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Think together,  
**THINK BALKANS:**  
A new model for enhanced  
regional cooperation

By Marie Jelenka Kirchner

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# Introduction

In February 2018, the European Commission Communication promised a credible enlargement perspective for Western Balkan (WB) countries. Since then, the start of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has been discussed and debated more or less passionately, but a decision is still pending. This is however less the fault of a lacking commitment on the side of the European Union, but rather due to the re-nationalization of the EU accession policy. The divergence among EU members towards enlargement keeps sending out mixed signals. That said, Western Balkan countries do have allies in Brussels who call for quicker accession. To ensure smooth accession and sustainable reforms, these pro-enlargement voices often look to analyse the shortcomings of the Eastern Enlargement in 2004/2007 to prevent the accession of illiberal, corrupt governments in economically weak states to the European Union (EU). Driven by a strong “return to Europe” narrative, CEE countries had shown a tendency to accept whatever condition was expected of them in order to join the

EU quickly without any consultation with the citizens of their countries. Today, this has led in some countries to governments re-claiming national sovereignty and a “it’s all Brussels’ fault” narrative. Taking this experience into account, WB countries today face stricter conditions and are monitored more closely, which further complicates their accession, but also takes a more inclusive approach into account. Research has underlined that lasting democratization needs strong civil societies and ownership of different, non-state actors in the political decision-making processes of a country. EU accession entails many important political, economic as well as normative decisions which can barely be taken by a government alone if a democratic backlash some years into EU membership is to be prevented. With a view to learning from the Eastern Enlargement when it comes to Western Balkan EU accession, this paper looks at the most formalized cooperative structure of CEE cooperation, the Visegrad Group, thereby also drawing lessons for Western Balkan regional cooperation.

# Think Visegrad: a model for regional cooperation

The Visegrad Group (V4) is a regional cooperative network between the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary with the purpose of tackling common political challenges. The format was initiated in 1991 at the end of the Cold War to bring the countries closer to the European Union, based on political and economic cooperation between themselves. Today, the group has no formal structure within the European Union, but instead consists of different formalized instruments to enable successful cooperation between the states. The central financial instrument is the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) which is (financially) supported by all V4 governments as well as foreign donors. The IVF was established in 2000 to promote regional cooperation, formerly between the V4, but increasingly also with other countries or in other regions such as the Western Balkans and Eastern

Partnership countries. The fund awards scholarships and grants to creative and innovative ideas in CEE.

Since 2012, **the fund supports the 'Think Visegrad' initiative, a Think Tank Platform to serve as a "network for structured dialogue on issues of strategic regional importance"**.<sup>1</sup> These issues include matters of regional and international security, environmental politics, the handling of migration and the stance on European/EU affairs. **Think Visegrad offers a platform and financial support for several think tanks from the region to work commonly on research, analyses and responses to political challenges in the region.** In order to actively engage in EU policy making, Think Visegrad opened a Brussels office in 2016 which main goal is to "encourage debate on issues of common interest to the EU and the V4 and explain the positions of the V4 to a wide audience". The office brings positions and perspectives from the V4 closer to the administrative heart of the European Union and therefore allows Think Visegrad to spread the results of comprehensive analyses more effectively and to promote

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<sup>1</sup> More information on Think Visegrad can be found online: [think.visegradfund.org](http://think.visegradfund.org)

their positions with emphasis. In all this, Think Visegrad formulates its various opinions independently from the V4 governments bringing multi-faceted perspectives from CEE countries on current matters of political significance into the European discourse and allows civil society and independent institutions of the respective countries an active role in European policy making.

