

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, LAW,
AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**Master's degree in
European and Global Studies**



**THE VISEGRAD GROUP AND THE EUROPEAN UNION
ENLARGEMENT TO THE WESTERN BALKANS**

Supervisor: Prof. ELENA CALANDRI

Candidate: VOLODYMYR POSVIATENKO
Matriculation No. 2039906

A.Y. 2021/2022

Abstract

The European Union enlargement policy is a key driver of European integration and an effective foreign policy tool for the democratisation of European countries. By being Member States for almost two decades, the Visegrad Group countries act as a successful example of such democratic and economic transformation. Today the enlargement agenda of the European Union is concentrated on the Western Balkans, where the perspective of European Union membership has been a stimulus for stabilisation and democratic transformation. Sharing numerous ties and similarities with the Western Balkans, the Visegrad Group countries are staunch supporters of European Union enlargement to the region and can positively influence the Western Balkan countries' accession process. The thesis aims to evaluate the Visegrad Group's approach to the Western Balkans' European integration and its impact on the region's accession process. The study concentrates on the Visegrad Group states' collective and individual approach to the Western Balkans and their European integration. The analysis of the Visegrad states' enlargement policies and Visegrad Members of the European Parliament enlargement discourses shows that the Visegrad Group's approach to the Western Balkans' enlargement is largely determined by the national interests of the countries, such as security and extending their influence on the European level. The positive impact of the Visegrad states' active support is overshadowed by their conflicting foreign policy priorities and visions on European integration, the lack of sufficient coordination, and Hungary's and Poland's democratic backsliding. Consequently, these challenges limit the Visegrad Group states' ability to exert a decisive influence on the democratisation and European integration processes in the Western Balkans.

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) enlargement policy has a special place within the EU's foreign policy. EU enlargement is at the heart of the European integration project and is widely considered one of the EU's most successful policies¹. Being one of the most effective foreign policy tools, this policy is deeply connected to the ideas of democratisation and economic transformation². Historically, the European perspective served as the key driver for the democratic transformation of European countries through the dissemination of European values, rules, and standards. Consequently, the EU enlargement policy turned the EU into a significant international actor and a normative power by systematically increasing its ability to influence the political and economic transformation of the neighbouring countries³. Simultaneously, the goal of the enlargement process is also in fostering European integration⁴. Each enlargement influences the institutional system of the EU and pushes EU Member States to engage in in-depth discussions about the future shape of the Union. Thus, the EU enlargement policy can be considered to be a driving force of European integration, since it not only widens but also deepens the integration process.

Since its inception, the EU has grown from the six founding Member States to a community of 27 European countries united around common values and a common vision of the future. The EU's transformation from an exclusively Western European organisation into the leading pan-European institution-building force makes the enlargement policy a key political process of transnational relations for the entire European region⁵. Following the end of the Cold War, the EU, through its enlargement policy, engaged in a complex process of democratic and economic transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, which culminated in the accession of twelve states into the EU in the period of 2004–2007. The 'Big Bang' enlargement of 2004 saw the Central European states of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia, together forming the Visegrad Group, joining the EU, which marked their 'return to Europe'.

However, the Western Balkan countries, belonging to the wider Central and Eastern Europe region, did not share the fate of the Visegrad Group in their European integration process. The

¹ Ker-Lindsay, James, Ioannis Armatolas, Rosa Balfour, and Corina Stratulat. "The National Politics of EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017): 511–22.

² Sjørnsen, Helene. "A Certain Sense of Europe? Defining the EU through Enlargement" *European Societies* 14, no. 4 (2012): 502–521.

³ Sedelmeier, Ulrich. "Enlargement. Constituent Policy and Tool for External Governance," in *Policy-making in the European Union*, eds. Helen Wallace, Mark A. Pollack, Christilla Roederer-Rynning, and Alasdair R. Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 407–435.

⁴ Sjørnsen, op. cit.

⁵ Schimmelfennig, Frank, and Ulrich Sedelmeier. "Theorizing EU Enlargement: Research Focus, Hypotheses, and the State of Research." *Journal of European Public Policy* 9, no. 4 (2002): 500–528.

Western Balkan region is covered by the EU enlargement policy since the early 2000s, which serves as the main tool of the EU's engagement in the region's stabilisation and democratisation. The Western Balkans are seen as the priority region of the current enlargement agenda, which also includes three Eastern European states, namely, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as Turkey. However, only Croatia, a country formerly considered as Western Balkan, has so far joined the EU in 2013. Since then, EU enlargement to the region has practically halted its progress.

By and large, the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans display certain similarities. Being geographically close to each other, both regions share the recent historical experiences of the authoritarian communist rule and the subsequent efforts to overcome its legacy through their efforts in democratic and economic transition. Moreover, both regions have comparable characteristics on a macro-regional level, as well as on the national level of individual countries. The Visegrad Group states are among the most vocal supporters of EU enlargement and are actively engaged in the promotion of the Western Balkans' EU accession. The Western Balkans' European integration is among the national interests and foreign policy priorities of the Visegrad states, which is reflected in their enlargement policies. Taking the aforementioned similarities into account, the Visegrad Group countries can positively influence the Western Balkan countries' European integration by serving as an example of a successful democratic and economic transformation.

