



**THE PERCEPTION OF VISEGRAD  
GROUP ON ENLARGEMENT IN  
LIGHT OF THE RUSSIAN WAR  
ON UKRAINE**

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# Introduction

The full-fledged Russian aggression against Ukraine fundamentally changed the security structure and geopolitical situation in the whole of Europe but in the V4 countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – the consequences of this new reality have been especially tangible. This event underlined the need for quick adjustment of the EU's policy to new security and political challenges and the importance of bringing the Western Balkans countries (WB6) to the EU to stabilize the region and counter the influence of Russia and China. With granting membership candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine and the recognition of Georgia as a potential candidate in June 2022 (the so-called Association Trio) the issue of reforming the EU accession process became crucial. For countries from both regions to advance the towards EU, the accession process must be more credible and effective. In a new context of granting the Association

Trio the EU perspective, a strong message on EU re-engagement in the Western Balkans and its commitment to advancements of regional and European integration of this region turned out to be a necessity.

The V4 countries are strategically interested in the successful European integration of the WB6 and Association Trio. All of them perceived security in the Western Balkans and in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia as a crucial argument for the EU engagement in both regions. However, while the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia advocate for ambitious enlargement policy in both regions, Hungary prioritizes the Western Balkans and is less inclined to support integration of the Association Trio, especially Ukraine. The V4 countries have been vocal advocates of European integration of WB6 and supported the reform process in the region through active political engagement and know-how

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<sup>1</sup> Resilience is loosely defined as the capacity to cope with, adapt to, and recover from various external and internal challenges, see David Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity* (Routledge, 2014); By contrast, the EU defines resilience more concretely and more dynamically, as the "ability of states and societies to reform thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises. See European External Action Service, "A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy," December 15, 2019, 23, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en).

sharing projects. They also stress the necessity to revitalize the European integration process of the Western Balkans. Therefore, all of them supported and welcome breaking the deadlock in the enlargement policy in 2022 and opening accession negotiation talks with Albania and (conditionally) with North Macedonia, granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)<sup>1</sup> and visa-liberalization to Kosovo. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia played a crucial role in advocating for granting Ukraine and Moldova membership candidate status by exerting pressure on the countries more reluctant to do so<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, the response of V4 countries to the Russian aggression in Ukraine highlighted the internal divisions in the Group concerning policy not only towards Moscow but also towards the neighborhood and EU enlargement. Although V4 together condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine, Hungary is reluctant to halt its cooperation with Russia especially in the field of energy<sup>3</sup>, imposing harsher sanctions on Moscow or providing generous and multifaceted assistance,

including military one to Kyiv<sup>4</sup>. As The Hungarian stance towards Russia has had heavy negative impact on the political cooperation in the V4 or V4+ formats, it prevents the undertaking of joint steps, especially in foreign and enlargement policy. One of the “victims” of the decreasing cooperation on the political level are the high-level meetings of V4 member states, including the format of V4+Western Balkans foreign ministers meeting. The last one took place in 2021 in the framework of the Polish presidency in V4. There was no meeting in this format during the Hungarian presidency and there are no plans to have one during the Slovak presidency.

Given the current disagreements on war-related issues, forging a common position in the debates on the future of EU enlargement, the EU policy towards Western Balkans and the eastern neighborhood and other geostrategic discussions are very challenging if not impossible in the V4 format. The V4 as a group is not participating in the renewed debate on the balance between deepening and widening of the EU, initiated by

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<sup>1</sup> Hungary even expressed dissatisfaction that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Georgia did not get candidate status along with Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022.