EU accession in 2004 shifted the priorities of the Visegrad group which had before been focused on EU integration of all its four members. The renewed agenda defined closer cooperation with non-V4-states as a priority. Bridging Western and Eastern Europe, the V4 took on a facilitating role to tie non-EU states in Eastern Europe closer to the West and to support these states in their efforts to integrate into the structures of the EU. This also made the Western Balkans a priority area of the V4. In light of the EU accession of Western Balkan countries, the V4 depict a valuable concept of regional cooperation which can serve as a helpful blueprint for the Western Balkan 6 countries (WB6) on

their way towards the EU. If lessons are learnt from the V4 and if best practices are borrowed, WB6 integration into the EU will be a success. Regional cooperation is not a new approach to the WB6, but with a momentous opportunity for crucial steps forward towards membership, the concept of regional cooperation as presented by the V4 is a great addition to integrating WB6 sustainably and successfully into the EU.

## Think Balkans: A valuable structure for comprehensive and inclusive reform in the WB6

EU-WB relations are unfortunately often accompanied by uncertainties, false hopes and a lack of credibility on both sides.<sup>2</sup> This is not a good standpoint for EU accession of the WB6. For good reasons, the EU has clearly communicated its deep concern for the rule of law, the quality of democracy and the economic situation – to name only few areas – of (prospective) candidate states ▶

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<sup>2</sup> Ivan Damjanovski and Marko Kmezcic would in fact argue that the Western Balkans accession path "remains all but credible" and explain why, for more information see *Europeanisation and Institutionalisation of EU Rules in the Western Balkans. 2019*. In Gordy, Eric and Efendic, Adnan (eds): *Meaningful Reform in the Western Balkans. Between formal institutions and informal practices*. Bern. Peter Lang. pp. 21-64.

▶ in the Western Balkans. While accession negotiations have started with Serbia and Montenegro and are hopefully to begin with Albania and North Macedonia by the end of the year, actual membership still lies in the rather distant future. While the European Commission has sent out clear signals of support for WB6 EU accession in the past months, member states show reluctance to formulate a common, supportive stance. At the same time, it is valid to expect Western Balkan countries to reform substantially and to solve bilateral disputes before entering the EU. In this process, it makes sense to encourage cooperation and common approaches in the region. Countries face not only similar political and economic difficulties, but also have a shared history.

Regional cooperation has been identified by the European Union as a pre-condition for successful accession and therefore several forums to enable regional dialogue in the Western Balkans have been created. The EU or individual member states have encouraged regional cooperation, for example through the Berlin Process or, as mentioned before, by means of the V4.

**Based on the idea of the International**

**Visegrad Fund, the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) was funded in 2015 and began operating in 2017.**

The WBF operates under the same principles and objectives as the IVF and is equally financed by the governments of its membership countries, hence all WB6 countries including Kosovo. Under the theme “supporting common projects”, the WBF provides funding for projects in three key areas: (1) Sustainable economic development; (2) educational exchange and cooperation and (3) cultural cooperation. The WBF has opened many doors for regional cooperation at eye-level in the WB region. However, other aspects of V4 regional cooperation have so far been overlooked. Most notably, Think Visegrad could serve as a valuable blueprint to WB regional cooperation. Nowadays, the EU puts a lot more emphasis on the inclusion of civil society into the democratization process of transforming countries. This has made governments in the WB realize the necessity to cooperate with civil society and to ask for the expertise think tanks have to offer. This paper therefore proposes the funding of *Think Balkans*, a formalized network of think tanks just like Think Visegrad which will provide a space

for independent research from the region, funded by all WB6 governments through the WBF.

Looking at the lessons learnt from the Eastern Enlargement, formats designed for regional cooperation on civil society level could be a crucial factor for successful democratic transformation in candidate states and pave the way for sustainable integration into the European Union. The gradual adaptation of EU legislation (“*acquis communautaire*”) is only one aspect of Europeanization during EU accession. Often overlooked, EU integration also includes a significant normative dimension. EU membership challenges traditional values and norms, because of the open-minded, inclusive and anti-discriminatory self-understanding of the EU. These values might appear to some as double standards, but, needless to say, a country does much better in the long term in the EU if its society can adapt to the norms proposed by the EU. To adapt to these norms, it is the responsibility of governments to implement the

corresponding legislation which can be communicated to the citizens by active and critically reflecting think tanks and CSOs.