Research on EU enlargement has become a significant part of the academic inquiry into the nature of European integration and the role of the EU on the international level. The topic has been addressed in the works of renowned scholars specialising in the research of European integration, such as Frank Schimmelfennig, Ulrich Sedelmeier, and Helene Sjursen⁶, among others. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier have contributed to the research on EU enlargement by introducing several important concepts. They defined four main dimensions of enlargement: the EU enlargement politics, the EU Member States' enlargement politics, applicant states' enlargement politics, and the impact of enlargement on the EU⁷. The EU Member States' enlargement politics dimension is particularly relevant for the aims of this thesis.

Theoretical reflections on EU enlargement have concentrated mainly on the analysis of factors prompting the EU to engage in democratisation and stabilisation of its neighbourhood by offering a European perspective. Researchers from the realist school of thought have pointed

⁶ Sjursen, op. cit.

⁷ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, op. cit.

out that the main factor determining EU enlargement is the national interests of the EU Member States⁸. Adrian Hyde-Price views EU enlargement as an instrument used by influential EU Member States to exert hegemonic power, thus shaping their neighbourhood with the aim of achieving long-term strategic and economic benefits⁹. While EU Member States' cost-benefit analyses of the EU enlargement process determined their approach on the enlargement decisions, they also defined the main argumentation patterns of European political actors on national and European levels¹⁰. From the realist perspective, the main justifications to support EU enlargement concentrate around economic and geostrategic arguments. Baldwin, Francois, Portes¹¹, and Schimmelfennig¹², among others, see economic arguments behind EU enlargement as a tool for the expansion of the EU single market with its four freedoms. Regarding geopolitical and geostrategic arguments, Higashino¹³, Grimm and Okka¹⁴, and Juncos¹⁵ have highlighted the role of the EU enlargement policy as a stabilisation tool for neighbouring countries, which raises the security of both EU Member States and aspirant countries. As Moravcsik and Vachudova argue, the enlargement process can be characterised as an asymmetric interdependence connecting the EU Member States and candidate countries¹⁶.

Constructivists, on the other hand, explain the EU Member States' engagement in the EU enlargement process by highlighting a different set of arguments. From their perspective, enlargement is seen as the process of community building through the accession of countries sharing common values and principles. For example, Góra¹⁷ describes how the constructivist perspective stipulates that the decision to proceed with the Eastern enlargement was taken because it concerned the identity issue of who belongs to the European civilisation of values.

⁸ Vachudova, Milada Anna. *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage and Integration after Communism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁹ Hyde-Price, Adrian. "'Normative' Power Europe: A Realist Critique." *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (2006): 217–234.

¹⁰ Sjursen, Helene. "The EU as a 'Normative' Power: How Can This Be?" *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (2006): 235–251.

¹¹ Baldwin, Richard E., Joseph F. Francois, Richard Portes, Dani Rodrik, and István P. Székely. "The Costs and Benefits of Eastern Enlargement: The Impact on the EU and Central Europe." *Economic Policy* 12, no. 24 (1997): 125–176.

¹² Schimmelfennig, Frank. *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹³ Higashino, Atsuko. "For the Sake of 'Peace and Security'? The Role of Security in the European Union Enlargement Eastwards." *Cooperation and Conflict* 39, no. 4 (2004): 347–368.

¹⁴ Grimm, Sonja, and Lou Mathis Okka. "Stability First, Development Second, Democracy Third: The European Union's Policy towards the Post-Conflict Western Balkans, 1991–2010." *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 6 (2015): 916–947.

¹⁵ Juncos, Ana E. "The European Union and the Western Balkans." Chapter. In *EU Security Strategies*, edited by Jerry Sperling, 1st ed., 49–66. Routledge, 2017.

¹⁶ Moravcsik, Andrew, and Milada Anna Vachudova. "National Interests, State Power, and EU Enlargement." *Perspectives*, no. 19 (2002): 21–31.

¹⁷ Góra, Magdalena. *Legitymizacja i kontestacja polityki zagranicznej Unii Europejskiej na przykładzie polityki rozszerzenia i Europejskiej Polityki Sąsiedztwa*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019.

The argument of ‘historical justice’ of the Eastern enlargement was significant as well, as discussed by Schimmelfennig¹⁸ and Sjursen¹⁹. The issue of the EU’s role in the transformation of neighbouring countries through the process of EU enlargement has featured in reflections on normative aspects of European integration. The success of the Eastern enlargement served as a confirmation of the EU’s role as a ‘normative power’, a concept introduced by Ian Manners²⁰. The concept of ‘normative power Europe’ characterises the EU as a powerful actor in international relations that is concentrated on the promotion of universal and European values as a tool to influence other actors²¹. In this respect, analyses of the EU enlargement policy have contributed to the empirical verification of the ‘normative power’ concept in the works of Lavenex and Schimmelfennig²², and Noutcheva²³, among others.

