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Visegrad Group's cooperation with Western Balkans: achievements and the way forward

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June 2019



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Acknowledgements: *The project is co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.*

This project No. 21830277 was made possible through Visegrad+ Grant from the International Visegrad Fund.

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Impressum

Title: Visegrad Group's cooperation with the Western
Balkans: achievements and the way forward

Publisher: Institutite for Democracy
"Societas Civilis" - Skopje

Authors: Jana Juzová, Anna Orosz, Andrzej Sadecki,
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Proofreading: Jana Dimitrovska

Design: Dejan Kuzmanovski

The publication can be downloaded from:

<https://idscs.org.mk/>

Introduction

The Visegrad Group is often described as a non-institutionalized platform of regional cooperation, functioning on an ad hoc basis. This description is however only partly true. Throughout its almost three decades of existence, the V4 countries, that is the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, have come to an agreement on several issues, which serves as a basis for their continuing and long-term engagement. Among its flagship priorities is the support for the neighbouring regions, that is, along the Eastern neighbourhood, the Western Balkans. Since 2004, when all V4 countries have already been anchored in the European Union and the NATO, the idea to assist the neighbourhood in its

transformation and EU path has become one of the new priorities of the Visegrad cooperation.

This policy paper takes stock of the policies and actions of the Visegrad Group towards the Western Balkans.¹ It looks at the actions undertaken collectively by the four countries under the banner of the V4,² as well as the funding activities by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). The evaluation of the hitherto achievements of the policies towards the Western Balkans is a starting point for reflection on what the V4 can do more and what the V4 can do better. It includes recommendations of both practical and political character.

¹ For pragmatic reasons, the Western Balkan region is considered here as: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. In the overview of the past V4 action towards the region, Croatia is also taken into account, but only until the point it entered the EU in 2013

² The approaches and policies of particular V4 countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) towards the Western Balkans are not reviewed in this paper. This can be found for instance in the following report: "Visegrad Group and the Western Balkan Countries" (2018), http://www.emins.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2018_Visegrad-Group-And-The-Wester-Balkans-Countries-sa-koricom.pdf.

Political dimension

First and foremost, the Visegrad Group has engaged in regular political cooperation with the Western Balkan countries. It is the only regional grouping within the EU that maintains a structured dialogue with the WB6 countries. Regular summits of foreign ministers of the Visegrad countries and their counterparts from the Western Balkan countries have been taking place 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. These annual summits are usually attended by the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and/or the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy as well.

Besides regular ministerial gatherings, the meetings of political directors in the V4-WB6 format have become another

“informal institution” underpinning cooperation between the two regional groupings. The participation of the V4 Presidency’s representative in regular WB6 Foreign Ministers meetings can be also mentioned as another instrument of (political) cooperation.

As for the political content, the Visegrad Group has established itself as a vocal supporter of the European perspective for the Western Balkans, advocating the enlargement agenda both in the EU and among the WB6 countries. In recent years, this was showcased mainly in the attempts to overcome the so-called enlargement fatigue in the EU. For instance, when in 2016 the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker announced that the timing of enlargement packages would change and one year would pass without any evaluation of the developments in the region, the V4 countries urged the EC to fully engage in the region and provide an alternative progress assessment possibility.³ The V4 also tried

⁵ The Visegrad Group Joint Statement on the Western Balkans, 29 November 2016 <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/the-visegrad-group-joint>

to reinvigorate the efforts of the WB6 countries on their path to the EU and offered their “helping hand” in the process. A very specific attempt to address the public of 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 EC’s country reports back in 2015.⁴

Inspirational dimension - know-how sharing

The Visegrad Group also embarked on sharing know-how of regional cooperation with the WB6 countries and inspiring the institutionalization of collaboration between them on various levels. 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. Actually, CEFTA can be considered as one of the most efficient examples of know-how export of the Visegrad Group to the Western Balkans. CEFTA enabled the Visegrad countries (and other countries of ‘wider’ Central Europe – Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia) to prepare themselves for entering the EU single market. CEFTA 2006, now encompassing Western Balkan countries (and Moldova), has exactly the same goal.

The establishment of the Western Balkans Fund in 2015 with a similar focus as the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) is another important example of the institutional know-how transfer from the V4 to the Western Balkans. Similar to the IVF, the Western Balkans Fund is financed by the governments of the Western Balkans countries and supports mainly people-to-people contacts and cooperation among civil society organisations. Since its establishment, the WBF has benefited from IVF’s technical assistance.