<sup>2</sup> K. Niecypor, Ukraine's integration with the EU in the context of the war, <https://europeum.org/data/articles/krzysztof-niecypor.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> I. Gizińska, F. Rudnik, A. SadeckiSzijjártó in Moscow: Hungary maintains its energy cooperation with Russia, Szijjártó in Moscow: Hungary maintains its energy cooperation with Russia, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-04-14/szijarto-moscow-hungary-maintains-its-energy-cooperation-russia>

<sup>4</sup> Due to the Russian aggression to Ukraine especially the political alliance between Poland and Hungary hit rock bottom.

the insistence of France, Germany, and the European Commission President that the future enlargement must be preceded by internal reform, including in particular extension of qualified majority voting (QMV)<sup>5</sup>. The proposal presented by some experts on the EU enlargement policy to introduce QMV in certain stages of the accession process<sup>6</sup> to prevent individual states from blocking the process due to political interests not linked to meeting the technical conditions for accession also did not elicit a common response. At the moment, all of the V4 countries are skeptical about introducing QMV in CFSP and enlargement as they are afraid of being regularly outvoted by more influential member states. Hungary and Poland are the most vocal opponents of this idea. But in Czechia, Slovakia and to some extent also in Poland, discussions on this issue in terms of the EU internal reform are taking place.

The V4 countries have neither been active so far in the debates about staged accession<sup>7</sup> as a way to unblock the process of enlargement nor on other proposals aiming

speeding up and deepening of the integration of the Western Balkans countries and Association Trio to the EU. It seems that V4 countries do not want to engage in time-consuming debates about reforming enlargement policy and prefer to focus on deepening sectoral cooperation with candidate countries through the existing institutional setup. Czechia and Poland are actively exploring possibilities for increased participation in European Union meetings and deepening sectoral integration with WB6 and Association Trio as it was envisioned in the new enlargement methodology adopted in 2020, while Slovakia has paid most attention to Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

Although the V4 countries have not presented a common stance on European Political Community (EPC) initiative presented by French President Emmanuel Macron, they all have similar positions on this issue. They underline that it should not be perceived as a substitute for the EU enlargement policy. At the same time, they support a non-institutionalized format of this platform, which could be useful for developing relations with

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<sup>5</sup> J. Juzová, Národní konvent o EU. Integrace Ukrajiny do EU, <https://www.europeum.org/articles/detail/5185/narodni-konvent-o-eu-integrace-ukrajiny-do-eu>

<sup>6</sup> S. Cvijić, A. Čerimagić, Rebuilding Our House Of Cards: With More Glue, [https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/9\\_A5\\_REBUILDING-OUR-HOUSE-OF-CARDS\\_WITH-MORE-GLUEENG.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/9_A5_REBUILDING-OUR-HOUSE-OF-CARDS_WITH-MORE-GLUEENG.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> This idea was proposed by experts i.e from CEPS and European Policy Centre Belgrade and European Stability Initiative. Their proposal is based on the logic that interim stages will create tangible incentives to encourage reform in countries aspiring to membership and will weaken opposition to the enlargement among member states. Cfr. M.Emerson, S. Blockmans, The New Agenda for the EU's Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policies, [https://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CEPS-PI2022-20\\_New-Agenda-for-EU-Enlargement.pdf](https://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CEPS-PI2022-20_New-Agenda-for-EU-Enlargement.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accession-process-credible-eu-perspective-western-balkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accession-process-credible-eu-perspective-western-balkans_en)

some countries outside the EU (e.g. with Great Britain and Norway).

Moreover, the growing inconsistency in the positions of the V4 countries towards specific challenges in the Western Balkans and relations with individual states has also been observed. It is especially visible in the case of debate on institutional reform in Bosnia and Hercegovina and the Kosovo – Serbia dialogue. While Hungary is increasingly

adopting a position close to Serbia or leaders of Bosnian Serbs and Croats in BiH, others take a more impartial position toward these issues. There is also a division among the Group members in the assessment of geopolitical challenges coming from China's and Russia's engagement in the Western Balkans and the importance of alignment of policies of Western Balkans countries with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU.



# The Czech Republic

The Czech Republic has traditionally strongly supported the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and advocated also for approximation of the Eastern European countries with the EU. There is lasting cross-party support for EU enlargement in the country and there are no political actors openly opposing the process. Even populist former prime minister Andrej Babiš (2017–2021) advocates for the EU to deliver on its promises to the candidate countries.

