



The Western Balkans on the Visegrad Countries' Agenda

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E-2017/39



KKI Policy Brief

Series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Publisher:

Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Typesetting:

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Abstract: After joining the European Union and NATO, the Visegrad countries agreed to give support to the Western Balkan countries in the Euro-Atlantic integration process. The current Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group handles the region and its integration process as a high priority. What does the V4 do in order to foster enlargement and how much it really matters? The V4 engagement cannot be analyzed and assessed without the wider European context and without the understanding of motivation of the individual Visegrad countries. The former determines the framework of their actions while the latter has a great impact on the strength of common standpoint. This brief analysis will take a look on these aspects and will highlight factors that could influence the V4's weight in the EU's policy toward the Western Balkans.

Összefoglalás: Az Európai Unióhoz és a NATO-hoz való csatlakozást követően a visegrádi országok megállapodtak abban, hogy támogatni fogják a nyugat-balkáni országok euroatlanti integrációját. A Visegrádi Együttműködés jelenlegi magyar elnöksége kiemelt prioritásként kezeli a térséget és annak integrációs folyamatát. De mit tesznek a V4-ek a bővítés elősegítése érdekében, és mennyiben számítanak ezek a lépések? A V4-ek szerepét nem lehet a tágabb európai kontextus és az egyes visegrádi országok motivációi nélkül elemezni és értékelni. Míg az előbbi a közös cselekvéseiknek ad keretet, az utóbbi a közös álláspont erősségére van jelentős hatással. Az elemzés a fenti aspektusokat és tényezőket veszi górcső alá, illetve rámutat azon tényezőkre, amelyek befolyással lehetnek a V4-ek súlyára, az EU nyugat-balkáni politikájára.

INTRODUCTION

After joining the EU and NATO, the Visegrad countries (V4) declared that the support of the Western Balkan (WB) countries and their Euro-Atlantic integration process would be one of the Visegrad Group's priorities. This engagement has been regularly reconfirmed in the joint statements and through the regular meetings of the ministers of foreign affairs while some resources of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) have been allocated to this purpose.

The V4's engagement and actions have always fitted into the framework outlined by the EU enlargement strategies but could hardly become a policy driver. The relative importance of the group's political support increased as the enlargement process got back on the priority list of the European Union. Under the burden of the economic and financial crisis, the EU's interest in the enlargement process decreased significantly which contributed to weakening leverage of the EU, as well as the loss of credibility of the EU membership perspective. A symbolic moment of this trend was the speech of the incoming President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker on freezing enlargement. Realizing the need for counteraction, German Chancellor Angela Merkel launched the Berlin Process in August 2014 that

played an important role in keeping the EU active in the region in a period when other actors like Russia, China, Turkey, and Gulf States activated their presence in the Western Balkans.

The Berlin Process became the most important framework of promotion in Euro-Atlantic integration, however, the number of actors involved from the EU remained limited. Although the V4 were willing to contribute to the process, they could rather act only in parallel with the process than as part of it. Partly, this was a consequence of the decision of Germany on the selected parties but also the consequence of the diverse foreign policy agenda of the Visegrad countries. Nevertheless, the latter managed to promote the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund successfully and gave assistance to several smaller projects that contributed to the cooperation between civil society and state actors. Beyond that, each Visegrad country strengthened its cooperation with the Western Balkan countries to different extents depending on their own interests and priorities.

Despite the internal problems of the EU, two important developments in the international context has brought some changes in the policy towards the Western Balkans. First, the migration crisis brought attention to the fact that the Western Balkan countries shall be involved into the solution of the crisis. Second, the worsening EU and USA relations with Russia and the strengthening Russian propaganda against the Euro-Atlantic integration process in the region, raised security concerns that put the region again to EU's security policy agenda. These also gave momentum to the cooperation between some V4 and WB countries in the field of police operation and border management, but also changed the rhetoric at the EU level and opened a new phase in the enlargement strategy. Concerning NATO enlargement, these circumstances raised the importance of the NATO accession of Montenegro.

But will this new momentum give more space for the Visegrad countries to contribute to the EU and NATO accession process of the Western Balkan countries or will their contribution remain limited in the future too? This briefly will take an account of the V4 inputs as well as of the individual countries to give an oversight on the Visegrad countries' engagement. Finally, I will outline the features of the European context that provides the framework of their action.

V4 AND THE WESTERN BALKANS – POLITICAL SUPPORT AND BEYOND

Whether the V4 can act successfully and in a united manner depends to a wide extent on the priorities and the interests of the individual countries, and how much the V4 action meets and supports the individual countries' aspirations.