## Think Balkans: a guarantee for successful EU integration of the Western Balkans

As the name suggests, Think Balkans would be a Think Tank network based on the concept of Think Visegrad. As explained above, its activities would be supported by the Western Balkans Fund. One of the many existing crises in the European Union is the democratic backsliding in several member states. While the EU enlargement policy had been originally celebrated as the most effective and powerful foreign policy tool of the European Union,<sup>3</sup> Europeanists have backpedalled in their praise of its

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<sup>3</sup> Tocci, Nathalie. Does the ENP respond to the EU's post-enlargement challenges? 2005. *The International Spectator*, 40:1, pp. 21-32, DOI: 10.1080/03932720508457108.

► transformative power. Instead, scholars have been looking at the question what exactly was missing during the accession talks in the 1990s and early 2000s and therefore favouring democratic backsliding in different new member states. Several factors fall together, but one important element is the exclusion of the general public and civil society in the process of accession negotiations. While there had been (half-hearted) programmes to involve the civil society as well as referenda on EU accession which were widely supported, it was never properly communicated to the broader public what EU membership meant, demanded and offered.

of EU accession and membership. This can easily lead to a dangerous situation in which governments half-heartedly implement reforms their citizens are uninformed about. This asymmetry can later easily be exploited by populist, anti-European groups who criticize the elitist approach of EU politics and re-claim sovereignty. This tactic can today be observed across Europe. To prevent this, it is crucial to ensure an inclusive accession process from the very beginning. **Think Balkans could be a crucial element of this inclusive approach.**

Furthermore, fluctuations in governments paired with a lack of structured formats for CSO inclusion made it difficult for existing organizations to take on a pivotal role in policy making.<sup>4</sup>

Looking at research in the WB region, support for EU accession is generally high among citizens as is the lack of knowledge of the exact procedures and demands

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<sup>4</sup> Vando, Peter, Traxler, Nicole, Millner, Reinhard and Meyer, Michael. Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges and Opportunities. 2017. Erste Stiftung Vienna. [http://www.erstestiftung.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/civil\\_society\\_studie\\_issuu\\_e1.pdf](http://www.erstestiftung.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/civil_society_studie_issuu_e1.pdf)

# Think Visegrad and Think Balkans: Strengthening countries from within

As pointed out, the V4 have increased their efforts to facilitate EU integration of the Western Balkans. This happens, for example, by means of study visits of civil servants from Western Balkan countries to V4 states, but could have an even more meaningful influence on the reform in WB6 if think tanks from both regions would cooperate more. At the moment, think tank cooperation in the WB6 is already happening e.g. through formats of V4 programmes or the Berlin Process. This could be even more effective, if think tanks and researchers could cooperate within structured networks. The current presidency of the Berlin Process is held by Poland and, besides Poland, the other three Visegrad countries have clearly positioned it as pro-enlargement when it comes to the Western Balkans. Looking however at nationalist tendencies in some V4 countries and their controversial reputation in the EU,

this raises the question how favourable the lead of these countries is in the case with Western Balkan EU integration.<sup>5</sup> For some, this raises the question whether V4 and WB6 cooperation can be useful at all, but this is clearly a wrong approach.

**What is needed is not less cooperation between regions that have gone or will go through the progress of EU-accession. Instead, it is time for new structures and tools for cooperation.**

The importance of structured civil society cooperation in this regard cannot be emphasized often enough. **Think Balkans as a platform will be able to profit from the pre-accession and post-accession experience of the V4 through the structured exchange with Think Visegrad.** During the accession period, the V4 experience can provide helpful assistance in the monitoring of governments to prevent an exclusive (towards civil society) accession progress which would inevitably lead to a de-facto continuation of illiberal and informal policy practice, despite those policies being officially framed as pro-European and aligned with the *acquis communautaire*.

