



European Movement
Montenegro

FOREIGN POLICY OF **V4** COUNTRIES TOWARDS **WB6** IN THE TIME OF CRISIS 2022/2024

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- Visegrad Fund
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Podgorica, 2024.



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Publisher

European Movement in Montenegro

For publisher

Momčilo Radulović

Editor

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Design/Prepress

IMPULS studio

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Note:

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POSITION OF CZECHIA TOWARDS EU ACCESSION PROCESS AND INTEGRATION OF WB COUNTRIES

Since its own EU accession, the Czech Republic has traditionally belonged among the main advocates in the Union for further enlargement to South-Eastern and Eastern Europe. Western Balkans together with Eastern Europe have a prominent place among Czechia's foreign policy priorities and the stability, prosperity, and democratic and pro-European orientation of these countries are in Czechia's vital interest due to geographical proximity, political and economic ties and historical and people-to-people connections.¹

Furthermore, the support for democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration of Western Balkan countries is shared across the Czech political spectrum with all mainstream parties agreeing on the goal of creating a prosperous democratic region which is firmly anchored in the EU structures. Also during the term of the government led by Andrej Babiš between 2017 and 2021, an ally of Viktor Orbán, the political support for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans remained high with the then Prime Minister advocating for example against the France-led veto to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019.²

However, the motivations and objectivity of Babiš were put into question due to his alliance with Orbán, Slovenia's Janez Janša and Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić³ and his repeated promoting of Serbia in the EU integration process despite its continuous democratic decline.⁴ The position of Babiš and his populist ANO party is then different in its approach to Ukraine with a firm opposition to its EU membership.

In relation to the Western Balkans, the only potential troublemaker on the Czech political scene is the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party – while its leaders have so far been silent on EU enlargement, its extreme nationalism, Czech protectionism and anti-EU sentiments might be reflected also in its stance on accepting new and poorer members into the club.

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy, https://mzv.gov.cz/file/1574645/Concept_of_the_Czech_Republic_s_Foreign_Policy.pdf.

2 "EU's Balkan breakdown reveals split among leaders," Politico, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eus-balkan-breakdown-reveals-split-among-leaders/>.

3 "Summit Hears Demography, not Climate is Key Question for Europe's Survival," Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/23/summit-hears-demography-not-climate-policy-is-key-question-for-europes-survival/>.

4 "Babiš s Orbánem se opřeli do Bruselu. Pro bezpečnost EU prý nedělá dost," iDNES, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/andrej-babis-madarsko-reportaz-hranice-uprchlici-migracni-krize.A210922_104538_zahranicni_rts, "Czech PM attends Bled Strategic Forum in Slovenia," Radio Prague International, <https://english.radio.cz/czech-pm-attends-bled-strategic-forum-slovenia-8727323>.

Support to the Euro-Atlantic ambitions of countries in both regions also featured among the priorities of both Presidencies of the Czech Republic of the Council of the EU, in 2009 and 2022. During the Presidency in the second half of 2022, progress in enlargement to the Western Balkans became one of the main successes of the Presidency. After the groundbreaking decision by the European Council in June 2022 to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova at the end of the French EU Presidency, the Czech Republic aspired to achieve progress also towards the Western Balkans in the spirit of a balanced approach.

The Czech Presidency thus oversaw the organization of the first Intergovernmental Conferences with Albania and North Macedonia, granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and agreement on visa liberalization for Kosovo. Furthermore, Czechia has advanced the concept of gradual integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU with and proposed areas where more integration would be possible and through inviting Western Balkan representatives to informal EU ministerial meetings on topics of shared interest, such as energy, foreign policy or migration. The Presidency organized the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs in November 2022 in Tirana.⁵ Furthermore, the Presidency hosted the 4th Prague Process Ministerial Conference adopting the declaration and Action Plan for years 2023-2027 on migration management cooperation.⁶

Apart from bilateral cooperation, the Czech Republic also supports the European integration of the Western Balkan countries through different formats within the Union. The traditional platform has been the Visegrad cooperation but the deteriorating political relations between the V4 countries in the past years have been hindering also joint efforts in this area. Support to Western Balkans' European ambitions has also been one of the priorities of the Austerlitz (Slavkov) format between Czechia, Slovakia and Austria. At a wider EU level, the Czech Republic is also an active member of the Friends of Western Balkans led by Austria and of the Tallinn Group ("the friends of enlargement").

In relation to Ukraine and Russia's war of aggression, Czechia is among the most dedicated supporters of Ukraine inside the EU with a very principled stance towards Russia. It has made very clear from the beginning that Russia is the aggressor violating international law and rule-based order, condemned the invasion of Ukraine as a sovereign country and called for providing Ukraine with all support needed.

While difficult to quantify in concrete numbers, according to the Kiel Institute's Ukraine Support Tracker, the Czech financial contributions compared to the country's GDP are the 10th largest among all Ukraine supporters.⁷ However, the government and diplomacy play a significant role in advocating and mobilizing support among EU Member States, including for financial and military assistance and for Ukraine's EU accession perspective.

In May 2024, Czechia initiated a letter to the Belgian EU Presidency signed together with a number of other EU Member States, calling for the organization of the first Intergovernmental Conference

5 Council of the EU, Joint press statement EU - Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs (Tirana, 3-4 November 2022), <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/>.

6 Prague Process, Ministers of the Prague Process states adopt a Joint Declaration and Action Plan to boost cooperation on migration <https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/news-events/news/694-ministers-of-the-prague-process-states-adopt-a-joint-declaration-and-action-plan-to-boost-cooperation-on-migration>.

7 Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Ukraine Support Tracker, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

with Ukraine and Moldova before handing over the Presidency to Hungary in July.⁸The Czech government has also organized several trainings and workshops for civil servants from Ukraine, Moldova and previously also from the Western Balkan countries, and line ministries and government institutions cooperate with their Western Balkan and Associated Trio counterparts on sharing of the Czech experience and know-how with the EU accession process and preparation for membership. Thanks to the long-term close contacts and experience Czechia has with Ukraine, it is recognized as an important actor and consulted by its EU partners frequently. Unlike other countries of the region neighbouring Ukraine, the Czech Republic stood against any restrictions to Ukrainian imports and advocated for upholding the free trade rules.

However, despite the unwavering support of the Czech government to EU enlargement and provisions of assistance to Ukraine, the Czech public opinion is increasingly turning to a different direction. According to the recent polls, Czechs are beginning to belong among some of the most enlargement-sceptic nations in the EU. For example, in June 2023, 50% of Czechs expressed support to further enlargement in future years while 37% were against (which is 3% more than at the beginning of 2023).⁹In case of Ukraine, in May 2024 only 36% of Czechs thought its joining of the EU would be “a good idea” and 48% thought it “a bad idea”.¹⁰

COOPERATION IN NATO INTEGRATION

The Czech Republic traditionally supports further enlargement of NATO to Western Balkans and Eastern Europe as any instability in these regions has had a direct impact on the country. The Czech representatives repeatedly stated that the Western Balkan region is of paramount importance for Czech security which is why the country continues to support its integration into the Alliance.¹¹Since the 1990s, Czechia also contributed to international missions present in the region and currently maintains its presence in KFOR in Kosovo and ALTHEA mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At the level of NATO, the Czech Republic belongs among the most active and recognized supporters of Ukraine. In terms of military support, Czechia was the first country to provide Ukraine with tanks, helicopters and other heavy equipment.¹² The Czech government took a proactive role in providing Ukraine with much-needed artillery shells through the so-called ammunition initiative, mobilizing other NATO members to acquire ammunition available globally and deliver it to Ukraine.¹³Czechia

8 “12 EU countries urge Belgium to accelerate negotiations on Ukraine and Moldova’s accession,”Ukrainian Pravda, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2024/06/5/7187497/>.

9 European Union, Standard Eurobarometer 99Spring 2023, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3052>.

10 “The meaning of sovereignty: Ukrainian and European views of Russia’s war on Ukraine,”European Council on Foreign Relations, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-meaning-of-sovereignty-ukrainian-and-european-views-of-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

11 Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, Náměstek Blažkovec: Západní Balkán je výsostným bezpečnostním zájmem ČR, <https://mocr.army.cz/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/namestek-blazkovec-zapadni-balkan-je-vysostnym-bezpecnostnim-zajmem-cr-240917/>, Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, Stability of the Western Balkans crucial for security of Central Europe, <https://www.army.cz/en/ministry-of-defence/newsroom/news/stability-of-the-western-balkans-crucial-for-security-of-central-europe-248347/>.

12 Government of the Czech Republic, Czechia sends hundreds of heavy military systems worth tens of billions to Ukraine during the first year of Russian invasion, <https://vlada.gov.cz/en/media-centrum/tiskove-zpravy/czechia-sends-hundreds-of-heavy-military-systems-worth-tens-of-billions-to-ukraine-during-the-first-year-of-russian-invasion-203252>.

13 “The Czech Munitions Initiative for Ukraine is gaining attention. WSJ reports that it has located an additional 700,000 munitions outside the EU,”CZ Defence, <https://www.czdefence.com/article/the-czech-munitions-initiative-for-ukraine-is-gaining-attention-wsj-reports-that-it-has-located-an-additional-700000-munitions-outside-the-eu>

also provides training for Ukrainian troops and the Czech defence industry plays a pivotal role in the production of military equipment and military cooperation with Ukrainian companies through joint ventures. Both the government and President Petr Pavel openly support Ukraine's NATO membership.¹⁴

Support to Ukraine in all aspects is one of the principles of the ruling coalition (consisting of Civic Democrats ODS, Mayors and Independent STAN, Christian Democrats KDU-ČSL, the Pirate Party and the TOP 09 party) with most parties supporting openly also Ukraine's future NATO membership.¹⁵ On the other hand, opposition parties are against accepting Ukraine into NATO with the far-right and far-left parties being against further military and financial support to Ukraine. The former Prime Minister Babiš repeatedly called for the ending of the war and immediate negotiations and his ANO party remain very ambivalent in its approach to Ukraine. While condemning Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and insisting on the country's territorial integrity, he simultaneously rejects further military support to Ukraine or its EU and NATO membership and criticizes the agricultural imports from Ukraine.¹⁶

BILATERAL RELATIONS IN 2022 AND 2023

In terms of economic relations, in 2023, the Czech Republic's trade exchange with Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia increased notably¹⁷ and Czechia approved the agreement on double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion with Kosovo.¹⁸ In 2022, the country's political contacts with the Western Balkan countries intensified further through the EU level due to the Czech EU Presidency and the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana organized in the second half of the year. The Development Cooperation Strategy of the Czech Republic for 2018-2023¹⁹ includes among the priority countries from the Western Balkans only Bosnia and Herzegovina and the earmarked funds for BiH remained the same in 2023 as in 2022, slightly increased in comparison to the previous year.²⁰ The Transition Promotion Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aimed at strengthening democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms in selected countries, includes in the Western Balkans Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia.²¹ In terms of bilateral cooperation, there is

14 "Fiala slíbil další pomoc i podporu členství Ukrajiny v NATO. S českým hlasem můžete počítat, řekl Zelenskému," EuroZprávy.cz, <https://eurozpravy.cz/domaci/zelenskeho-navsteva-cr-pokracuje-setka-se-s-vrcholnymi-ustavnimi-ciniteli.2yse0h81>, "Pavel chce, aby summit NATO označil vstup Ukrajiny do Aliance za nezvratný," IDNES, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/nato-pavel-ukrajina-rusko-summit-usa-rusko-valka-bezpecnost.A240710_170830_zahranicni_jhr.