⁵ 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>.

Political dimension

The V4 cooperation with Western Balkan countries extends beyond the strictly political or diplomatic dialogue and has involved to some extent the sectoral cooperation as well. The most intensive ties were established in the area of justice and home affairs, particularly since the intensification of the migration crisis in the Balkans in 2015. However, long before that, the issues jointly discussed included the fight against corruption,⁵ judicial training⁶ and asylum issues.⁷ Yet another platform of cooperation is the “V4-Western Balkans Expert Network on Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights”, initiated by

the Polish Presidency (2012/2013). In 2014, the V4 Ministers of Interior signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of the V4 Good Governance Forum. Particular attention was paid to the promotion of exchange of information and sharing best practices with Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.⁸

The eruption of the migration crisis in 2015 intensified the cooperation of the V4 and the Western Balkans, especially due to the significance of the so-called Balkan route for migrants. The meetings of V4 Ministers of Interior with their counterparts from Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia can serve as an example.⁹ Moreover, with the support of Austria, the V4 launched cooperation with the

⁵ For instance, a seminar on the experiences in the field of 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.

⁶ 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>.

⁷ The Czech V4 Presidency (2011-2012) organized for instance the 2nd Ministerial conference of the Prague Process which focused primarily on issues related to asylum and migration. See: Report on the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group July 2011 – June 2012, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports>.

⁸ Report of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group July 2013 – June 2014, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports>. The last forum was organized under the 2017/18 Hungarian V4 Presidency in April 2018 and its focus was on the trends in public administration development, with special focus on e-government.

⁹ 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.

Western Balkan countries on protection of their borders.¹⁰ Another example is police cooperation, though it was primarily based on bilateral agreements of the V4 countries with selected counterparts in the Western Balkans (Macedonia, Serbia).

Cooperation in other sectors would include especially defence and energy. For instance, the meeting of V4 Ministers of Defence and their counterparts from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia took place in 2009, during the Hungarian V4 Presidency, with the purpose to discuss in detail the NATO and EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries, as well as a possible V4 contribution.¹¹

Although cooperation in energy included mostly Croatia before its EU accession (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 Balkan countries as well. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia were also co-signatories to the Summit Declaration, together with the Visegrad countries, Austria, Bulgaria and Romania. The Summit initiated the creation of several working groups, including a V4 working group on north-south interconnection.

Civil society and administration

The International Visegrad Fund – the donor institution of the Visegrad Group - has for more than a decade extended its funding activities to the Western Balkan countries (alongside the Eastern Partnership countries). Between 2008 and 2018, the IVF funded 60 projects with participation of the entities from the WB6 countries. Almost 180 applicants from the WB6 countries were beneficiaries of IVF ▶

¹⁰ Visegrad Group and Austria Summit Declaration on "Setting up a Mechanism for Assistance in Protecting the Borders of the Western Balkan Countries", 21 June 2018, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/visegrad-group-and>

¹¹ See: 2009/2010 Hungarian Presidency—Annual Report, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports/2009-2010-hungarian-110412>.

► scholarships from 2004 to 2018.¹²

In line with the decision of the Visegrad countries, the IVF dedicates funds to projects that are important for the region and support V4 agenda towards the region. Among the main themes are promotion of Euro-Atlantic integration, democratization, cross-border cooperation, security and defence, migration, etc. The IVF projects regularly cover topics related to reconciliation (following the implementation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue by involving also local civil society actors, sharing experience related to reconciliation and best practices as well as lessons learned from V4's own reconciliation examples). The IVF also supported projects which addressed questions like radicalization and foreign fighters (including fighters in Ukraine, Syria and Iraq), important challenges for the region which necessitate cross-border cooperation to manage. In 2019, giving new impetus

to the enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans is among the strategic priorities of the International Visegrad Fund.

The Western Balkan region has also been in focus of the "Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform", funded by the IVF. This is an expert network which supports the V4 MFAs through providing long- and short-term analyses, covering among others topics related to the Western Balkans. The consortium also operates the Civil Servants Mobility Program (CSMP) established in 2014 and supported by the IVF. Since 2017, the programme has been extended to the WB6 countries too, when the first group of civil servants from Serbia participated in study trips to all V4 countries' capitals.¹³ In 2018, civil servants from Montenegro participated in the programme.¹⁴ In 2019, two out of three groups of civil servants visiting V4 countries will come from the WB region, namely from Albania and North

¹² Data provided by the International Visegrad Fund in April 2019.