During the second EU Presidency in 2022, the enlargement agenda was an obvious priority for the Czech Republic<sup>9</sup>. For Prague, the progress in the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans was especially important as a rebalancing approach to the success achieved by the Associated Trio countries in June 2022. Under Czech leadership, the enlargement process thus achieved several important breakthroughs - opening

of the accession negotiations with Albania and conditionally with North Macedonia, granting of the candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and agreement on visa liberalization for Kosovo and accepting the EU Kosovo application for the EU membership. The Czech representatives showed a proactive approach in searching for ways of deeper integration of the countries with the Union both institutionally and sectorally already in the pre-accession phase as it was outlined under the new enlargement methodology adopted in 2020.<sup>10</sup> Czechia invited the Western Balkan representatives to informal EU ministerial meetings, in areas of strong common interest, such as energy, foreign policy, and migration. The Czech Presidency also continued the annual EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs.<sup>11</sup>

While EU enlargement is a stable priority of Czech foreign and

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<sup>9</sup> The Eastern Partnership was launched during the first Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2009, and is widely considered one of its main successes.

<sup>10</sup> Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accession-process-credible-eu-perspective-western-balkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accession-process-credible-eu-perspective-western-balkans_en)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/11/04/joint-press-statement-eu-western-balkans-ministerial-forum-on-justice-and-home-affairs-tirana-3-4-november-2022/>

European policy, the enhanced attention to concrete steps on the accelerated sectoral and institutional integration of the candidate countries appeared only after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There seems to be a general realization in Czechia that it is a shared interest to actively seek areas where deeper cooperation would be beneficial for both sides and that it needs to be acted upon already now, not once the countries are ready for accession. Nevertheless, the consensus still is that the process should be merit-based and deeper integration must be conditioned by compliance with the accession criteria – demonstrated in the lack of progress even on technical issues in accession negotiations with Serbia. Furthermore, Czechia is among the EU Member States that advocate for not letting bilateral issues impact the accession process of new countries.<sup>12</sup> Although it is now widely forgotten, the Czech Republic had a similar experience during its own accession process with Austria threatening to block the country's accession over a nuclear power plant dispute.<sup>13</sup>

Czech active support for the acceleration of the enlargement process reflects also in the discussion about the EU's internal reform. The Czech Republic belongs among the EU Member States advocating for continued and accelerated integration of candidate countries into the EU and the necessary preparation of the EU institutions for the accession of new countries. While the leaders realize the importance of the discussions about the EU reform and during its Presidency of the Council of the EU Czechia initiated exchange among Member States on the possibility of QMV introduction in CFSP<sup>14</sup>, the country itself remains rather skeptical towards this change, outside of enlargement policy, or any transfer of power from the Member States to supranational institutions like the European Commission or European Parliament.<sup>15</sup> However, the Czech position on QMV in CFSP does not seem to be set in stone anymore, especially in light of Russia's war, and there is an ongoing internal discussion on this issue.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> O. Plevák, Czechia to push for Kosovo visa liberalisation during presidency, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/czechia-to-push-for-kosovo-visa-liberalisation-during-presidency/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/czechia-to-push-for-kosovo-visa-liberalisation-during-presidency/)  
<sup>13</sup> O. Naegele, EU: Austrian Anti-Temelin Drive Seeks To Block Czech EU Accession, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1098470.html>

<sup>14</sup> Euractiv, The Capitals: České předsednictví testuje názory států na reformu E, <https://euractiv.cz/section/politika/news/the-capitals-ceske-predsednictvi-testuje-nazory-statu-na-reformu-eu/>

<sup>15</sup> O. Plevák, Reforma zahraniční politiky EU je v nedohlednu. Váhavou pozici Česka nejspíš nezmění ani Piráti, <https://euractiv.cz/section/evropska-unie-a-svet/news/reforma-zahranicni-politiky-eu-je-v-nedohlednu-vahavou-pozici-ceska-nejspis-nezmeni-ani-pirati/>