15 SPOLU Coalition Program, https://www.spolu21.cz/assets/documents/program/program_eu2024.pdf, Pirate Party Program, <https://www.pirati.cz/program>, STAN Party Program, <https://data.eu.cntmbr.com/stan/stan-beta/c82835dc-647a-4bcb-bbfa-e46e76e9a3ae.pdf>.

16 "Andrej Babiš ukrajinský. Jak šéf ANO opět zkouší měnit rétoriku," Echo24, <https://echo24.cz/a/Hhuwu/zpravy-domov-andrej-babis-ukrajinsky-sef-ano-meni-retorika>.

17 Information from Czech Republic's Embassies in the region

18 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, https://mzv.gov.cz/pristina/cz/bilateralni_a_multilateralni_vztahy/smlouva_mezi_ceskou_republikou_a.html#:~:text=Dne%2024.,listopadu%202013.

19 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Development Cooperation Strategy of the Czech Republic 2018 - 2030, https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/development_cooperation_and_humanitarian/development_cooperation_strategy_of_the_1.html.

20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Annual plans of development cooperation, https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/rozvojova_spoluprace/koncepcie_publikace/rocni_plany/index.html.

21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Transition Promotion Program, https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/human_rights/transition_promotion_program/index.html.

certainly space for improvement in the area of joint twinning projects where the Czech Republic has not implemented any in the past years.²² Unlike Hungary, the Czech Republic or any other V4 country does not second any diplomats or experts from the national administration to the Western Balkans, leaving the potential for intensified cooperation in the future.

In 2022 and 2023, Czechia maintains its good relations with Albania. The contacts between Czech and Albanian representatives took place predominantly at the EU level due to the Czech Presidency's activity towards the Western Balkans. The high-level bilateral meetings were thus less numerous than in 2021 when the visits of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the delegation of the Senate of the Czech Republic were organized. The Czech Police President visited Albania in July 2022, following the tradition of established cooperation with Albanian police.

Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to be among Czechia's priority countries in its development assistance program as well as the Transition Promotion Program with supported projects focusing primarily on the protection of human rights, economic development, environmental protection and green transition.

Czechia continues to have good relations with Kosovo and the mutual contacts significantly intensified in the period before and during the Czech EU Presidency. Kosovo representatives used the opportunity to advocate for visa liberalization and sought support for the EU membership application submitted in December. Several high-level visits to Kosovo took place, including the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and members of the Foreign Committee of the Czech Parliament. The number of visits of Kosovo representatives to Czechia also increased and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo visited Prague twice in 2023. The Czech Republic further continued to support human rights, engagement of civil society and independent journalism in Kosovo.

The Czech Republic also continues to have good relations with Montenegro regardless of the government changes in the past years. A high-level visit of President Đukanović and Deputy Prime Minister Ibrahimović to the Czech Republic in 2022 and the Czech Deputy Foreign Minister visited Podgorica that year. The Czech support to pro-democratic and development projects is apart from traditional areas focused increasingly also on women's rights.

The country also has good relations and cooperation with North Macedonia and the countries have close contacts especially at the level of the Ministry of Interior. Despite its previous opposition to including of bilateral and identity-related issues in the accession negotiations,²³ the Czech Republic supported the agreement between Bulgaria and North Macedonia and oversaw the first Intergovernmental Conference with North Macedonia and Albania. In 2023, the number of high-level political visits increased, with Minister of Defence and President Pendarovski visiting Prague and Minister of Foreign Affairs Lipavský visiting North Macedonia under the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting during the country's OSCE Chairmanship.

Despite the increased tensions between Serbia and the EU regarding its stance towards Russia in reaction to its invasion of Ukraine and the criticism of the ban of Euro Pride in 2022, the Czech

22 European Commission, Twinning, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/twinning_en.

23 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic on the Council Conclusions on Enlargement, https://mzv.gov.cz/representation_brussels/en/news_and_media/joint_statement_by_the_ministers_of.html.

Republic continues to have good relations and cooperation with Serbia and increases its economic cooperation with Serbia. The Czech Embassy also expands on its relations with Serbian civil society and NGOs in the area of human rights and democracy. Two visits of the Czech Deputy Foreign Minister to Serbia were organized in 2022.

MULTILATERAL COOPERATION ON RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

At the international scene, Czechia belongs among the most "hawkish" countries and initiated several resolutions on the Russian aggression towards Ukraine at the level of the UN, OSCE and Council of Europe. In the UN General Assembly, Czechia voted in favour of all resolutions on Russia and Ukraine, in particular on: Aggression against Ukraine; Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine; Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council; Territorial integrity of Ukraine; Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine; and on Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine.²⁴ Similarly, Czechia supported all European Council conclusions and declarations condemning the aggression and during its Presidency advanced three packages of sanctions against Russia.²⁵ In November 2022, the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic approved a resolution declaring the Russian regime as terrorist and condemned the annexation of Ukraine's eastern regions.²⁶

In May 2022, the Czech Republic was elected to replace Russia in the UN Human Rights Council with a mandate lasting until December 2023.²⁷ The country was also among the leading actors behind the proposal to establish a special international tribunal for Russia and initiated the establishment of the Register of Damage caused by the aggression of Russia against Ukraine, becoming one of its founding members.²⁸

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WB

The Czech Republic unequivocally supports any progress on regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries, both bilaterally and by sharing its experience with cooperation through the Visegrad format. During the Czech Presidency in the V4 in 2015, an agreement establishing the Western Balkans Fund according to the International Visegrad Fund model was signed by foreign ministers of the V4 and the Western Balkan countries.²⁹ While Czechia does not participate in the

24 UN General Assembly Documents, Security Council Report, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/general-assembly-documents/.

25 Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, Výsledky českého předsednictví v Radě EU v zahraničních záležitostech, <https://tvorimevropu.cz/2023/01/09/vysledky-ceskeho-predsednictvi-v-rade-eu-v-zahranicnich-zalezitostech%ef%bf%bc/>.

26 Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic, Sněmovna usnesením označila současný ruský režim za teroristický, <https://www.psp.cz/sqw/cms.sqw?z=16713>.

27 "Česko je členem Rady OSN pro lidská práva. Nahradilo vyloučené Rusko," Deník.cz, https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/cesko-rada-bezpecnosti-osn-20220510.html.

28 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Summit of the Council of Europe creates the Register of Damage caused by Russian aggression against Ukraine, https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/press_releases/summit_of_the_council_of_europe_creates.html.

29 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Visegrad Group – Western Balkans Fund became a reality, https://mzv.gov.cz/pristina/en/bilateral_and_multilateral_relations/visegradska_skupina_zapadobalkansky_fond.html.

Berlin Process, it closely follows and endorses the initiatives achieved in its framework. During the Czech EU Presidency, the country's representatives participated in some events under the Berlin Process on behalf of the Union.³⁰

In 2022, the Czech Republic also hosted a high-level conference with WB civil society representatives in Prague organized by the EESC together with the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council.³¹ The conference focused primarily on the European integration of the region and a more proactive role of the youth in the process. Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized in September 2022 Roundtable with Civil Society from the Western Balkans on Challenges of European Integration bringing together representatives of civil society, NGOs, media, academia, human rights and civic activists.³²

As an engaged member of the Friends of the Western Balkans group, the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs participated in the first meeting of the group in 2023 and the second meeting in June 2024 where a joint appeal for Western Balkans' enlargement was signed by the foreign ministers of the participating EU countries and the candidates from the region.³³ The initiative calls for advancing the gradual integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU and enhanced cooperation in areas of shared interests while acknowledging the importance of regional cooperation in the process.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since its own joining of NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004, the Czech Republic has established itself as a loyal partner of the Western Balkans and Ukraine and as a consistent advocate for their Euro-Atlantic integration. Support to both regions is a cornerstone of the country's foreign, regional and European policy and represents a topic of shared interest also in its partnerships with other EU Member States such as the Visegrad countries, Austria, Slovenia or Germany and France. So far, this support has been present with all Czech governments led by different political parties and its importance is understood by all mainstream parties. However, especially in the case of Ukraine and the perspective of its EU accession, this topic can become more divisive than has been the case until now with Czech populists emphasizing the economic costs and consequences for redistribution of EU funds which could affect also the Czech Republic. Furthermore, the Czech government is faced with an increasingly enlargement-sceptic and anti-Ukraine public, creating an environment where advocating for further enlargement of the Union will not be an easy task.

- The Czech Republic should continue calling for further EU enlargement at the level of the Union and maintain its advocacy for a balanced approach between the Associated Trio and Western Balkans and for gradual integration of the candidates into the EU.

30 Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, Vít Rakušan jednal v Berlíně o migraci, <https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/vit-rakusan-jednal-v-berline-o-migraci.aspx>.

31 European Economic and Social Committee, Young people as promoters of change and the Western Balkans' integration into the EU, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/young-people-promoters-change-and-western-balkans-integration-eu>.

32 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Civil society from the Western Balkans adopted a "Call to Action" at the MFA, https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/archive/events_and_issues/x2022/civil_society_from_the_western_balkans.html.

33 Austria's Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Foreign Minister Schallenberg's Initiative "Friends of the Western Balkans" Celebrates Its First Anniversary, <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/ministerium/presse/aktuelles/2024/06/foreign-minister-schallenbergs-initiative-friends-of-the-western-balkans-celebrates-its-first-anniversary>.

- Support for EU enlargement represents a crucial topic of many regional cooperation formats that Czechia is part of. However, it should utilize the current government's good reputation and positive image after its EU Presidency to try to build wider EU alliances beyond the region of Central and Eastern Europe or countries neighbouring with the candidate countries.
- In terms of bilateral support, the Czech Republic could consider increasing the technical assistance it provides to countries aspiring for EU membership, particularly through participating in twinning projects or possibly by sending Czech experts to the candidate countries' administrations to assist them through the accession process.
- The Czech Republic should consider the benefits of renewing the V4 ministerial meetings with Western Balkan countries despite the current crisis of relations within the V4.
- The worsened political relations among the V4 countries also should not hinder the work of the International Visegrad Fund or its financing as the Fund remains an important instrument in connecting the civil societies of the V4, Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, for capacity building of democratic actors in the candidate countries and their preparedness for EU accession.
- In the starting discussions about the next Multiannual Financial Framework for years 2028-2034, the Czech Republic should already formulate and promote ideas on how to prepare the EU budget for the next enlargement and how to reform the IPA so it better corresponds with the needs of the candidate countries.
- In relation to the EU reform discussions and the prepared internal reform roadmap, the Czech Republic should commence a discussion with domestic actors about the preparation of the Union for another enlargement and formulate a concrete vision of an enlarged EU and its functioning.