¹³ Civil Servants Mobility Program 2017, https://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Think-Visegrad_CSMP2017_report.pdf.

¹⁴ Study visit by the Montenegrin border police: the management of irregular migration, 29 November 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/wydarzenia/study-visit-montenegrin-border-police-management-irregular-migration>.

Macedonia.¹⁵ As part of CSMP, study visits are organized in the hosting V4 country through which the civil servants of the beneficiary country can get deeper knowledge about policy implementation, challenges of EU law's harmonization and application.

Recommendations

All in all, the Visegrad Group has developed quite a comprehensive policy towards the Western Balkan region, encompassing the political cooperation with the WB6 countries, promotion of the enlargement agenda in the EU, sharing know-how in regional cooperation and political/economic transformation, as well as supporting people-to-people contacts. Nevertheless, recent developments – including the enlargement fatigue in the EU and several political and economic challenges threatening the stability of the Western Balkans - make it ever more pressing to intensify the

V4-WB6 cooperation. In order to avoid the ritualization of interregional contacts, filling it with new content and adjusting it to current challenges, we recommend as follows:

- There is an untapped potential for regional cooperation among the WB6 countries, which is also a prerequisite set by the European Union for the region.¹⁶ There are quite a lot of formats of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans designed to bring the countries of the region together. However useful they are, most of the groupings have been initiated from outside the region which often translates into a lack of ownership and limited commitment by the countries from the region. The Visegrad Group can serve as a model of cooperation “from within” and has quite a unique experience of pre- and post-accession regional cooperation in Europe. When it comes to civil society, the transfer of know-how in regional cooperation should go forward beyond the current achievements, such as the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund. Among the good practices that the ►

¹⁶ A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, European Commission, 6 February 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

► V4 could share is the structured think-tank or civil society cooperation.¹⁷ Showcasing the benefits of regional cooperation in overcoming bilateral conflicts and strengthening the political clout of each country should also be in focus.

- An area explored to a limited extent is the sectoral cooperation between the V4 and the WB6 countries. So far the meetings in the V4+WB format were organized on the level of the ministries of foreign affairs and WB6 countries' representatives were rarely included in other settings. While the political dialogue is to remain a central platform of interregional relations, inviting officials and experts from the WB6 countries to the V4 meetings in the fields of economy, transport or energy can bring new incentives for cooperation and "socialize" the WB6 countries in the sectoral cooperation with EU countries. Another area where closer cooperation

could develop is digitalisation (and digital transformation), since it represents a joint challenge for V4 and WB6 countries. There certainly is space for exchange of experience between the two regions in several fields, including e-government. The V4 countries could also promote the inclusion of WB6 countries' representatives the EU settings.

- Sharing know-how can be particularly productive when focused on a specific policy area or functioning of an institution. Notwithstanding several shortcomings existing in the V4 countries, there are a number of good practices to be shared with the WB6 countries. For instance, a recent study showed a significant problem in collecting statistics in the Western Balkan countries¹⁸ and this could be potentially addressed through cooperation of statistical offices. Otherwise, institutions such as border

¹⁷ The support for cooperation between think tanks in both regions is mentioned directly also in the last joint statement of V4 and WB countries ministries See: V4 Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement on the Western Balkans, Bratislava, 28 May 2019, <http://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/3574816/190528+V4+Foreign+Ministers%E2%80%99+Joint+Statement+on+the+Western+Balkans,+Bratislava>

¹⁸ Tim Judah and Alida Vracic, The Western Balkans' statistical black hole, 2 May 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_western_balkans_statistical_black_hole_eu_enlargement

authorities, state audit institutions, patent institutes, ombudsman offices or various other government agencies, can play an important role in sharing know-how and twinning programs, improving the quality of public administration in the WB6 countries and facilitating their preparation for EU accession. Well-established initiatives, such as the Enlargement Academy run by the Polish MFA,¹⁹ could be further developed and expanded in order to share V4's experiences from the accession process. Parliamentary cooperation could also be a potentially fruitful opportunity for political dialogue and exchange of information and know-how.