<sup>16</sup> J. Kovář, J. Eberle, Vetsinove hlasovani o zahranicni politice Evropske Unie: Vstricny pristup je ve svetle geopolitickych vyzev v ceskem zajmu, <https://www.iir.cz/vetsinove-hlasovani-o-zahranicni-politice-evropske-unie-vstricny-pristup-je-ve-svetle-geopolitickych-vyzev-v-ceskem-zajmu>

Another milestone of the Czech EU Presidency was the first European Political Community (EPC) summit organized in October in Prague. While seen as a potentially important geopolitical platform for communication among European states in reaction to Russia's war in Ukraine, the Czech representatives

expressed clearly that it is not in any way supposed to replace the enlargement process. On the contrary, ideally, the EPC would provide another platform for the Western Balkan and Associated Trio leaders to discuss issues of shared interest among themselves and with other European countries, amplifying their voices.

# Hungary

The support for the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU still enjoys support from all parties represented in the Hungarian legislation. Since Hungarian politicians perceive EU enlargement as a guarantor of European (and national) peace and stability, the war in Ukraine gave them additional arguments for the Western Balkan countries' accession to the EU what in their opinion contribute to the security of the entire continent. Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó argued that the war in Ukraine *must make it clear that the EU needs the Western Balkans more than the Western Balkans needs to EU* and by opening the door for new member states, the EU makes itself stronger in guaranteeing its own security.<sup>17</sup> The main opposition politicians also highlighted the necessity of enlargement although referring to other arguments. Member of the European Parliament Katalin Cseh stressed that the growing malign influence of Russia and China in the Western Balkans can only be

countered by a credible enlargement perspective.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from having European peace and stability secured by accession, energy security emerged as an additional topic within the same narrative. The Western Balkans, especially Serbia is a key in securing Hungarian energy supplies (coming from Russia or other countries) and speeding up diversification as well.<sup>19</sup>

Although Serbia came under strong pressure to harmonize its foreign policy alignment with the EU, this issue did not seem to matter in Budapest. Serbia's non-compliance with the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP) is not an issue as Belgrade is still treated as a key (political and economic) partner for Budapest and, from the perspective of Hungary, is the guarantor of stability in the Western Balkans.

Relations between Ukraine and Hungary were problematic even

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<sup>17</sup> FEOL, Szijjártó Péter: Brüsszelnek változtatnia kell nagyképu hozzáállásán a nyugat-balkáni bővítést illetően, <https://www.feol.hu/orszag-vilag/2022/05/szijjarto-peter-brusszelnek-valtoztatnia-kell-nagykepu-hozzaallasan-a-nyugat-balkani-bovitest-illeteo-video>

<sup>18</sup> Szabad Európa, Az Európai Unió erősíteni próbálja a befolyását a Nyugat-Balkánon, <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/az-europai-unio-erositeni-probalja-a-befolyasat-a-nyugat-balkanon/32105360.html>

<sup>19</sup> MTI, Orbán Viktor: Magyarországnak létérdeke az EU bővítése, <https://www.portfolio.hu/unios-forrasok/20221206/orban-viktor-magyarorszagnak-leterdeke-az-eu-bovitese-583640>

before the war, mainly arising from the Ukrainian language law that negatively impacts Hungarians in Transcarpathia. Nevertheless, Hungary did not object to granting Ukraine a candidate status; the EU integration of Ukraine has been linked to the protection of Hungarians (in Ukraine) from the war.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the EU integration of Ukraine can be beneficial for achieving security for the Hungarian minority too. On the other hand, the minority issue will certainly trigger Hungary's veto concerning the further EU accession of Ukraine.

Hungary welcomed the idea of the European Political Community (EPC) in its current, high-level, and non-institutionalized format.<sup>21</sup> However, Budapest underlines that enlargement policy must remain at the centre of the EU's agenda and EPC must not become a replacement for the EU membership perspective for the Western Balkans. According to Hungary, the Western Balkans countries must, first and foremost strengthen regional cooperation and overcome bilateral issues to move forward with their respective EU accession path.