Authors: Julianna Ármás and Ferenc Németh

EU – HUNGARY AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Hungary has been known as a firm supporter of the Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic accession for decades. Given its proximity, historical and cultural ties to the region, and its kin-minority in Serbia (and Croatia), the post-transition governments have always placed a special emphasis on the region's stability, economic development, integration to Western alliances, and regional cooperation mechanisms. Over the past few years, Hungarian political and economic relations have grown significantly with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska (RS) and with Albania. These tendencies, especially Prime minister Viktor Orbán's political relations, however, have also raised concerns regionally, and might undermine Hungary's credibility among some political leaderships in the Western Balkans. Nonetheless, Hungary's diverging opinion on Russia's aggression in Ukraine and NATO's assistance, surprisingly, has not impacted its relations with any of the Western Balkan states. The paper highlights not only the multifaceted relationship of Budapest toward the region but examines how the Hungarian government has perceived the war in Ukraine and responded to NATO's actions.

Hungary is a long-standing and consistent supporter of the EU integration of the Western Balkans. As a neighbouring country, the peace and security of the region is a top foreign policy priority and a political issue that is underpinned by national consensus. Hungarian–Western Balkans relations are based on two main pillars: security policy considerations and economic interests, and these two objectives are linked by the protection of the Hungarian kin-minority beyond the borders. The primary framework of relations is provided by the Hungarian support for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans. Following the change of regime in Hungary, the most important foreign policy goal for the country became the accession into NATO and the EU, and this was seen by Hungary as an appropriate solution for its southern neighbours as a means of guaranteeing stability after the experience of the Yugoslav disintegration. In the era of new types of security challenges, the importance of institutionalised cooperation is even more appreciated, as threats such as natural disasters, migration or pandemics do not stop at national borders, but countries are also interdependent in terms of security of supply and energy.

Hungary's (new) economic interests are not without their own ends either: the fact that the Western Balkans is the primary target area for Hungarian investments (including outward foreign direct investments, OFDI) also means looking ahead to the economic integration of the region, so that a close and active Central and Southeast European economic area can operate as part of the European Union's (EU) Common Market.

Hungarian support for the EU integration of the Western Balkans can be identified at the level of political decision-makers, and its practical-technical manifestation should also be highlighted. Hungary is consistently striving to ensure that enlargement policy is part of the EU's political agenda

and that the Western Balkans remains its primary focus. The most visible and memorable success of this was the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency programme, which set the objective of concluding accession negotiations with Croatia, making it the first (and so far, the last) Western Balkan country to join the EU. The appointment of Olivier Várhelyi for Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement in 2019 also underlines the Hungarian priority for enlargement policy and the region, with the Commissioner's statement that he intends to conclude accession negotiations with at least one Western Balkan state by the end of his term. The reasons are manifold that this is not a reality at the moment, the EU's enlargement drive has slowed down, further affected by global and regional geopolitical crises, which have had a significant impact on the accession aspirations of the Western Balkan candidate countries. In this context, the practical and technical assistance provided by enlargement countries is of particular value, and Hungary is a leader in this field.

It is important to underline that the Hungarian position is that, in addition to political support for the accession of the Western Balkans, technical assistance is also essential if the countries of the region are to be brought within the EU's borders. Technical assistance instruments were launched in the EU institutional framework after Hungary's accession in two priority areas for Hungary, where a number of regional-sectoral similarities with the Western Balkan countries could be identified. Thus, the transfer of experience was launched along the lines of the Common Agricultural Policy and the Cohesion Funds through short-term expert visits and webinars. Hungarian experts are also active in IPA (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance)-funded programmes such as TAEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) and Twinning Projects, where study visits or assignments are mostly carried out in the fields of internal market, justice and home affairs, agriculture, rural development, fisheries and food chain monitoring. However, not only at EU institutional level, but also on a bilateral basis, Hungarian expertise and assistance to the region is a priority. A good example is the Hungarian Export Promotion Agency, which, in 2019, launched for the first time the Western Balkans Investment Scheme, which aims at the economic development of the region through the strengthening of the presence and role of Hungarian companies in the region. The Agency also covers bilateral infrastructural project preparation programmes for the Western Balkans, where technical assistance is provided on an intergovernmental basis (currently with Serbia and Montenegro). The most significant bilateral support is the presence of Hungarian EU experts, which is the first time in the history of Hungarian diplomacy that a large number of diplomats have worked for a relatively long period of time for another country in an organised manner.

The deployment of EU integration experts started in 2015, with two experts in North Macedonia and Serbia. By 2024, 8 experts are working in the region, covering all Western Balkan countries (two in Albania and Montenegro). The primary role of these Hungarian experts, who possess extensive and profound EU expertise, is to provide comprehensive advice that extends beyond specific policy areas or negotiation chapters. Their support aims to assist the receiving country by drawing on the broader experiences of Hungary's EU accession and membership. The success of the network is demonstrated by the fact that respective countries themselves have requested second experts and there is no doubt that the Hungarian experience is a major contribution to the dynamism of the accession process.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine has shaken the European security architecture, and Hungary, as a neighbouring country, has once again felt its first-hand destabilising effects. Despite the strained Ukrainian–Hungarian bilateral relations, the country has continued to condemn Russia's aggression in all international fora and to stand up for Ukraine's territorial integrity, even after the

2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of 2022. Such support is also reflected in the contributions to international measures to help Ukraine, most recently the €50 billion EU aid package voted in February 2024, which the EU will finance from the common budget. Since the beginning of the war, Hungary has provided medical equipment to Ukraine through the rescEU mechanism (patient monitor, ventilator, central monitor, infusion pump), and similar assistance has been provided through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. On a bilateral basis, the Special Medical and Rescue Team of the University of Debrecen organised a charitable mission, Hungary offered to provide full medical care for 130 Ukrainian children in need of hospital treatment, free medical care for Ukrainian refugees and hospital care for injured soldiers. The National Blood Service donated 25,000 blood bags from its existing stocks, while the Hungarian Defence Forces also donated medical equipment and consumables. Hungary has also contributed to the fight against COVID with almost 50,000 Pfizer vaccines, while also supporting the renovation of diagnostic equipment at Okhmatdy Children's Hospital in Kyiv.

HUNGARY AND NATO IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Hungary places significant emphasis on maintaining peace and security in the Western Balkans. In this quest, NATO and the military alliance's engagement in the region provide the framework through which Budapest can ensure this objective. Hungary has been engaged in NATO-led peacekeeping missions since the 1990s through IFOR and SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and as part of KFOR in Kosovo. It has served as NATO Contact Point Embassies in Podgorica and Sarajevo, and has supported every Western Balkan country that wished to join the alliance or opted to nurture stronger ties through the Partnership for Peace.

Hungary's dedication to NATO's peacekeeping operations is best illustrated by the fact that in 2021-22, a Hungarian Lieutenant General served as Commander of KFOR, and the country currently contributes with approximately 430 soldiers to the mission. Being the first post-socialist Central European country to hold KFOR's commandership is a testament that Western powers perceive Hungary as a reliable partner in maintaining security in the Western Balkans, and the country also enjoys credibility from the leaderships in Belgrade and Pristina. Although EUFOR Althea is under the command of the EU, it is worth mentioning that in 2024 a Hungarian Major General leads the mission and Hungary provides it with 164 soldiers, the largest contribution by a Visegrad country. Hungary's active engagement in peacekeeping missions in the Western Balkans is also a diplomatic success for the country. Additionally, Hungary is holding the rotating Presidency of the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC) this year, which includes members such as Croatia and Slovenia.

The Hungarian government holds a staunch position on NATO's support for Ukraine. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the government has publicly (and loudly) ruled out any NATO-led initiatives that would bring lethal weapons to Ukraine or place "NATO soldiers" on Ukrainian soil. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán pledged that Hungary would not block any NATO-led initiatives at the NATO level, however, every out-of-area operation conducted by NATO must remain voluntary. On the other hand, as discussed above, Hungary has provided its largest-ever humanitarian aid to Ukraine in the last two years. Most of the opposition parties are in favour of NATO's assistance for Ukraine, and often criticize the government's attitude toward Ukraine and its ties to Russia.

BILATERAL COOPERATION BETWEEN HUNGARY AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Bilateral relations between Hungary and the countries of the Western Balkans are good, without open issues that would hinder the development of further political and economic ties. Although Hungary perceives Serbia as its main regional partner, Budapest nonetheless maintains strong ties with all capitals, mainly by providing security through peacekeeping missions, supporting the countries' Euro-Atlantic integration and investing into the region. Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement also elevates Hungary's role and visibility in the region. The ever-growing relations between Prime minister Orbán, Serbian President Vučić and RS President Dodik, mainly based on ideological similarities, however, have a negative impact on Hungary's perception in Sarajevo and Pristina, and on the international level.

Unlike Serbia, Albania is still an "uncharted territory" for Hungary. Up until the last few years, there were virtually no major investments nor political visits by Hungary to Albania. The country's economic expansion reached a new level as the Hungarian 4iG company became the largest player in the Albanian telecommunications sector after the merger of ONE Telecommunications and ALBTelecom in 2022. In the banking sector, Hungarian presence is also visible: OTP Bank, which was already present in the country, bought Alpha Bank, and became the fifth largest commercial bank in Albania. In the field of renewable energy, a water industry cooperation deal and an agreement on the construction of a solar park worth approximately 13 million euros were signed last year. The expansion of WizzAir's Tirana base and the addition of new flights also solidified the low-cost carrier's market-leading position.

On the political side, Prime minister Orbán and former President Katalin Novák, for the first time since taking office, visited their Albanian counterparts in Tirana. A second EU integration officer was also seconded to the Prime Minister's Office to assist the country with its technical preparedness to EU integration.

The recently (re)discovered political ties between Premiers Orbán and Edi Rama serve as a solid ground for heightened political and economic cooperation, especially for Hungarian companies in Albania. This tendency is likely to continue in the upcoming period with the possible expansion of 4iG and more Hungarian OFDI to Albania.

While relations with Sarajevo deteriorated by the beginning of 2022, political and economic cooperation with Banja Luka have exponentially strengthened. Hungary also nurtures good relations with the most significant Croatian party, HDZ BIH and with the Special Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Christian Schmidt. The Banja Luka Regional Office of the OHR is once again headed by a Hungarian diplomat since 2022.

Although political ties with the Bosnian Serbs leadership, first and foremost with President Dodik are booming, Hungarian investments were made in both entities. Budapest supported RS with 35 million euros for agricultural investments and the Hungarian Eximbank also provided the entity with a loan of 110 million euros. In 2023, Orbán and Dodik agreed on an investment package to RS worth 118 million euros; half of this financial package would go for projects that Germany had stopped financing last year. On the side of investments, the Austrian Asamer Baustoffe AG sold Lukanac Cement d.o.o, one of the largest construction companies in the country located in Tuzla and near Banja Luka, to the Hungarian Talentis Group Zrt. Furthermore, Hungarian energy company

Lugos Renewables became the majority owner in one of the biggest solar power plants in BiH and will build the Trebinje 1 solar power plant.