After the Visegrad countries joined the EU and NATO, the support of the Western Balkans became one of the new common goals of the V4. The common ground for V4 action towards the Western Balkans has been the common understanding that:



- Euro-Atlantic integration of the region contributes to the stability and security of the region and the EU as well;
- sharing Visegrad countries' experience regarding the transformation of social, economic and political systems as well as the European integration process could help a smoother transformation process in the Western Balkans;
- sharing experience on regional cooperation, namely on Visegrad cooperation itself could support the facilitation of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans; and
- the Visegrad countries can build better relations with the Western Balkan countries through V4.

Since 2011, the regular meetings of the ministers of foreign affairs from the V4 and the Western Balkans have contributed to a regular exchange between the representatives from the two regions. In the [Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group and Slovenia on the Western Balkans](#) the countries expressed their readiness to extend the Visegrad+ programme of the IVF – that used to focus on supporting longer-term initiatives that facilitated the transfer of the V4 region's transformation and democratization know-how to other regions, like the WB – to the Western Balkans and suggested to their partners there to consider the establishment of a fund or an instrument similar to the IVF for cooperation between state institutions and civil society in the region. IVF has already supported the region since 2004 as the Chart 1 presents.

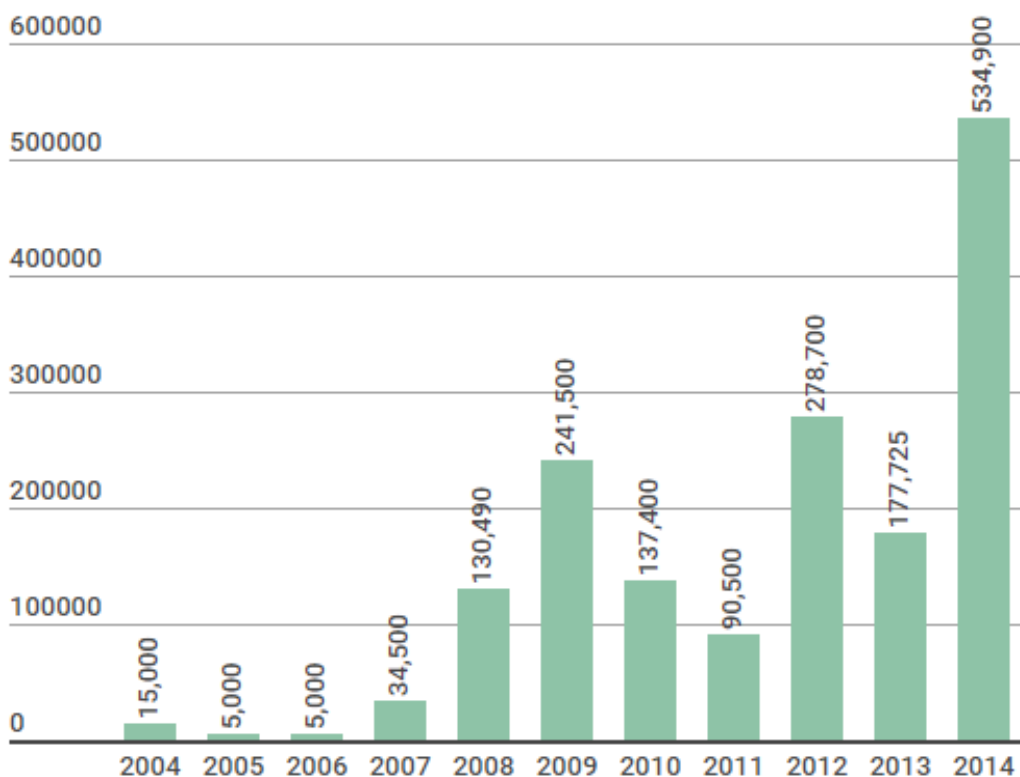
The cooperation between the V4 and the Western Balkans resulted in the foundation of the Western Balkans Fund in 2017 with a seat in Tirana. The process was not easy and took three years from the first joint statement in October 2014 until the real establishment.

In [2012](#), the V4 countries also presented a new initiative V4–Western Balkans Expert Network on Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights, which aimed to support better reform processes, exchange ideas and provide technical assistance. The joint statement in [2014](#) pointed to a number of examples of practical assistance – among others in the field of justice and rule of law, children rights, public administration reform – that V4 provided in order to facilitate the fulfillment of criteria within the EU negotiation chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), which represent the backbone of the accession process. The V4 also encouraged third countries' involvement and financial support through the IVF.

The migration crisis that accelerated in September 2015 became a new ground of cooperation. In January 2016, the ministers of interiors from the V4, Slovenia, Serbia, and Macedonia met in Prague and issued a [joint declaration](#) on the future cooperation in order to enhance control over migration flows. Police officers from the V4 travelled to Serbia and Macedonia to contribute by their human capacities and border management know-how to the management of the migration crisis.