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<sup>20</sup> R. Pálfi, Szijjártó Péter: Magyarország támogatja Ukrajna EU-csatlakozását, <https://hu.euronews.com/2022/03/01/szijjarto-peter-magyarorszag-tamogatja-ukrajna-eu-csatlakozasat>

<sup>21</sup> L.B. Veszprémy, Mire jó Macron Európai Politikai Közössége?, [https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20230329\\_europai\\_politikai\\_kozosseg\\_mcc\\_konferencia](https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20230329_europai_politikai_kozosseg_mcc_konferencia)

# Poland

For Poland, enlargement policy is an issue of strategic interest to the EU and a matter of security for the whole continent. Warsaw also points out that European integration of the WB6 and Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia is the only way to ensure prosperity, and stability in these two parts of the continent. Support for enlargement is a matter of bipartisan consensus in Poland and all major parties support this position in principle. Moreover, support for the enlargement of the Polish society is also one of the highest in the EU.

Poland has been not only an active supporter of the Western Balkans accession to the EU but also a long-time advocate for giving Eastern Partnership countries (format initiated together with Sweden in 2009) the EU membership perspective. Therefore, Polish diplomacy was actively lobbying for granting Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia candidate status when these three countries submitted accession applications. At the same time, Poland insists on speeding up

enlargement in the Western Balkans and continues to support the security of the whole region through military and police presence in NATO and EU missions. From a Polish perspective, the inclusion of the three new countries in the enlargement policy only strengthens the relevance of this policy for member states and the EU institution and is a fresh impetus, which hopefully contributes to its transformation to be a more efficient instrument. Therefore, not only it won't diminish interest in the Western Balkans as many are afraid, but quite contrary it also reinvigorates the EU engagement in the region.

Poland remains a supporter of the conditionality principle. However, it is against tougher conditions and strongly opposes the politicization of the enlargement process, and advocates maintaining its technical nature, including in talks with Serbia and Montenegro<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, it is against the inclusion of any political elements in the accession framework as it only unnecessarily prolongs the process. However, it also underlines



that the governments of the region must focus on democratization reform.

Poland strongly opposes the position that the admission of new members must be linked to internal EU reform including the extension of QMV as it considers this proposal as a way to further centralization of the EU<sup>23</sup>. According to the current government that would strengthen the dominance of big member states (e.g. Germany or France) and undermine the ability of the small states to protect their key security and national interests. Polish decision-makers emphasize that the European Union in order to be stronger and more influential has to focus on completing EU integration with the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova – in line with Europe’s geographical borders. This means that, unlike their Western European partners, they prioritize widening over the deepening of the EU.

From the Polish point of view, EPC can be a useful platform for

strengthening cooperation military and security cooperation with countries such as Great Britain and discussion on energy issues with Norway or Azerbaijan<sup>24</sup>. However, Poland is rather cautious towards this initiative underlining that only the EU and NATO can ensure peace and stability in Europe.

According to Poland, the EU should also work closely with the Western Balkans countries to help them to counter the damaging effects of a proliferation of disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda as well as other manifestations of foreign malign influence. It is particularly important for Poland to support reducing the region’s dependence on the import of oil and gas from Russia by diversification of sources and supply routes. Poland is also concerned about the negative economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine in the countries in the region, especially in terms of price increases and the local energy crisis.