Political relations between Dodik and Orbán continued to grow as leaders paid visits to each other several times. Orbán remains the only EU leader who openly opposes sanctioning Dodik, citing its possible counterproductive impact on regional stability. In response to former President Novák's invitation, Željka Cvijanović, Member of the Presidency of BiH visited Hungary twice.

Imbalances in Hungary's position towards Sarajevo and Banja Luka hamper the objectives of Budapest in maintaining good bilateral relations with all political circles in BiH. In a long run, it may lead to complete alienation from Bosniak political elites and can also result in the deterioration of Hungary's credibility regionwide.

Bilateral ties are good, although they are primarily viewed through the lens of KFOR's security provisions and the excellent political ties between Hungary and Serbia. Thus, relations are mostly focused on non-political fields, including education, culture and sport.

Hungary has always been a supporter of and welcomed the decision on Kosovo's visa liberalization. The country's unwavering support, however, must not be taken for granted: when it came to supporting Kosovo's application bid to the Council of Europe, Budapest voted against it at the Committee of Ministers, making the country the only one to do so who, at the same time, has recognised Kosovo's independence. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó explained that it would be a "premature" decision to have Kosovo as a member given Pristina's tense relations with Belgrade, and the same argumentation was used to explain Hungary's hesitation concerning Kosovo's EU membership application.

Hungary is a supporter of the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue with the aim of finding a mutually acceptable, legally binding solution at the end of the normalisation process. When it comes to the multiple crisis episodes in 2022-23, Premier Orbán played a role in convincing President Vučić to let the three captured Kosovo Police officers. The clashes between Serbs and KFOR personnel in Zvečan last year resulted in more than 20 injured Hungarian soldiers; Budapest, however, did not condemn violence nor held any political leadership accountable.

The ever-growing political ties of the Hungarian leadership with Serbia—and to a certain extent, with RS—undermines Budapest's credibility in Kosovo. In practice, that also means that Hungary, albeit being a recogniser, will not always be in favour of Pristina's efforts in joining regional and international organisations, including the Council of Europe and the EU; this will also add to Hungary's growing credibility problem among certain political elites in the region.

Relations between the Hungarian leadership, Milo Đukanović and the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska partija socijalista Crne Gore, DPS) were excellent. As the political landscape changed with the departure of DPS and, three years later, Đukanović himself from power, bilateral relations have remained stable and friendly, building on mutual economic cooperation, the potentials in tourism, and Hungary's support for Montenegro's EU integration.

In 2023, former President Novák and Prime Minister Orbán welcomed then-President Đukanović in Budapest. Later that year, Orbán had an informal meeting with the newly-elected President, Jakov Milatović. In addition to political ties, Hungary-based BSD Invest Europe is involved in the installation of a solar park in the northern municipality of Rožaje. Hungary's prime objective in regard to Montenegro is for the country to advance in its EU integration path. In order to do so,

Budapest considers stability is a prime objective: without a strong government, Montenegro will not be able to undergo reforms or live up to the EU's expectations.

Although Hungary favours cooperation with the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE, it nevertheless maintains good political relations with the SDSM-led government based on the former's support towards EU integration. In 2023, President Novák visited Skopje and held talks with her counterpart Stevo Pendarovski last year. Later that year, Prime minister Orbán welcomed VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski in Budapest. Although Hungary does not take a clear stand on the Macedonian-Bulgarian issue, but it nevertheless promotes the importance of having North Macedonia in the EU.

Economic potentials dominate bilateral relations as, after Serbia, North Macedonia is Hungary's second-largest trade partner in the region. On the side of energy cooperation, Hungary, Serbia, and North Macedonia joined diplomatic forces to protest Bulgaria's introduction of transit fees over Russian fossil fuels.

With the return of the right-wing government in the summer of 2024, political and economic cooperation between Hungary and North Macedonia are expected to rise significantly.

The Hungarian government considers Serbia as its most important partner from the Western Balkans both in terms of politics (based on ideological similarities) and economic relations. Building up on the so-called historical reconciliation from 2013, bilateral relations have never been stronger but are not taken for granted either.

In 2022, during the election campaigns in Serbia and Hungary (both countries held elections on the same day), there was an increased political cooperation as Premier Orbán campaigned in favour of President Vučić. Moreover, former President Novák visited her counterpart shortly after her inauguration which also marked her first visit to the Western Balkans. Countless state visits on the levels of (foreign) ministers and prime ministers/presidents took place, including on the Hungarian national holiday (20 August).

The most important political development was the signing of the Agreement on Cordial Relations and Strategic Partnership (with 12 political, economic, infrastructural, and military agreements) and the establishment of the Council of Hungarian-Serbian Strategic Cooperation in 2023. This type of comprehensive agreement is the first in the modern histories of Hungary and Serbia and signals an elevated level of bilateral cooperation. The countries also set up, as a response to the energy crisis, a joint natural gas company (called SerbHunGas), and agreed on the construction of a new oil pipeline between Hungary and Serbia. Moreover, the groundwork has been laid for the establishment of the regional electricity market between Hungary, Serbia, and Slovenia.

Economic ties between Budapest and Belgrade, building up on the already high level of economic cooperation, have strengthened amid the energy crisis and Serbia remained the main beneficiary to Hungarian OFDI in the Western Balkans. Cross-regional cooperation also increased with the refurbishment of train lines and opening of new border crossings in recent years.

Hungary remained a supporter of Serbia's speedy EU integration and ruled out introducing sanctions on Belgrade. The Kosovo issue (i.e., attack on Hungarian KFOR soldiers) did not cause any (political) rifts between leaders; rather, Orbán appeared as a "mediator" and influenced Vučić to set the three Kosovo Police officers captured by Serbian police forces free. Although Budapest was among the first EU member states to recognize Kosovo, recent moves by Hungary shows that, if needed, it can side with Serbia.

Hungary perceives Serbia as one of its stronger allies and has the conviction that the country is a security provider to the entire region. Thus, Hungarian foreign policy towards the Western Balkans shows biases toward Serbia which, many times, questions Budapest's intentions in other Western Balkan capitals (especially in Sarajevo and Pristina). Nevertheless, political, economic and sectoral cooperation are expected to continue in the years to come.

MULTILATERAL COOPERATION: HUNGARIAN STANDPOINTS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE FOREIGN POLICY ANSWERS

A stable, democratic and economically cooperative Ukraine is in Hungary's strategic interest in its neighbourhood, and also a regional security policy imperative to the east. The dynamics of relations between the two countries are characterised by duality: while both sides have always striven for good neighbourliness, it was precisely in the wake of the Russian aggression(s) against Ukraine that the country's nation-building began, which also adversely affected the Hungarian minority in Ukraine (national minorities and language rights became a matter of national security). Nevertheless, as we have already pointed out, Hungary has condemned Russian aggression (in 2014 and 2022) without exception in all international fora and stands by Ukraine's territorial integrity. The same can be said for the adoption to NATO and EU measures, the sanctions packages were also imposed by Hungary at all levels, and the only points of contention were the protection of national economic and energy security interests, on which consensus was made at the decision-making levels.

The Hungarian position and long-held veto on Ukraine's EU accession has caused a major stir. The 'Western Balkans logic' that Hungary's peace and security can be guaranteed by a stable neighbourhood that is part of the Euro-Atlantic institutional system is also true in the Eastern neighbourhood, but in times of an armed conflict, it is necessary to assess the differences. Support for Ukraine's EU enlargement does not mean fast-track accession for Hungary; it must remain consistent and merit-based, using objective comparisons between the candidate countries, and what is more, the EU cannot afford to integrate yet another bilateral conflict within its borders—as it did with Cyprus which has become a reference point for the normalisation process between Belgrade and Pristina.

There is no doubt that Ukraine has put the EU's enlargement ambitions back on the EU's agenda, and there is no question that Ukraine's candidate status and subsequent vote to open accession negotiations was a political rather than a merit-based decision. The tension at the end of 2023, when Hungary threatened to veto Ukraine's accession negotiations (citing the country's lack of preparation and the cost of accession), was finally resolved by Prime Minister Orbán leaving the room before the vote in the European Council.

It is fair to say that the Hungarian leadership has also recognised that without Ukraine there is no real appetite for enlargement in the EU, therefore this is the only way to bring the Western Balkans back into the focus of enlargement policy.

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE HUNGARIAN EXPERIENCE AND STANDPOINTS

Hungary is not unfamiliar with regional cooperation and with the benefits such formats can offer, especially in preparation for EU membership, thus the country supports any Western Balkans cooperation formations with a similar objective. The integration into Euro-Atlantic structures was one of the declared and most important objectives when the Visegrad Group (V4) was established in 1991, which has essentially become the driving force of cooperation. Although the Visegrad Declaration of 1991 did not address economic cooperation, the parties had already considered the creation of a free trade area, therefore the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) was created in 1992 through a different channel but retaining the same participants. CEFTA's main aspiration was to demonstrate the capacity for cooperation with the European Community (EC) and to reduce the existing competitive disadvantage after the dissolution of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. Although the arrangement did not significantly increase the volume of economic relations between CEFTA member states, as the most important partner was already the European Communities, it was an indication of the effort towards market liberalisation. Today, the countries of the Western Balkans (and Moldova) are members of CEFTA, with a similar objective to that of the 'founding fathers.'

As Hungary considers the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU not only a strategic goal and a national security interest, but also the further deepening of economic cooperation as one of its priorities, the country shows strong support for regional formations that stimulate economic cooperation in the region. The competitiveness of the Western Balkans, along with the EU, is in decline, and a first step towards reducing this trend should be the creation of the Common Regional Market of the Western Balkans, where the free movement of labour, goods, capital and services can be achieved. A larger labour market would also boost trust of foreign investors and reduce the outflow of labour by facilitating access to new jobs. The Western Balkans' common market can also be seen as an entry factor for the gradual integration model. Hungary has expressed its support for gradual integration and believes that it (also) helps the EU's commitment and credibility in the Western Balkans, but should in no way become an alternative to obtaining member state status.

Such logic can also be seen in the support behind the Berlin Process and the more recent Open Balkan initiative. Although Hungary is not formally a member of the Berlin Process, it follows the format's work closely and fully supports its moves towards a Common Regional Market. A good example of this is Hungary's encouraging position on the ratification of the 2022 Mobility Agreements and the participation of former Hungarian Head of State Novák in the 2023 Tirana Summit. It is also worth recalling that at the signing ceremony of the Open Balkan initiative, Albanian Prime minister Rama invited Italy, Greece and Hungary to join the Open Balkan as "observers". Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, Péter Szijjártó said at the time that Hungary was ready to join the cooperation format, underlining the importance of collaboration by the challenges of increasing migratory pressure as well as energy and security of supply, but also referring to the possibility of expanding the EU's Single Market.