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<sup>5</sup> Juzova, Jana. Visegrad in the Western Balkans: Losing ground? 2019. Think Visegrad Policy Brief. <http://europeum.org/data/articles/2-juzova.pdf>

# Lessons learnt from Eastern Enlargement

In the WB region, many think tanks and CSOs are well-aware of the shortcomings of their governments. These institutions and organizations have been working on democratization in their countries for years, sometimes in an obstructive environment and against pressure exerted by government officials. **Much better than any EU official or EU institution, local non-state actors can provide in-depth research into all matters relevant for political, economic and social transformation.**

Think tanks and CSOs stand naturally at the interface between society and governments. With their research and through different formats, they can capture, or even stir, attitudes and opinions of the general public, while at the same time communicating

developments and decisions of the government to a broader audience. When it comes to regional cooperation, **the rational and analytical approach of think tanks helps to overcome the difficult legacy of the past** by focusing on common challenges and regional solutions to it. Think tanks and CSOs have the potential to foster progressive and rational discourses and dialogue. At the same time, think tanks and CSOs in the WB are not only challenged by sometimes hostile environments, but also by financial shortcuts. Additionally, many of them are relatively young compared to organizations from abroad. Therefore, **a structured regional format for Think Tank cooperation is important to share best practices, allow supportive funding schemes and provide training across country borders.** *Think Balkans* would be essential in including civil societies and an analytical perspective into the EU integration discourse in the region.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> More background information on how to raise the capacities of WB CSOs based on the experience of the V4 can be found in a study supported by the Visegrad Fund: Civil Society and Policy Making in the Visegrad Group Countries. Lessons for the Western Balkans. 2019. <https://ten.europeanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Regional-Study-Web.pdf>

## Checks and balances from within

**Strong, independent research institutions will provide check and balances in developing democracies and closely monitor the reform progress of their countries from within.**

With their human capacity on site, think tanks can disclose political scandals and hold stakeholders accountable. By utilizing the capacities of regional research, evidence-based policy making has the chance to trump over informal practices or emotions-based policy making. EU institutions have defined a number of obstacles to immediate accession of Western Balkan states, but lack the means to closely monitor the governments of these countries that have proven a tendency to 'EU-flag' certain policies to bypass debates on critical topics. This leads also to situations in which policies or practices are introduced to meet the criteria of EU conditionality, yet are not actually fully implemented. Think Tanks can provide checks and balances of their government's activities in a way

that no Brussels-based organization can do. The better think tanks and CSOs are connected, the more effectively their criticism can be channelled towards national policy makers. **It is therefore in the best interest of all EU member states to support a strong network of think tanks in the region as a guarantee for constant critical analysis of the progress in the countries.**

## Turning candidate countries into credible stakeholders of accession

Initially, regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries had been identified by the EU as desired, yet not as a top priority. This is reflected in individually negotiated and signed Stabilisation and Association Agreements. 15 years in and major successes are still pending. Over these 15 stalling years, regional cooperation has been approached differently and



► its importance increased to the extent to become a top priority. Initiatives to promote regional cooperation were driven by external as well as internal actors, yet with players from the region gaining increasing ownership in the process. This ownership is necessary, because the future of external structures such as the Berlin Process is unclear.<sup>7</sup> **Enabling regional think tank cooperation beyond big summits every now and then makes civil societies active stakeholders of the accession process. At the same time, it also calls regional governments to more credibility.** It is one thing to pretend Europeanization to EU institutions which appear often enough to be lacking credibility themselves. It is another thing to avoid active interaction with increasingly empowered think tanks from one's own country, restrict their freedoms and exclude them from the general debate. This behaviour will automatically be perceived as undemocratic and expose the quality of reform in respective

countries. Support for *Think Balkans* by all 6 governments through the Western Balkans Fund makes governments and think tanks alike active stakeholders of the reform process, based upon an inclusive regional model.