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<sup>22</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau on the principles and objectives of Poland’s foreign policy in 2023, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/media9.nsf/files/MPRA-CQUBZR/%24File/Information%20on%20the%20principles%20and%20objectives%20of%20Poland%E2%80%99s%20foreign%20policy.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Mateusz Morawiecki at Heidelberg University, Europe at a historic turning point, <https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/mateusz-morawiecki-at-heidelberg-university---europe-at-a-historic-turning-point>

<sup>24</sup> A. Koziol, Ł. Maślanka, European Political Community Meets for the First Time, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/european-political-community-meets-for-the-first-time>

# Slovakia

Slovakia continued both bilateral political cooperation with the Western Balkan countries and its support for their EU integration after February 24, 2022. The Slovak prime minister Eduard Heger was one of the initiators of granting EU perspective to Associated Trio and together with other like-minded leaders from other EU countries he succeeded to convince traditional “skeptics” like France or the Netherlands of this idea. As it became obvious that Ukraine would not be able to follow the fast track when it comes to accession to the EU, Slovakia intensified its efforts on transferring its know-how from the integration process and especially from the transposition of the EU legislation to the Ukrainian government.<sup>25</sup>

Slovakia welcomed the beginning of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, as well as the candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina and granting visa liberalization to Kosovo. Though Slovakia does not recognize the unilaterally declared independence of

Kosovo, it continued developing ties with both its governmental and non-governmental stakeholders (meeting of the Slovak Prime minister and Kosovar president on the margins of the EPC Summit in Prague <sup>26</sup> could serve as a good example) and supported its future in the EU.

Though the introduction of the qualified majority issues in CFSP (and enlargement) has been supported by some of the leading representatives of the Slovak MFA, Slovakia does not have a clear position on that issue. The discussion continues to go on and one of the outcomes might be that Slovakia would potentially support the introduction of QMV in human rights and rule of law issues. Bratislava has also not taken any active steps when the reform of the enlargement policy is concerned.

Slovakia has been supportive to the idea of European Political Community (EPC) as Bratislava does not consider it as any kind of substitute for the enlargement process.<sup>27</sup> The EPC is perceived as a useful platform for

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, A. Duleba, Russia’s war against Ukraine in 2022: a credibility test for Slovakia, In: P. Brezáni (ed.) Yearbook of Slovakia’s Foreign Policy 2022, Bratislava: RC SFPA 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Premiér: Ak Putin stratí vplyv na Európu, trh s plynom sa upokojí, 6 October 2022, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-ak-putin-strati-vplyv-na-europu-trh-s-plynom-sa-upokoji/?rt=18264304536808354132>.

<sup>27</sup> Heger na summite EÚ podporil koncept európskeho politického spoločenstva, 24 June 2022, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/heger-na-summite-eu-podporil-koncept-europskeho-politického-spolocenstva/>.



exchanging views and coordination of positions when possible. The simple fact that the EPC includes a high number of countries, among which one can find EU member states, candidate countries, as well as partner countries, points to a high diversity and need to base the whole initiative on realistic expectations. Slovakia therefore agrees with the prevailing attitude that refuses any institutionalization of the initiative. On the other hand, by taking part in the informal working group on security, in which, besides some other EU members also the UK and Kosovo take part, Bratislava admits that the existence of informal institutions and certain divisions of the participating countries in the clusters does not go against its interest.

Political support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, which also includes know-how sharing from transformation and Euro-Atlantic integration processes, was not, however, followed by the intensification of ties in other areas, especially in economic cooperation. Bilateral trade was stagnating in 2022, with Albania – and to a certain extent Kosovo – being the exception. The interest of Slovak investors also remained low. Besides the aftermath of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reason also is the absence of economic diplomats at the Slovak embassies across the region. The declared intention to intensify cooperation is also not reflected adequately

in the number of twinning projects or seconded diplomats and experts.

Development assistance proved to be an important and efficient instrument of Slovakia's foreign policy towards the region. Therefore the decision to exclude Western Balkan countries from the Slovak Aid development agency traditional project calls came as a surprise. According to this decision, the development aid would be limited to micro-grants provided by the embassies, projects of EU delegated cooperation and activities under the umbrella of economic diplomacy, which would certainly limit the possibilities of grantees for maneuvering. On the other hand, the total volume of the development aid aiming at Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia was extended.