In addition to the economic-practical cooperation framework, civil society organisations and think tanks, as well as their role in advocacy, bridge-building between the decision-makers and expert levels should be mentioned. Recognising this necessity, the Visegrad countries established the Think Visegrad – V4 Think-Tank Platform in 2012 to ensure a regular and structured dialogue between

the participating think tanks and the governments of the Visegrad countries. The main idea was that after coordinating positions and discussing strategic and contentious issues, the government sector can benefit from the knowledge and experience of the expert community, learning about Central European interests before an issue is taken to a higher, EU level. In essence, the platform gives visibility to the Visegrad Group's priorities and establishes an additional channel to advance its agenda within the European Union and among its other partners. For both the V4 and the Western Balkan countries, such cooperation platforms are good "training grounds", as it must be recognised once and for all that the EU is a conflict-ridden space for the pursuit of its interests, and that it is not worthwhile to chase policies along bilateral lines, but to seek allies and make agreements on the basis of specific policies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Hungary remains one of the biggest supporters of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans, in terms of invested political capital, energy, and on-the-ground assistance. Maintaining peace, stability, and security is the prevailing prism through which Hungary perceives and advocates for the EU accession of the region. In recent years, the untapped economic potential of the Western Balkans has also gained prominence as more Hungarian companies entered the region, which also gave a rise to Hungarian support towards regional cooperation mechanisms, including the Open Balkan initiative. Economic investments, technical assistance, and political support are all welcomed by the countries of the Western Balkans. Surprisingly, Hungary's stances on Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the rejection of providing Kyiv with lethal weapons (or with military equipment in general) have not raised any concerns from Western Balkan states. Although NATO allies in the region (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) as well as Kosovo have aligned their foreign policy objectives with the EU's common foreign and security policy directives, they nevertheless accepted that Hungary holds differing views on how the armed conflict in Ukraine should be managed. The greatest challenge for Hungary remains the region's slow EU integration process and the growing regional/local concerns—especially in Sarajevo and Pristina—over its "Serbia-centered" foreign policy agenda. The latter might result in the deterioration of Hungary's credibility in the Western Balkans in the long run.

- Hungary's regional presence in peacekeeping missions, as well as its political and economic relations, is still welcomed by (almost) all political elites. Maintaining this position and (re)gaining the trust of those concerned about the Hungarian leadership's heightened focus on Serbia can provide Hungary with leverage not only in the region but also at the EU level.
- Hungary should continue to be an active player in advocating the Western Balkans' speedier integration to the EU and must advocate for a more balanced approach concerning EU accession towards the region and the Associated Trio;
- Ukraine is the new driver of the EU enlargement policy; Hungary must keep that in mind that blocking Kyiv's EU aspirations will backfire in the Western Balkans;
- Participating in regional cooperation initiatives that aim to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU—including gradual/staged integration—should be a must for Hungary;
- Despite the lack of common Visegrad cooperation since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Hungary must collaborate and coordinate with Bratislava, Prague, and Warsaw on matters concerning the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and the region's economic growth and development. The International Visegrad Fund and focusing on technical assistance, are two non-political fields that might open up potentials for joint cooperation efforts.

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DEGREE OF ENGAGEMENT OF WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES IN EU INTEGRATION

The Western Balkans is a region comprising six countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia) that remain outside the European Union. Five of these countries emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia, while Albania, which complements the region, was a reclusive communist dictatorship during the Cold War. Since the accession of eight Central and Eastern European states to the European Union in 2004, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, the Western Balkans have become an enclave within the EU.

All these countries maintain close cooperation with the European Union and have been assured of future membership since the EU summit in Thessaloniki in 2003.

At the current stage of European integration within the Western Balkans, three distinct groups of countries can be discerned, each categorized by their respective phases in the integration process with the European Union.

The first group comprises countries engaged in negotiating specific chapters as part of their accession process. Montenegro unequivocally occupies the forefront of this ranking. According to the President of the European Commission, since autumn 2023, Podgorica has stood at the threshold of its path towards EU accession. Montenegro formally applied for EU membership in March 2008 and attained candidate status in December 2010. Thus far, the country has initiated negotiations on all 33 chapters required for accession to the EU, with only three temporarily closed to date.

The second country with a comparable status is Serbia, which, however, demonstrates a multifaceted approach in its foreign policy. This is exemplified, for instance, by its alignment with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, an organization that presents political and economic competition to the EU. Belgrade has commenced negotiations on 22 out of 35 chapters with the European Union, having temporarily concluded two of them.

The foremost challenge for this country in its journey towards European integration persists as the unresolved dispute with Kosovo—a former province that held the status of an autonomous territory within Serbia.

In contrast to the unwavering stance of the Montenegrin government, Belgrade, while maintaining a pro-European stance as customary, also leverages cooperative engagements with Russia or China. Serbia, unlike most European countries, has refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia following the commencement of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The second group of countries includes Albania and Macedonia, which embarked on accession talks during the same period amid occasional turbulence in bilateral relations between Skopje and Athens, as well as Skopje and Sofia.

These disputes involved cultural and identity dimensions, which both EU countries leveraged to veto the commencement of accession negotiations with North Macedonia.

However, both countries simultaneously initiated their first intergovernmental negotiations in July 2022. During this phase, Tirana and Skopje received definitive reform guidelines from the European Council as part of the screening procedure to assess the alignment of national legislation with Community law.

Both Albania and Macedonia were urged by the Council to advance towards initiating the first negotiating clusters, characterized by comprehensive themes such as good governance, the internal market, economic competitiveness, and connectivity, after aligning with EU recommendations. In Tirana's case, the recommendations focused on amending the constitution to align with EU standards regarding migration policy solutions. In the case of Skopje, the Council mandated that the commencement of the first negotiating chapters would be contingent upon amendments to the constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, specifically to formally recognize Bulgarians as one of the national identities within the state. This remains a contentious issue between Skopje and Sofia, with Bulgaria withholding consent for further accession talks until revisions are made to North Macedonia's constitution.

While Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are at varying formal stages of European integration, their internal complexities pose considerable obstacles and thus both states are included into a distinct third group.

Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged as the most recent country to be conferred official candidate status amid the European Union's heightened activity in the Western Balkans. After the EU had granted Bosnia candidate status in December 2022, on March 21, 2023, Sarajevo began formal negotiations with the European Union.

Among the countries in the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina stands out due to its complex political structure, which includes two autonomous entities—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska—alongside divisions within smaller administrative units. This complexity renders consensus on matters concerning European integration particularly challenging. Furthermore, this is worsened by the fact that one of the state's entities consistently refuses to acknowledge the rulings of the constitutional court and openly supports Russia during the Ukraine war.. Furthermore, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska introduced in May the controversial "foreign agents law" that mirrored Russian legislation, which caused considerable concern in Brussels.

Kosovo is the sole country in the region holding the status of a potential candidate for the European Union, and formally, it is the least progressed in the process of European integration. The primary impediment lies in the persistent conflict with Serbia, notably over the status of the Serbian minority residing in Kosovo's northern region. Kosovo's international status remains unsettled because not all European Union members, apart from Serbia and its allies like China or Russia, recognize its statehood.

Nations such as Cyprus, Spain, Greece, Slovakia, and Romania have yet to extend recognition to Kosovo's independence. In December 2022, Pristina submitted an application for membership in the European Union. A notable accomplishment for Kosovo in its dealings with the European Union has been the elimination of the Schengen visa requirement for Kosovar citizens possessing biometric passports starting from January 1, 2024. Kosovo remained the only country in the Western Balkans to maintain a visa regime with the EU, despite fulfilling the requirements for visa

liberalization since 2018. The delay stemmed from opposition by certain countries, notably France and the Netherlands—both apprehensive about potential surges in migration flows.

POLITICAL RIFTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS INTENSIFIED BY EUROPEAN UNION'S SLOW PACE

The process of European integration has emerged as a major reason for rifts across all societies in the Western Balkans. The primary political parties in the region frequently align into two main camps: those espousing liberal principles aimed at enacting reforms in harmony with European Union integration, and those advocating for partnerships with entities like Russia and China, often in opposition to Brussels' policies. A crucial political catalyst for Eurosceptic parties is the sluggish pace of the negotiation process with Brussels.

A poignant illustration of disillusionment with Brussels can be found in North Macedonia, which was governed by the center-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) from 2017 to 2024. During the tenure of the party, Skopje successfully navigated the milestones of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Its conciliatory approach helped the country renegotiate the name-changing deal with Greece. The government in Athens regarded the term "Macedonia" as integral to its heritage, making the creation of a compromise name for the country a politically risky endeavor for authorities in Skopje that somewhat necessitated public compensation. The renaming to North Macedonia sparked a dispute with the right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), which sought to boycott the decision as a perceived national betrayal. Simultaneously, they underscored to the public that their state had yet to achieve its international political objectives. Even with North Macedonia's accession to NATO, the advancement in European integration remains at a preliminary stage.

In the May parliamentary and presidential elections in North Macedonia, a political hiatus ensued and thus the VMRO-DPMNE party returned to power. The newly elected president of the country, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, during her inauguration, omitted the official name "North Macedonia" and used only the initial term, causing outrage in Greece. Given the party's historical activities, it is expected to pursue a more circumspect policy towards the EU than the SDSM did, particularly on identity issues that could pose obstacles to accession talks. The new government in Skopje may also seek to forge regional alliances with Eurosceptic blocs across Europe. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán were among the first foreign leaders to congratulate VMRO-DPMNE on their dual victory.

Concurrently, the new government intends to maintain its political endorsement of Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict with Russia, as asserted by the president of North Macedonia, a stance that could diverge from the policies observed in Hungary or Serbia. Under the SDSM's administration, North Macedonia was set to transfer Soviet-era military equipment from its arsenal, yet the exact quantity and types of armaments involved remained undisclosed.

The second country to witness recent political changes is Montenegro, where after 30 years of dominance by the Democratic Socialist Party (DPS), former President Milo Đukanović was ousted in the May 2023 presidential election. His successor, Jakov Milatovic, hailed from the newly formed Movement Europe Now (Pokret Evropa sad!, PES). His victory symbolically paved the path for the PES party to secure success in the parliamentary elections held in June. With an insufficient number

of votes, the PES party had to forge a coalition with parties representing the Albanian and Serbian minorities. That raised concerns in Brussels that Podgorica might politically align with Belgrade. The opposition DPS party has expressed concerns regarding Montenegro's European future, as the country approaches the culmination of its efforts. They question whether the new government will uphold a pro-European policy stance. The new Montenegrin government, led by PES President Miloško Spajić, firmly rebuffed these concerns and suggestions, emphasizing its commitment to accelerating Montenegro's European integration process.

Montenegro demonstrated significant solidarity with Ukraine by providing military aid totaling 10 million euros. While this amount may appear modest, when contextualized against Podgorica's annual military budget of €70 million, this amount takes on greater significance when measured relative to the country's GDP.

A hallmark of the Western Balkans is the political environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina, characterized by persistent ethnic divisions and a deadlock in top state institutions. Moreover, in Republika Srpska, the ruling Serbian Democratic Party (SDP), led by the charismatic Milorad Dodik, is notably inclined towards separatist policies. The one pursued by the Bosnian Serbs is principally oriented towards dismantling the Dayton system, which retains elements of international oversight over Bosnia and Herzegovina through the institution of the High Representative. As a result, the SDP party boycotts all decisions at the highest political level and thus renders it impossible to pursue further accession dialogue with the European Union.