- Although cross-border cooperation in Central Europe is not developed under the Visegrad umbrella, the good experience in this field shared by the V4 states and the often unexploited cross-border potential

among the WB6 countries makes it an excellent area for know-how sharing. For instance, the Polish-Czech borderland witnesses one of the most intensive cooperation in Europe, while the Slovak-Hungarian cross-border cooperation proves that sometimes even tense bilateral relations can be eased by bringing together local actors and focusing on concrete projects and challenges.

- The question of how to communicate European integration to the public could potentially be another item for Visegrad-Balkan cooperation. The countries of the Western Balkans currently face a crisis in public support for European integration, while V4 countries' societies remain strongly pro-European after 15 years of EU membership.²⁰ However, in the pre-accession period, EU membership was quite contested and a highly debated issue in the V4 countries and the lessons ▶

¹⁹ The Enlargement Academy is organized annually since 2015 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland. It is addressed to public officials of the countries aspiring to joining the EU. See: https://www.msz.gov.pl/en/news/officials_from_western_balkans_train_at_enlargement_academy_in_warsaw_?channel=www.

²⁰ Particularly Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, the Czech Republic to a lesser extent. See: <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/86481>.

► learned from that period could be potentially useful for candidate countries from the Western Balkans.

- One of the crucial tasks for WB6 countries are the reforms in the field of rule of law - one of the main EU accession requirements. The V4 should intensify their efforts in assisting the WB6 countries in this endeavour, through reinvigorating expert contacts, for instance in the framework of the already existing V4-Western Balkans Expert Network on Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights.

- With Brexit, the EU loses one of the main proponents of the enlargement policies and engagement EU's neighbouring countries. At the same time, other major EU member states display quite a restrictive approach towards enlargement. This stresses the necessity for active lobbying for the European perspective of the Western Balkans even more. The V4 should also look for synergies with other initiatives aiming at revitalizing the European integration process of Western

Balkan countries, such as the Berlin Process.

- On EU level, apart from promotion of the enlargement agenda, the V4 countries can contribute to several issues instrumental for the Western Balkan region. For instance, the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the years 2021-2027 will soon enter its decisive phase. This is when EU's financial assistance to the Western Balkan countries will be decided for the next years to come, among others the IPA funds. The V4 countries should make sure in the course of the MFF negotiations that funding for EU's neighbouring countries is secured adequately to the weight of the Western Balkan region. At the same time, the Western Balkan countries should make efforts to improve the absorption of EU pre-accession funds in order to assure the credibility of the claim, whereas the Visegrad Group could prepare them for sufficient absorption of the Structural and Cohesion Funds once they become member states. Moreover, inclusion of

EU enlargement toward the Western Balkans into the strategic priorities of the new Commission could facilitate higher EU ambitions regarding this issue and provide political ground for financial and institutional support. Finally, in the coming years, three of V4 countries will hold the EU Presidency²¹ which should serve as an opportunity to promote the enlargement policy and engagement with the Western Balkans.

- The next few months following the EU elections will also determine in whose hands the policy towards the Western Balkans will be and what the approach of the new Commission will be towards the region. This concerns mainly the post of the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, as well as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. It is in the interest of the V4 countries to advocate for strong nominees for these posts and then to engage with the new EU leadership to keep the Western Balkans high on the agenda.

²¹ The Presidency of the Council of the EU will be held by the Czech Republic in July-December 2022, Hungary in July-December 2024 and Poland in January-June 2025.

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About the Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project

In December 2018, the SEE Think Network received financial support from the International Visegrad Fund as part of the Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project. The network therefore broadened its scope of activities in the Visegrad region through cooperation with the following think tanks: the Centre for Eastern Studies from Poland (OSW), Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade from Hungary (KKI), the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA) from Slovakia, and EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM) from the Czech Republic.

As part of Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project, the SEE Think Net Network plans to organize four promotional events in the Visegrad and Western Balkans region. The events will take place in Bratislava, Budapest, Tirana, and Skopje. These events which be used for the promotion of 7 policy papers on the key topics of the Berlin Process as well as the regional cooperation between the Western Balkans and Visegrad Group countries.

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Information about the International Visegrad Fund

The Visegrad Fund is an international donor organization, established in 2000 by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to promote regional cooperation in the Visegrad region (V4) as well as between the V4 region and other countries, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The Fund does so by awarding €8 million through grants, scholarships and artist residencies provided annually by equal contributions of all the V4 countries. Other donor countries (Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States) have provided another €10 million through various grant schemes run by the Fund since 2012.

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This publication is available at:

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*This project No. 21830277 was made possible through
Visegrad+ Grant from the International Visegrad Fund.*