Despite the fact that Slovakia has been the presiding country in the Visegrad Group in 2022/23, the V4 did not play any particular role in the development of relations with the Western Balkan partners.<sup>28</sup> The reasons for the slowdown of cooperation are the different positions of individual V4 countries towards their cooperation with Russia and the support of Ukraine. On the other hand, the cooperation of non-governmental stakeholders continues to be intensive, which is proved by the number of grants provided by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). Cooperation between the IVF and Western Balkans Fund (WBF) has also continued on several levels, mostly by using other than financial instruments.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, the official website of the Visegrad Group – [www.visegradgroup.eu](http://www.visegradgroup.eu).

# Conclusion

The Russian aggression in Ukraine renewed discussions on the EU enlargement policy and the need for the revitalization of the process of European integration of like-minded countries in the Southern and Eastern Neighborhoods. Their integration into the EU is in the strategic and geopolitical interest of all V4 countries and in all V4 countries there is strong support for active enlargement possibility both on political and social level. Therefore, the V4 countries want to maintain the momentum and use it to accelerate the reform in countries of both regions and their integration process to the EU and to advocate for more active engagement of the EU with WB6 and Associate Trio. However, given the frozen high-level political ties within the Group (especially between Poland and Hungary), they are now focusing more on supporting aspirant and candidate countries through individual actions and through wider EU coalitions, deepening bilateral cooperation and assisting them in the transformation process (support through expert cooperation, development assistance etc.).

V4 countries are also still engaged in assisting WB6 and Associate Trio through activities of the Integrational Visegrad Fund (IVF). IVF support is manifested not only through financing projects but also through Civil Servants Mobility Program (CSMP) – experience-sharing instrument for civil servants - or support of international mobility of students, experts and artists. IVF has also assisted in boosting WB6 cooperation in supporting civil society and expert cooperation through the support of the Western Balkan Fund. The cooperation of civil society and experts from V4, WB6 and Associate Trio is also very advanced with a lot of think tanks developing various activities to support enlargement policy.

As for now, V4 countries advocate for EU active engagement and enlargement policy through cooperation with like-minded countries in different ad-hoc coalitions in the framework of the EU. The support for WB6 and Associate Trio is also the issue of cooperation in the other regional format like the Three Seas Initiative (3S), The Bucharest Nine (B9) and the Slavkov Triangle.

# 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.

**Address:**

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# Information about THINK BALKANS

The ‘Enhancing Think Balkans – knowledgehub for Western Balkans EU integration and regional cooperation’ project is financially supported by the International Visegrad Fund and builds upon the previously established cooperation between the members of the Southeast European Think Net Network (SEE Think Net) and Think Visegrad as part of the ‘Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project’ and the project “Cooperation Instrument for the Western Balkans Think Tanks – THINK BALKANS” supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

Following the successful past cooperation, the **Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje (IDSCS)** will remain project coordinator, which, in collaboration with the **European Movement in Serbia (EMINS)**, **Balkan Research Institute** from Kosovo\*, **Politikon Network** from Montenegro, **Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS)** from Albania, **Humanity in Action** from Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)** from Poland, **Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT)** from Hungary, the **Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA)** from Slovakia, and

**EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM)** from the Czech Republic, will work in achieving the project’s goals.

The project duration is 12 months, that is, from October 2022 to October 2023.

Based on the lessons learned, this project proposal aims to promote active participation in policy-making and foster democratic debate based on relevant data and information by further: 1) promoting cooperation among think tanks, CSOs and experts in the WB as a successful regional model; 2) strengthening the cooperation with the WB MFAs through the establish network of contact point and include their opinions and ideas in specifying the details of the topics chosen to be analyzed through this project; 3) providing V4 expertise on security, resilience and EU enlargement in general in light of the Russian invasion on Ukraine and the expressed interest of the Associate trio countries to join the EU; 4) using the potential with the establishment of Think Balkans to strengthening people-to-people links between the WB and V4; 5) cultivating interregional cooperation between V4 and WB6 on issues of common strategic interest.

## About the authors:

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# Link

**This publication is available at:**

<https://idscs.org.mk/en/2023/06/20/the-perception-of-visegrad-group-on-enlargement-in-light-of-the-russian-war-on-ukraine/>



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