Another area of disagreement between Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and pro-Western Croats, on the one hand, and Republika Srpska, on the other, revolves around its foreign policy orientation and stance towards the European Union and NATO. Representatives of the Serbian community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who officially declare neutrality towards the war in Ukraine, are actively pursuing a policy of closer ties not only with their primary ally, Belgrade, but also with Moscow. Milorad Dodik, along with other politicians from his faction, frequently visits Russia. In 2022, the Bosnian Serb leader engaged in negotiations with Gazprom in Russia to discuss the terms for increasing gas imports.

The unabashedly pro-Russian stance of the Bosnian Serbs, alongside the looming threat of separatism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is causing considerable consternation in the West. There are some concerns that Russia, as part of a purported proxy war, may exacerbate tensions in the Western Balkans.

Another troubling trend in the region is that a single party has consolidated all power in one country. This is evident in Albania, where Edi Rama and his Socialist Party of Albania have been in power since 2013. The opposition Democratic Party of Albania is divided by internal conflicts, with two emerging leaders: Lulzim Basha, who assumed party leadership in July 2023, and former Prime Minister and President Sali Berisha, currently under house arrest due to corruption charges. The opposition accuses Prime Minister Rama of politically motivated retaliation against Berisha. Conversely, the ruling government views the arrest of a prominent politician as a validation of judicial reform. At the European level, the Democratic Party of Albania is aligned with the largest faction in the European Parliament, the EPP (European People's Party).

On the international front, Albania demonstrated considerable support by sending 23 MaxxPro combat vehicles to Ukraine in 2023, a notable contribution given the country's capabilities. In 2019, Tirana was said to have acquired only 40 of these vehicles from the USA.

The dominance of a single party on the political scene also persists in Serbia—where Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) have held unchallenged power since 2014. Vučić served as Serbia’s prime minister until 2017 and has been president since May 31, 2017. Between 2012 and 2014, he held the position of first deputy prime minister in the coalition government. Over the past decade, the SPP party and its leader have adopted a strategy that involves consolidating power while simultaneously marginalizing the opposition. On the contrary, Aleksandar Vučić, while maintaining a pro-European narrative, also sought to bolster political ties with China and Russia.

In recent years, Serbia has seen considerable political polarization, exacerbated by allegations from the opposition coalition “Serbia Against Violence” accusing Vučić’s party of electoral fraud during the December 2023 elections. The opposition coalition, despite securing second place, lacks the requisite majority to impede reforms in a country that exhibits authoritarian tendencies. Both the EU’s and the Council of Europe’s election observers then concluded that these elections were not fair, citing manipulated votes, and recommended that the case be investigated by the prosecutor’s office. The ruling SNS party secured 128 seats in the 250-member National Assembly, while the largest opposition coalition garnered just 65 seats.

Amid internal challenges in Serbia’s democratization process, another critique leveled against authorities in Belgrade is their unwavering commitment to a pro-Russian foreign policy stance. Serbia has refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia. In July 2023, Aleksandar Vulin was dismissed from his position as head of Serbia’s secret services in a move prompted by intervention from the EU and the U.S. The politician received recognition in Moscow for his deep collaboration with the Russian Federal Security Service.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that in June 2024, Belgrade sold PLN 800 million worth of ammunition to Kyiv.

Kosovo, not fully acknowledged as a sovereign state in the international community, delineates a major point of contention with Serbia, especially regarding the Serb-majority municipalities in its northern territories. Prime Minister Albin Kurti’s Self-Determination! Movement (Lëvizja VETËVENDOSJE!, LVV) commands nearly 50 percent support, notwithstanding their confrontational approach to the conflict in the country’s northern provinces, where the Serbian minority is concentrated in four districts. The Kosovo politician’s stance has raised alarm in the European Union and the United States, as it threatens to undermine the peace process in the Balkans. Much like the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this situation could entangle the West in a “proxy war,” diverting attention from Ukraine, which may be Russia’s strategic goal in the region.

SUPPORT FOR EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN WESTERN BALKAN NATIONS

A comprehensive study on the Western Balkans’ approach to European Union integration was conducted across all countries in the region between February 3 and March 5 of this year. One of the questions asked was: If a referendum were held today, would you vote for your country to join the EU? Albanians responded most affirmatively to this question, with 92 percent in favor, followed by Kosovars at 89 percent, Montenegrins at 79 percent, Bosnians and Herzegovinians at 68 percent, Macedonians also at 68 percent, and Serbs at 40 percent³⁴. The subsequent question addressed the

³⁴ <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-mini/>

European Union's real motivations behind extending membership to countries in the region. 62 percent of Kosovars, 59 percent of Montenegrins, 54 percent of Albanians, 44 percent of Bosnians and Herzegovinians, 34 percent of Macedonians, and 30 percent of Serbs responded positively.

These studies underscore a substantial degree of skepticism among Western Balkan nations regarding the effectiveness of the European integration process. This is largely attributed to the protracted nature of European integration and the absence of any new accession since 2013. On the other hand, the current uptick in the European integration process in the Western Balkans stems largely from the aftermath of the Ukraine war. Brussels aims to assert its influence anew amid competing interests from global powers such as China and Russia—each with divergent agendas in the region.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The majority of citizens in the Western Balkans support their countries' accession to the European Union, with Albanians and Kosovars showing the highest levels of support, while Serbia remains significantly sceptical. This support reflects a high valuation of EU membership as a key factor for political and economic stability.

There is deep scepticism regarding the effectiveness of the European integration process, which has been significantly impacted by slow progress and the absence of new accessions since 2013. This scepticism is particularly pronounced in Serbia, where national policies often counter European aspirations.

Geopolitical changes, including the war in Ukraine, have increased the significance of the European integration process in the Western Balkans. The EU faces competition from global powers such as China and Russia, each with different interests in the region.

Poland, as a key member of the Visegrád Group (V4), provides substantial political and economic support to the Western Balkans. Poland and other V4 countries support the European aspirations of the Western Balkans but are also focused on geopolitical aspects, including relations with Russia and support for NATO integration.

- The European Union should improve the transparency and efficiency of the accession process to reduce scepticism among Western Balkan countries and accelerate progress in integration.
- The EU should continue to provide support and incentives to countries like Albania and Kosovo, which show high levels of support for membership, to strengthen their commitment to reforms.
- Consider enhancing the accession process to allow for quicker inclusion of new members and reduce the sluggishness that contributes to skepticism, taking into account geopolitical tensions in the region.
- Increase engagement and support from Visegrád Group (V4) countries, particularly Poland, in providing assistance and advice to Western Balkan countries to strengthen their European perspective and improve bilateral relations in key areas such as security, trade, and political stability.

Author: Tomáš Strážay

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF SLOVAKIA'S POSITION TOWARDS EU ACCESSION PROCESS AND INTEGRATION OF WB COUNTRIES

Slovakia has been a committed supporter to EU enlargement policy since its own accession to the EU in 2004. Western Balkan countries have always played a particular role in its foreign policy. The importance of the Western Balkans for Slovakia can be demonstrated through the opening of Slovak embassies in the region. While in the year 2004 Slovakia only had two embassies in the region (Belgrade and Zagreb), ten years later Slovak embassies can also be found in Podgorica, Sarajevo, Skopje and Tirana, while in Pristina Slovakia has a liaison office. One of the most visible proofs of Slovakia's interest in the region is the direct involvement of Slovak diplomats in the stabilization of the Western Balkans, just to mention Miroslav Lajčák, Eduard Kukan or František Lipka. Continuity is also apparent in Slovakia's position towards the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo, since Slovakia has remained to be among five EU members that have not changed their attitude on that issue. When it comes to the recent engagement of Slovak stakeholders, Miroslav Lajčák's active engagement as the EUSR for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues (2020-2024) needs to be mentioned. The same applies to Vladimír Bilčík, who has served as the rapporteur for Serbia and chair of the European Parliament's Montenegro Delegation.

Besides political support on bilateral and multilateral basis Slovakia has been engaged in economic cooperation with WB countries. Though it had lagged behind its V4 neighbours when bilateral trade and investments are concerned, recently encouraging, positive trends can be noticed. Bilateral trade with the biggest economy in the region – Serbia – increased to over 1 billion euro in 2023, while intensive investments of some Slovak companies were announced in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Still, economic diplomacy needs to be strengthened, also by re-opening a position of economic diplomat(s) in the region.

Official development assistance (ODA) represents another important tool of cooperation. Though the focus of Slovakia's ODA has partially moved to other geographical regions, selected Western Balkan countries remain to be the target countries. Taking into the consideration the length of the accession process to the EU for some countries of the region, Slovak ODA will remain to be an important instrument of Slovakia's foreign policy in the Western Balkans for the years to come. It will remain so despite the fact that the region was excluded from the classical development assistance scheme and now ODA is more based on micro-grants and co-financing projects.

Other instruments of cooperation include twinning projects and secondment of diplomats and experts. Practically each of the WB countries has been the implementing territory for different kinds of twinning projects, usually with the participation of other EU countries. Though the secondment

of diplomats has not been used very often, experts from various fields have served as consultants in several WB countries.

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 was condemned by all significant political parties in the Slovak National Council. The declaration adopted in the National Council in February 2022 was followed by another one adopted a year later.³⁵ Still, differences among political parties exist not solely on a declarative level. In comparison to the governments of prime minister Heger and prime minister Ódor, the new government of prime minister Fico created in October 2023 categorically rejects to support Ukraine militarily. Though in practice this position does not include the delivery of military equipment on a commercial basis, it is presented as a fulfilled promise to the voters of the governmental coalition consisting of the SMER (DIRECTION – Slovak Social Democracy), HLAS (VOICE – Social Democracy) and SNS (Slovak National Party) parties. The rhetoric on Ukraine and the ongoing war by the prime minister Fico and other representatives of the government is significantly less supportive to the policy of Ukrainian president Zelensky than in the case of the representatives of the main opposition parties: PS (Progressive Slovakia), SaS (Freedom and Solidarity) and KDH (Christian Democratic Movement). Particularly the representatives of the ruling SMER and SNS parties are also openly critical to the continuation of a justified war of Ukraine against the Russian aggressor and ask for a (unspecified) peaceful solution. Also, they call for the maintenance of cooperation with Russia in those areas, where it would be possible. Nevertheless, on the EU level Slovakia has so far approved all the support provided to Ukraine by the EU, including the last package worth 50 billion EURO adopted at the special EU Council meeting in February 2024.³⁶

The escalation of the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine changed the perception of the enlargement policy. Already in June 2022 Ukraine and Moldova were given the candidate status and a year later both started their negotiations with the EU. Though Georgia lagged behind them, it was also granted the candidate status in 2023. In fact, enlargement policy merged with the neighbourhood policy of the EU as the WB6 was joined by the so-called Accession Trio countries (UA, MD, GE). The enlargement policy on the level of the EU was energized and Slovakia took an active part in that. The support for the future membership of Ukraine (as well as of Moldova and Georgia) was demonstrated by all three governments that served in Slovakia since February 2022. Though the manifesto of the government created after September 2023 elections does not contain a single notion on the Western Balkans and support for the Western Balkan countries integration process to the EU, part of it is dedicated to the integration of Ukraine to the EU and to the intention of Slovakia to take part in the reconstruction process.³⁷ Still, the support to the European perspective of the Western Balkans is considered to be one of the priority of the new government. Slovakia not only sees the future of the Western Balkan countries in the EU, but also declares its support to the balanced approach, which does not prioritize any of the groups of candidate/potential candidate countries from different geographical regions.³⁸

35 NR SR odsudzuje vojenskú agresiu Ruska na Ukrajine, žiada zastavenie operácie, 25. 2. 2022, <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=udalosti/udalost&MasterID=55961>, NRSR: Poslanci uznesením opätovne odsúdili ruskú agresiu na Ukrajine 16. 2. 2023, <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=udalosti/udalost&MasterID=56319>.