## Bringing the Balkans to Brussels

That said, strengthening think tanks and CSOs in their own countries and fostering regional cooperation in the WB is crucial to democratization of the WB6, but for successful and thorough Europeanization one more element is important. Based upon Think Visegrad, this would be the introduction of a Think Balkans Brussels Office. Even if the WB6 are encompassed by EU member states, the WB region is often not on the agenda of (Western) EU members and is perceived as an outsider in European affairs. This is extremely

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<sup>7</sup> Madhi, Gentiola. Western Balkans in the loop: Reshaping regional cooperation in times of uncertainty. 2018. [https://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Madhi\\_Western-Balkans-in-the-loop-Reshaping-regional-cooperation-in-times-of-uncertainty.pdf](https://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Madhi_Western-Balkans-in-the-loop-Reshaping-regional-cooperation-in-times-of-uncertainty.pdf)

obstructive as to the mutual process of cohesion between the EU and the WB6. *Think Balkans*, if equipped with a Brussels Office like Think Visegrad, can bring opinions, needs, challenges and ideas from the WB much more effectively into the daily policy making in Brussels. If accession should be a success story, regional actors beyond the governments must be included more thoroughly into all aspects of accession negotiations. This also includes regular involvement in meetings, events and discussions in Brussels. For successful EU integration of the WB6, it is crucial to signal an honest interest in the civil society perspectives of WB countries. Bilateral cooperation (between the EU and one WB country) will not be as successful as an approach based on firstly the entire region and secondly on the inclusion of non-state actors. A representation in Brussels will allow the WB6 to be more present at the heart of EU decision-making and prevent the EU accession process to appear exclusive, elitist and top-down.



# Conclusion

This paper has given various arguments why the creation of *Think Balkans* as a structured format for think tank cooperation in the Western Balkans is in the best interest of the WB6 and the EU. The cooperation within the V4 offers many valuable lessons for regional cooperation many of which have already been drawn by WB6. The introduction of *Think Balkans* as a structured format for think tank cooperation in the Western Balkans would be a significant addition to the already existing formats of regional cooperation. Think Balkans as a network would enable sharing of best practices, common training and empower think tanks in the region. Just like Think Visegrad, *Think Balkans* would be supported by the joint effort of all WB6 governments and will enable critical reflection on the activities and reform progress of governments by non-state actors.

Lessons from Eastern Enlargement in 2004/2007 have shown that civil society had been largely excluded from actual policy making. This should be avoided in the case of the Western Balkans accession process.

Think tanks and CSOs offer valuable checks and balances of governments during their transformation to more democratic and lawful states. At the same time, they have the capacities to directly communicate developments in the government to the citizens. Offering the civil society more ownership in the EU accession process will be crucial for a sustainable success of European integration. Calling governments for support through the tool of the WBF will lead to more credibility in the EU accession process altogether.

The positions and findings of the joint research by organizations under the umbrella of *Think Balkans* could have an even better, more direct and immediate impact on EU policy making through the introduction of a Brussels office. In conclusion, following the substantive research which has been conducted onto the importance of both civil society inclusion in transformative processes and the significance of regional cooperation for change, the introduction of *Think Balkans* should not be a question of "if?", but a question of "how soon?".



# Information about SEE Think Net

**The SEE Think Net Network** was established in mid-march 2018 as the first regional network composed of civil society organisations that aim to monitor the topics related to the Berlin Process. The Network encompasses think tanks, civil society organisations and individuals from the 6 Western Balkan countries plus Croatia and Slovenia. Besides the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” (IDSCS) which will coordinate the Network, the SEE Think Net Network includes the Network of the European Movement in Serbia (NEMinS), Open Society Foundation for Albania and its affiliate, the EU Policy Hub, Adnan Ćerimagić, Politikon Network from Montenegro, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) from Croatia and the Centre for European Perspective (CEP) from Slovenia. The goal of the SEE Think Net Network is to produce significant policy inputs and provide policy recommendations on topics that derive from the Berlin Process. As such, its activities are devised in order to closely monitor the Berlin process and the policy areas the process encompasses.

As part of 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. 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 (IFAT), the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA) from Slovakia, and EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM) from the Czech Republic.

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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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