[Chart 1](#)

IVF Financial Support for the Western Balkans per Year (in EUR)



What the support of the Euro-Atlantic integration process concerns, beyond the regular reconfirmation of political support, the V4 countries provided additional support while they held the EU Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Probably the most important ones were the efforts of the Hungarian and the Polish Presidencies that contributed to the final decision on Croatia's accession to the EU in 2011.

BILATERAL RELATIONS AND PRIORITIES: FOR WHOM IS THE WESTERN BALKANS A PRIORITY?

Although the Visegrad Group declared its commitment towards the Western Balkan region, the intense of the bilateral relations reflect the difference in the priorities of the Visegrad countries. It would hardly cover the truth that the WB is on the top of the foreign policy priority list of each Visegrad country. This is a natural consequence of the different geographic positions as well as the history



and background of relations with the Western Balkan states. Here we will not take an attempt to analyze the bilateral relations deeply but to point out some important aspects of foreign policies of the V4 countries towards the Western Balkans.

In terms of contribution to stability and security, it can be noted that Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic contribute to the KFOR mission in Kosovo (Slovakia withdrew from the mission earlier), while all V4 countries take part in the EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nevertheless, Hungary's contribution (number of troops) is significantly higher than the ones of the rest of the V4 (more than two and three times higher than Poland's) while the Czech Republic's contribution is very limited. Hungary's geographic closeness and experience of the wars in the 1990s are strong motivating factors while Poland naturally looks towards its Eastern neighbors, Ukraine and Russia that raise many important security challenges. Hungary's Embassy in Podgorica also served as a NATO contact point for Montenegro while Hungary also takes care of the upper air space of Kosovo.

Hungary's relatively high interest towards the region is underpinned by also the presence of Hungarian communities in some Western Balkan countries, namely in Serbia and Croatia. Such social ties do not or not in such an extent characterize the bilateral relations of the other V4 countries and the Western Balkans. (See Table 1.)

Table 1
Ratio of National Minorities from V4 Countries in the Western Balkans

	Bosnia and Herzegovina*	Croatia	Kosovo	Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia
Czechs	NDA	0.22	NDA	0.005	NDA	NDA
Hungarians	NDA	0.33	NDA	NDA	0.05	3.5
Poles	NDA	0.01	NDA	0.008	NDA	NDA
Slovaks	NDA	0.10	NDA	0.005	NDA	0.8

* Bosnia and Herzegovina recognizes the four nationalities as official minorities.

The wars in the 1990s directly affected Hungary's security and economic situation. For this reason, preserving stability of the region has always been high on the agenda of the Hungarian foreign policy. In accordance with [Hungarian Foreign Policy Strategy after the Hungarian EU Presidency \(2011\)](#) and the [Hungarian National Security Strategy \(2012\)](#), Hungary pursues an active foreign policy in the region by various means, including economic cooperation and political support in order to preserve regional stability and contribute to the stabilization process and economic recovery.

The Hungarian foreign policy efforts are accompanied by institutional and financial means too. Institutional network supporting cooperation in the field of trade, economy, and investments has significantly broadened (establishment of trading house networks in the region, cooperation of Chambers of Commerce, and set up of joint economic committees). The results are not balanced in the region though. The biggest increase in trade was realized with Serbia whose value in 2017

might surpass 2 billion euros while such development could not be achieved with other countries. This also applies to the investments and companies' presence from Hungary. Political cooperation between the two governments also surpasses the intensification of relations to other Western Balkan countries.

As Tomaš Štražay, researcher of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association highlighted on a conference in Skopje, Slovakia expanded its diplomatic presence in the region after 2004. Currently, it only does not have an embassy in Kosovo, which Slovakia does not recognize as an independent state. Although Slovakia is not a neighboring country, it perceives itself as a close country to the region. The region became one of the two territorial priorities of the Slovak foreign policy after the EU and NATO accession of Slovakia. Slovak diplomats and politicians are also very active in this field. Miroslav Lajčák, the current Minister of Foreign and European Affairs who used to be an envoy of the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy and the EU Special Representative and High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, put high emphasis on the region during Slovakian Presidency of the Council of the EU – though obviously, it had to deal with serious issues like migration, Brexit, etc.

He also underlined that in accordance with Slovakia's foreign policy priorities, the Western Balkans also belong to the areas, which are targeted by the development cooperation activities of Slovakia. The Slovak Agency for Development Cooperation selected Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina as project countries. SlovakAid has already launched projects in the Western Balkans (in Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, and now in Macedonia) that support the establishment of framework of cooperation between civil society and government sector related to the Euro-Atlantic integration process based on the Slovak experience.