36 Special meeting of the European Council (1 February 2024) – Conclusions, Brussels, 1 February 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/69874/20240201-special-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

37 Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023 – 2027 (The Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2023 – 2027), <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376>.

38 Minister Juraj Blanár: Stabilita krajín západného Balkánu je v ich členstve v Európskej únii, 6 February 2024, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=20672103.

The overall assistance provided to Ukraine reached 1,3 per cent of Slovakia's GDP between January 2022-October 2023. Out of this support, 0,6 per cent is bilateral assistance and 0,7 per cent assistance provided through the EU, in the latter case also through the European Peace Facility Instrument. This support includes not only military assistance to Ukraine, including the handover of the S300 anti-missile system and MIG-29 fighters, but also humanitarian aid and economic assistance. Other EU-based instruments include e.g. Connecting Europe Facility. In addition, humanitarian assistance in the amount of 530 million EURO provided to Ukrainian refugees on the territory of Slovakia did not come from the Slovak state budget, but from unused EU funds from the previous operational program.³⁹

RELATIONS WITH NATO

Slovakia is a committed NATO member since the year 2004 and as a country supported the accession of Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia to the Alliance. With those WB members Slovakia maintains the same level of relationship as with other allies. Slovakia, for instance, holds the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Centre of Excellence (EOD CoE) in Trenčín. It is one of NATO Centres of Excellence that cooperate with other NATO members, partners, other countries and international organizations, in order to enhance EOD capabilities.

When non-NATO countries are concerned (Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, though the latter is a special case), possibilities of cooperation are multiple. Slovakia had served as a contact point embassy for NATO in Serbia between 2013-2016. During its two mandates Slovak Republic was actively supporting high level meetings as well as the discussion about Serbia – NATO relations at the public level.

In relation to the needs of partner countries in the WB, NATO has developed an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP), through which joint exercises, courses, and trainings could be organized. This type of programme, however, is not focusing solely on WB partners, but comprises the variety of partners worldwide. In the context of ITTP, the Defence Capabilities Building Package (DCBP) was established, through which concrete projects in partner countries are supported financially. In the framework of this facility, for instance, the helicopter fleet in BaH was modernized.⁴⁰

Slovakia has participated actively in the EUFOR ALTHEA mission in BaH and though this is mostly an EU initiative but is based on previous NATO missions SFOR and IFOR. The size of the Slovak contingent was raised to 60 troops. ⁴¹On the other hand, Slovakia stopped its engagement in the KFOR mission in 2010 and for now it is not planning to renew its engagement.

The membership in Ukraine in NATO has been a divisive issue in Slovak politics. The governmental coalition that was created in the aftermath of the September 2023 elections declared its opposition to the integration of the biggest Slovak neighbour in NATO, while some of the opposition parties (Progressive Slovakia – PS, Freedom and Solidarity – SAS) are in favour of UA's future membership in the alliance. Both government and opposition, on the other hand, support the integration of Ukraine to the EU. However, the strict fulfilment of the membership criteria is underlined by the representatives of the government.

39 Slovenská pomoc Ukrajine patrí medzi najštedrejšie na svete. Pozrite si kompletný rebríček krajín, PRAVDA, 12 February 2024, <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/ludia/clanok/699004-zverejnili-cisla-ako-slovensko-pomaha-ukrajine-ficovi-sa-rozbehnuty-vlak-uz-nepodari-zastavit/>.

40 Based on the interview with the representative of the Permanent Mission of the Slovak Republic to NATO.

41 <https://www.mod.gov.sk/operacia-althea-bosna-a-hercegovina/>

BILATERAL COOPERATION

Slovakia continued or even intensified both bilateral political cooperation with the Western Balkan countries in 2022-23 and its support for their EU integration. This applied also to Kosovo, though Slovakia does not recognize its unilaterally declared independence. Ties with Prishtina continued to be developing on both governmental and non-governmental levels.⁴²

Slovakia continued to be a convinced supporter of the enlargement policy of the EU both prior and after the September 2023 parliamentary elections. The elections, however, had an impact on the intensity of political relations—in just one year Slovakia had three different foreign ministers.

Political support, including for sharing the know-how from transformation and Euro-Atlantic integration processes, was, however, followed only partially by the intensification of ties in other areas, especially in economic cooperation. Bilateral trade with WB countries had mostly been stagnating in 2022, with Albania – and to a certain extent Kosovo – being the exception. The same applies to the year 2023, except for Slovak–Serbian relations - trade exchange between Slovakia and Serbia reached a historic high in 2023 with 1,2 billion euros. The interest of Slovak investors also remained low, though there occurred some noticeable investments of the Slovak companies in the region (e.g. the SHP Group 130 million EURO worth investment in the Celex company in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Besides the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on trade exchange, one of the reasons for an unsatisfactory situation is the absence of economic diplomats at the Slovak embassies across the region. To reverse this trend, the Slovak embassy in Belgrade, which is the biggest one, paid a lot of effort to re-create the position of the economic diplomat, but without concrete results. Also, due to their limited size, other embassies in the region are rather understaffed. The situation changes only slowly, e.g. in Montenegro the number of diplomats increased by one in 2022. Positive development in this context was noticed also in Serbia, where Slovakia opened a new Honorary Consulate in Vojvodina in 2023.⁴³

The declared intention to intensify cooperation is not reflected adequately in the number of twinning projects or seconded diplomats and experts. Except for Serbia and Montenegro where brand-new twinning projects have been launched recently, the situation in other countries has not changed or even experienced a negative dynamics, which also means that some remained without any twinning project or any seconded expert.⁴⁴

42 In relation to Kosovo, Slovakia decided not to recognize its independence unless there is an approval of the UN Security Council and/or an agreement between Belgrade and Prishtina on the issue. The reason for this position can be found in domestic politics and can be explained by the lack of political consensus on that issue, supported also by (legally not-binding) declaration of the Slovak Parliament. On the other hand, this fact does not prevent Slovakia to maintain and intensify contacts with the representatives of various institutions in Kosovo and support joint projects, also through the Official Development Assistance. Slovakia has also developed technical tools for cooperation with Kosovo, which includes opening of a liaison office in Prishtina and recognition of Kosovar passports. Slovakia considers Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244/99) to be an integral part of the Western Balkan region with a clear European perspective. Also, though Slovakia differs from its Visegrad neighbours in the issue of Kosovo's independence, projects supported by the International Visegrad Fund are open also for applicants from Kosovo. Taking into consideration the current composition of the Slovak National Assembly, the chance that Slovakia would change its attitude towards Kosovo's independence is very low.

43 Based on information provided by the Slovak embassies in Belgrade, Podgorica, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tirana and liaison office in Prishtina.

44 In Montenegro Slovakia took part in the new joint twinning project with Germany and Estonia focused on employment policy, while in Serbia a new project focusing internal market facility and financed through IPA was launched.

Development assistance saw a positive tendency in 2022-23 and did not experience any significant decrease despite the fact that the Slovak Development Agency decided not to maintain any longer Western Balkan countries as targets for development projects in its traditional project calls. This can be explained by the fact that the embassies managed to use other cooperation instruments, particularly micro grants.

2022 – highlights

- May 2022 - the state secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia Zoran Popov visited Slovakia (meeting with his counterpart State Secretary Martin Klus)
- May 25 – 27 - the state secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Ingrid Brocková visited BiH,
- June 2022 – foreign minister Ivan Korčok attended the Prespa Forum Dialogue in Ohrid, North Macedonia,
- June 2022 – foreign minister Ivan Korčok visited Montenegro,
- June 2022 – Montenegrin president Milo Djukanovic visited Slovakia for the GLOBSEC 2022 conference,
- June 2022 - a delegation of the Committee for defence and security of the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic visited BiH (meeting with the (then) Minister of Defence of BiH, with the commander of the EUFOR/Althea mission),
- September 2022 - the president Zuzana Čaputová visited North Macedonia in her first official visit to the Western Balkan region ever,
- October 2022 - prime minister Eduard Heger met with the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, on the sidelines of the Prague summit of the European Political Community,
- October 2022 - minister of defence of Slovakia Jaroslav Nad' visited Kosovo to commemorate victims of a tragic accident of military aircraft during which 42 Slovak soldiers returning from their duty with the KFOR mission died in the year 2006 (unofficial meetings with some high-level representatives of the Kosovo administration),
- November 2022 - political director of the Ministry of Defence of Kosovo, Faruk Geci, visited Slovakia on the invitation of one of the think tanks (meeting with his counterpart Martin Sklenár, political director of the ministry of defence of the Slovak Republic),
- December 2022 - prime minister Eduard Heger attended the first ever EU – Western Balkan summit in Tirana.⁴⁵

2023 highlights

- May 2023 - the Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, Megi Fino, visited Bratislava (meeting with her counterpart State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Ingrid Brocková, with whom she signed the Agreement on avoiding double taxation),
- May 2023 - the Minister of Foreign Affairs of BiH, Elmedin Konaković, visited Bratislava in May 2023 (discussion about BiH's EU and NATO membership),
- May 2023 - Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani in Bratislava, who also attended the GLOBSEC Forum 2023 and spoke in the panel on the EU integration,

⁴⁵ For more information see also Ján Cingel, "Western Balkans and Slovak foreign policy 2022 in hindsight", In: Peter Brezáni (ed.) Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2022, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association 2023, <https://www.sfpa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Rocenka-ZPSR-2022.pdf>.

