Mobility Program supported by the International Visegrad Fund to more Western Balkan countries.
- support further the Western Balkans Fund and consider launching of joint IVF-WB project calls focusing on the intensification of cooperation between the two regions, explore further the ways how to increase the investments of Slovak companies in and bilateral trade with the Western Balkan countries. Specific attention should be paid to the needs of small and medium size enterprises that are interested in cooperation with the Western Balkans partners.

In the European Union:

- provide the enlargement policy with an adequate support and continue the open door policy. The enlargement policy has belonged to the most successful EU policies so it deserves particular attention.
- Avoid the “inflation of summits” dedicated to the Western Balkans. Ensure that the next EU-WB Summit held under the Croatian EU Presidency in 2020 will deliver tangible results for the Western Balkan countries.
- reflect adequately progress made by individual candidate countries, especially in terms of the implementation of important reforms, and enable any candidate country to accede the European Union as soon as it fulfils all the criteria. ,
- support by all means the intensification of regional cooperation in Western Balkans and provide liveliest and most efficient regional initiatives with adequate financial support.
- encourage EU members that participates in different initiatives aiming to support the European perspective of the Western Balkans to look for synergies,
- extend internships for civil servants at the EU institutions and staff mobility programs in order to satisfy the demand on the side of WB countries,
- improve communication about EU programs that are being implemented in the Western Balkan region. Besides metropolitan areas, smaller regional centers should also be taken into consideration while developing information campaigns.



Friends of the Regional Convention on the European Integration of the WB