As mentioned earlier, the Western Balkans is not the highest priority for Poland. Nevertheless, Warsaw's political support is strong for the region. Poland also contributes to the Western Balkans' preparation for EU membership through its Enlargement Academy. The Polish–Macedonian consultative-expert forum "Skopje Conference" aims at exchange of pre-membership experience too. In terms of trade and economic cooperation, Poland has relatively stronger relations with Croatia and Serbia. The region might get bigger attention as a consequence of the Three Seas Initiative and the building of South–North corridor.

The Czech Republic's strategy towards the Western Balkans relies mainly on the guidelines of the EU enlargement process and since 2014 on the Berlin Process. The migration crisis also contributed to the police cooperation with Macedonia and Serbia that is also part of V4 cooperation with the region to handle the migration crisis. However, beyond sporadic support and assistance, the Western Balkans does not compose a strategic segment of the Czech foreign policy.

Considering the above mentioned, it can be argued that despite the political support of the individual Visegrad countries, the importance of the Western Balkans significantly vary among the four countries that also has an impact on the scope of common actions.



How Much V4 Actions Matters?

Although the enlargement of the EU is considered to be the Community's biggest success story, difficulties of transformation and democratization have already caused concerns during previous enlargement rounds in the 2000s. These concerns strengthened enlargement fatigue on the side of the Western European EU Member States and made them be more inward looking. This tendency was topped by the economic crisis and the debate on the deepening of the European integration that had further decreased the political willingness of the European Union to accept new members.

In 2014, the speech of the incoming President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker on freezing enlargement process was very negatively interpreted by the Western Balkan countries. Although it was unrealistic for any of them to enter during the mandate of President Juncker, the message increased disappointment in the Western Balkans. In order to ensure Western Balkan countries about that the EU remains in the game, German Chancellor Angela Merkel launched the Berlin Process in the same year, that has become the most important platform of regional cooperation among the Western Balkan states. The process aims to enhance Connectivity Agenda in cooperation with the European Commission, political dialogue and reconciliation, and European integration. Though it is an informal framework, it has involved only France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Austria (as well as Croatia and Slovenia which has strong link to the region) from the EU Member States. Although other countries like some V4 countries were interested in getting involved, the set up remained the same.

As a consequence of the migration crisis escalating during the summer of 2015, migration also got on the agenda of the Berlin Process. It was also realized at the EU level that the situation cannot be solved without the cooperation with the countries that are part of the so-called Balkan migration route. Consequently, the region got back on the agenda of the EU that was also fostered by the increasing presence and influence of third actors like Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf states and developments (like political crisis in Macedonia, increasing tension between Kosovo and Serbia, the possible coup attempt in Montenegro) that raised security and stability risks in the EU and the United States. More often it has been also brought into question that the European path is the only real alternative for the Western Balkans.

The rhetoric at EU level changed significantly in 2017. In his [State of the European Union speech](#), President Juncker mentioned that he foresaw important developments during his term and a possible enlargement in the near future. He also announced later that the European Commission would work out a new strategy for Serbia and Montenegro for the period until 2025 that would be

published in February 2018. [In May 2017, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel also announced the continuation of the Berlin Process](#) in the Aspen Institute where he had a meeting with his Czech partner too. He also mentioned that there might be [new intergovernmental instruments](#) to set up a fund infrastructure and technology. However, it was not foreseen that the process would involve other EU members in general.

As a consequence of Brexit, the United Kingdom is likely to get out from the process. It has been already criticized for hosting the summit in 2018 that is supposed to support the European perspective of some other countries. Later, Germany decided to invite Poland into the process, though as mentioned above, Warsaw is not the most interested actor in the Western Balkans. A reason for that could be that such common goal could be a positive common agenda, especially in the light of worsening political relations between Germany and Poland and tough debate on democratic situation in the latter. Similar debate on the democratic institutions and the management of the migration crisis burdens the relations of Hungary and Germany too but the strengthening cooperation within the Berlin Process seems to be much less likely at the moment, though Warsaw might would appreciate the support and know-how of the Visegrad partners. The German Foreign Minister also considered the promotion of the Western Balkans as a possible cooperation field with the Czech Republic as the two countries might be able to provide good examples of building good neighborly relations. However, Prague has not been invited to the Berlin Process as Poland has. Nevertheless, the outlines of the Berlin Plus initiative are still very vague so it might be too early to judge whether the process will become more inclusive.

Considering the above-mentioned tendencies and factors, it can be noted that the Visegrad countries, by using their own means, contributed so that the enlargement agenda could be kept on the surface but they mainly follow the agenda of the European Union rather than forming it and it is unlikely that this will change significantly in the future. The involvement of Poland might bring the Berlin Process and the Visegrad Group closer to each other a bit and it is to be seen what other options of cooperation will be offered, but the political tension between the V4 and Germany might be an obstacle for that.