- May 2023 - the Embassy of Slovakia in Podgorica organized, in cooperation with the Business Chamber of Montenegro, a business forum for Slovak companies working in the HORECA sector and food production,
- June 2023 - the Ambassador of Slovakia to BiH, Roman Hlobeň, together with the NATO HQ Commander in the country, handed a donation of 20.000 EUR to the Defence Ministry of BiH,
- June 2023 - the regular air connection between Bratislava and Podgorica was opened, operated by Air Montenegro,
- July 2023 - Slovak Minister Wlachovský met with the Deputy Foreign Minister of BiH, Josip Brkić, during the NATO Summit in Vilnius,
- July 2023 - the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic Miroslav Wlachovský, together with his Austrian and Czech colleagues Alexander Schallenberg and Jan Lipavský, visited North Macedonia (meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, other representatives of the Government of North Macedonia, the opposition, and civil society),
- September 2023 - Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik paid an unofficial visit to Bratislava (meeting with the leading (then) opposition party SMER-SSD chairman Robert Fico and his deputy Juraj Blanár),
- December 2023 - the President Zuzana Čaputová, accompanied by the Minister of Defence Robert Kaliňák, visited Bosnia and Herzegovina (meeting with Slovak troops serving in the EUFOR/Althea operation and BiH interlocutors, possibilities for increasing the Slovak contingent contribution to the operation were also discussed),
- December 2023 - farewell of the Slovak Ambassador to Serbia, Fedor Rosocha (meeting with President Aleksandar Vučić, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Porfirije). The new Ambassador of Slovakia to Serbia, Michal Pavúk, took office in February 2024.⁴⁶

MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

Slovakia demonstrated its support to the territorial integrity of Ukraine and condemned the escalation of Russia's aggression on various multilateral fora, among which the UN, EU and NATO have played the most important role. The voting in the UN General Assembly from March 2022 and February 2023⁴⁷ could serve as examples. Despite the changed, more offensive rhetoric of some representatives of the new Slovak government led by the prime minister Fico towards Ukraine and strengthening of the voices advocating for the renewal of cooperation with Russia, Slovakia did not stop supporting Ukraine. Since the Fico government halted any military aid to Ukraine from the state stocks, it continued the provision of other types of assistance, among which the humanitarian aid has played the most important role. This "red line" applied to the military assistance, however, has not affected the provision of ammunition and different types of military equipment (including howitzers "Zuzana") to Ukraine on the commercial basis.

Slovakia has never used the veto neither in NATO nor in the EU when the support to Ukraine is concerned. This also applies to the support provided through the European Peace Facility instrument, as it does not oblige participating countries to provide military assistance on the

46 For more information see also Ján Cingel, "Slovakia and the Western Balkans in 2023: a year of turbulence", In: Peter Brezáni (ed.) Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2023, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association 2024, <https://www.sfpa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Yearbook-of-Slovakis-Foreign-Policy-2023.pdf>.

47 General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Demanding Russian Federation Immediately End Illegal Use of Force in Ukraine, Withdraw All Troops, 2 March 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12407.doc.htm>, UN General Assembly calls for immediate end to war in Ukraine, 23 February 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133847>.

individual (state) level. On the other hand, Slovakia did not join the Czech initiative to fund and procure ammunition for Ukraine. As a reaction to this decision, a successful citizens' initiative to raise funds to this purpose was launched in Slovakia.⁴⁸

Minilateral formats of cooperation through which Slovakia also demonstrated its support to Ukraine should not be forgotten as well. Due to differences between Hungary and other three Visegrad countries the V4 definitely stopped to play the role of the most efficient format of regional cooperation after February 2022, support to Ukraine was still declared at the summits of the presidents, prime ministers and also foreign ministers. After the September 2023 parliamentary elections some of the representatives of the Slovak government, including prime minister Fico, both rhetorically and to a considerable extent also in practical sense, got closer to the Hungarian government and prime minister Orbán. This deepened even more divisions in the group. Still, the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), which is supported by all for V4 governments continued to support the projects focusing on Ukraine, including mobility projects. The Slavkov triangle (S3), which encompasses Slovakia, Austria and Czechia also served as the platform for the verbalisation of pro-Ukrainian positions, especially on the level of foreign ministers, prior to Slovak 2023 elections. This format, preferred by the previous governments of Eduard Heger and Ľudovít Ódor, however, lost its importance, since the preference of the new Fico government was given to the Visegrad format. The most active platform for consultations and support of Ukraine became the Bucharest nine format (B9), which encompasses nine members of the NATO Eastern flank. The initiative is maintained on the level of the presidents of nine participating countries.

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Slovakia has supported regional cooperation in the Western Balkans through the activities of the European Union, but also through its engagement in minilateral formats of regional cooperation. Among them particular attention was paid to the Visegrad Group. Being a member of various regional formats, Slovakia understands the importance of regional cooperation for the integration of WB countries to the European Union and development of good neighbourly relations.

The Visegrad countries' support to the Western Balkans dates back (at least) to 2004 when the Kroměříž Declaration framing the priorities of the V4 countries after their accession to the EU was signed. When political cooperation is concerned, the V4 used to be the only regional format having joint ministerial meetings with ministers of foreign affairs from the Western Balkan countries in the entire EU. Although the Western Balkans still represent the territorial priority for all V4 countries, cooperation on the group level is not as intensive as it used to be. The last V4+WB ministerial meeting was held in June 2021, under the Polish V4 Presidency. The reason was primarily the growing divergence in the V4 countries' European and foreign policy priorities. Due to a very limited political cooperation on the group level, most of inter-regional activities were coordinated by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF).

V4 has served as an inspiration and a role model for regional initiatives in the Western Balkans, including the Western Balkan Fund (WBF). WBF was modelled after the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), the only standing institution in the V4. The idea to create a similar institution in the Western

⁴⁸ According to the portal *Munícia pre Ukrajinu* (Ammunition for Ukraine) portal, within 45 days of fundraising 4,278,222 EURO was raised. The sum is higher than the official support of some of the governments of the countries participating in the initiative. See <https://www.municipreukrajinu.sk/>.

Balkans appeared initially in the study of the International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT), which was developed with the participation of authors from all V4 countries. The intention was to develop a self-sustainable institution, with strong regional ownership, financed by the governments in the region.

The so-called technical assistance from the IVF to the WBF has dropped significantly over the last five years. While already in 2017 the amount was relatively modest – 80 000 EUR – between 2020 and 2021 it decreased to 60 000 EUR and in 2022-2023 – to 40 000 EURO. Still, both funds coordinate in the evaluation of projects focusing on the WBs and share information about the applicants. Though the WBF managed to attract foreign and EU funding, the contributions of the governments of the WB countries remain relatively low (and insufficient when it comes to the full operation of the WBF). This fact does not correspond with original expectation that the WB countries governments would be responsible for the functioning of the WBF and by financing its activities would guarantee the regional ownership of the WBF. The role of IVF however is, due to its very symbolic financial contribution, very limited.

Cooperation between the IVF and WBF continues on different levels and by using other than financial instruments. One of them is a regular dialogue between the management of both institutions. The IVF, in cooperation with the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), also agreed on a new scheme aimed at intensifying academic mobility between the V4 and WB regions. The new scheme launched in 2024 provides financial support for visiting fellowships and guest lectures. The parties share the costs in the ratio 3:2 – the IVF covers 60% of the budget, while the WBF 40%. Though the total amount dedicated to this project scheme is quite modest (100,000 euros in total), the scheme as such can be perceived as a new activity in inter-regional relations and can be further developed.⁴⁹

The development of inter-regional cooperation can also be measured by the support of projects submitted to the IVF by subjects with residence in particular WB countries, as well as by supported scholarships.⁵⁰

CONCLUSIONS

Slovakia is and will remain to be the supporter of the EU enlargement policy and integration of the Western Balkan (as well as the so-called Accession Trio countries) to the European Union. In relation to the further extension of NATO, Slovakia will most probably assess potential candidates membership individually. So far, the negative position of the government was issued towards the aspirations of Ukraine to become the member of NATO.

When compared to most EU member states, Slovakia will continue to have a different position on the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo. Though Slovakia abstained during the vote on the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers with regard to Kosovo's membership application in 2023, prior to the expected next round of CoE voting scheduled for spring 2024 the Slovak foreign minister issued a statement in which he rejected the acceptance of the membership of Kosovo in

⁴⁹ Based on the Minutes of the Council of Ambassadors (December 19, 2023), Resolution of the Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (December 19, 2023), as well as interview conducted by one of co-authors with the representatives of the International Visegrad Fund.

⁵⁰ For more details please visit the official website of the International Visegrad Fund, www.visegradfund.org.

CoE unless an agreement between Belgrade and Prishtina is concluded.⁵¹ Further differentiation of Slovakia from other member states in the issues related to the Western Balkans cannot be excluded. The recent abstention in UN vote on Srebrenica genocide can be used as the most recent example. Together with two other EU member states, Cyprus and Greece, Slovakia abstained from a vote, while Hungary was against the recognition of Srebrenica genocide. According to the statement published by the Ministry of Foreign and European affairs, Slovakia recognized the genocide in Srebrenica, but the motivation for the abstention from vote was for the sake of the “stability of the Western Balkans, where the situation has been quite tense”⁵². This position raised questions among some foreign observers related to the future compliance of Slovakia with EU policies targeted on the Western Balkans.

Taking into the consideration the weakness of the unilateral formats of regional cooperation in which Slovakia takes part, namely V4 and S3, bilateral initiatives and cooperation on the EU level will continue to be Bratislava’s most important support tools for the accession of Western Balkan countries to the EU and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. Still, the International Visegrad Fund can make a difference, due to its long track record and non-political focus. To certain extent, an informal “Friends of the Western Balkans”⁵³ initiative launched in June 2023 could also serve as a tool, especially when it comes to balancing the Eastward shift in the EU integration process. Another possibility for the exchange of views will remain the summits of the European Political Community (EPC), though expectations from this initiative remain to be moderate due to its rather symbolic character. The European perspective of the Western Balkan countries can be further supported by the capacity building process and development of sectoral recommendations through the National Convention of the European Union project, which is considered as an important element of know-how sharing.⁵⁴

Despite the changed rhetoric of the new Slovak government created in the aftermath of 2023 general elections and its reluctance to provide military aid to Ukraine from the state stocks Slovakia has continued supporting Ukraine and its integration ambitions to become the EU member. The positions Slovakia had at the European Council meetings, as well as the jointly organized meeting of the Slovak and Ukrainian governments prove this support. However, due to the turbulences in domestic politics one cannot take the absolute continuity of Slovakia’s foreign and European policy for granted. Still, projects that would improve cooperation and coordination between the Western Balkans and so-called Accession Trio countries, held both on inter-regional and EU levels, will certainly remain in the focus of Slovakia’s foreign policy in the years to come.

51 Vyhlásenie ministra zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR Juraja Blanára k záverom Výboru pre politické vzťahy a demokraciu Parlamentného zhromaždenia Rady Európy k členstvu Kosova v Rade Európy, 2 April 2024, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=21524491.

52 Hlasovanie vo Valnom zhromaždení OSN o Srebrenici, 23 May 2024, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=22922134.

53 “Friends of the Western Balkans” CallforConcreteStepstowardstheIntegration of the Western BalkansintotheEuropeanUnion, 23 June 2023, <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/the-ministry/press/news/2023/06/friends-of-the-western-balkans-call-for-concrete-steps-towards-the-integration-of-the-western-balkans-into-the-european-union>.

54 Currentlytheproject has beenimplementedwiththepartialsupport of theSlovakAid in two Western Balkancountries, namelyAlbania and North Macedonia.