The research on EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is especially significant for the current context of enlargement, as the region is essentially the priority region of the policy. The Western Balkans’ EU enlargement features prominently in the works of Milada Vachudova, who analyses the influence of the EU enlargement policy on the region²⁴ and the influence of the Western Balkan states’ national interests on their accession process²⁵.

An extensive body of literature has been dedicated to the reasons why the EU, as a unified political entity, has wanted to enlarge, and how this process has been undertaken. However, despite the fact that national enlargement policy agendas are crucial drivers in this unified support towards enlargement, relatively little research has been done on the factors determining individual EU Member States’ support or opposition to the EU enlargement process. Yet the issue of the EU Member States’ national policies on the Western Balkans’ EU enlargement in particular has gained prominence in the literature in recent years. Particularly noteworthy is the extensive study on the national politics of EU enlargement conducted by James Ker-Lindsay, Ioannis Armakolas, Rosa Balfour, and Corina Stratulat²⁶. This research analyses how domestic political concerns and national politics affect the way in which EU Member States approach

¹⁸ Schimmelfennig, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe*, op. cit.

¹⁹ Sjursen, “A Certain Sense of Europe?”, op. cit.

²⁰ Manners, Ian. “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–258.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Lavenex, Sandra, and Frank Schimmelfennig. “EU Democracy Promotion in the Neighbourhood: From Leverage to Governance?” *Democratization* 18, no. 4 (2011): 885–909.

²³ Noutcheva, Gergana. *European Foreign Policy and the Challenges of Balkan Accession: Conditionality, Legitimacy and Compliance*. London: Routledge, 2014.

²⁴ Vachudova, Milada Anna. “EU Enlargement and State Capture in the Western Balkans.” *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans*, 2018, 63–85.

²⁵ Vachudova, Milada Anna. “EU Leverage and National Interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years On.” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 1 (2013): 122–138.

²⁶ Ker-Lindsay et al., op. cit.

enlargement to the Western Balkans²⁷. Several scholars contributed to this study, such as Theresia Töglhofer and Cornelius Adebahr focusing on Germany²⁸, and Natascha Wunsch analysing the case of France²⁹. Beáta Huszka³⁰ analyses the main aspects of the EU enlargement policy of Hungary, a EU Member States which is included within the scope of this thesis. The research has demonstrated that there is a variety of factors shaping individual Member States' attitudes towards the EU enlargement policy and specifically towards the Western Balkans' enlargement. These factors include economic connections, security concerns, ties to the region and individual accession states, general foreign policy priorities, and national ideological approaches towards European integration in general³¹. However, despite the substantial similarities between the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans, the systematic analysis of the Visegrad EU Member States' national enlargement policies towards the Western Balkans has not received adequate attention.

Therefore, this thesis aims to analyse the Visegrad Group countries' approaches to the Western Balkans' EU enlargement. The analysis examines the place of the Western Balkans in the foreign policies of the Visegrad countries in the context of EU enlargement by looking at their policy preferences and relations with the Western Balkan countries. The Visegrad countries are analysed both individually and collectively as the Visegrad Group. The thesis focuses on several research objectives. Firstly, the research seeks to identify the factors motivating the Visegrad countries' support of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans and examine which factors dominate their support. Secondly, the research seeks to assess how these factors influence the Visegrad countries' approach to the Western Balkans' EU enlargement by following the theoretical underpinnings of EU enlargement. Thirdly, the research seeks to examine how the Visegrad Group's approach to the Western Balkan countries influences the Western Balkans' EU accession process. Consequently, the research addresses the following research questions:

Research question 1: What factors dominate the Visegrad Group's approach to EU enlargement to the Western Balkans?

Research question 2: How do these factors influence the Visegrad Group's enlargement policies towards the Western Balkans?

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Töglhofer, Theresia, and Cornelius Adebahr. "Firm supporter and severe critic – Germany's two-pronged approach to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017): 523–539.

²⁹ Wunsch, Natasha. "Between indifference and hesitation: France and EU enlargement towards the Balkans." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017): 541–554.

³⁰ Huszka, Beáta "Euro-sceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017): 591–609.

³¹ Ker-Lindsay et al., op. cit.

Research question 3: What influence does the Visegrad Group have on the Western Balkans' EU accession process?

The analysis is primarily based on the case study method, which is widely used in social sciences, since it allows for an in-depth study of each case and aims to explain the similarities and differences between them. Lune and Berg define case studies as “in-depth qualitative studies of one or few illustrative cases”³². The focus on the qualitative nature suggests that while case studies are intended to explain how the research subject operates within a particular context, their results can also be put on a more global scale³³. Still, generalisation may be regarded as one of the main limitations of the case study approach, which focuses on empirical results of a single case³⁴. In other words, such research is undertaken to study the unique nature of a case, and not because it represents other cases. However, when applied to EU Member States' national enlargement policies, the results of the case study method may serve as a sound basis for generalising about possible factors determining EU Member States' stances on the EU enlargement policy and their implications on the process itself. The comparative case study method is used for this research to analyse the Visegrad Group countries' approaches to the Western Balkans' EU enlargement in order to identify the similarities, differences, and particularities across the cases. Additionally, the analysis is complemented by the empirical discourse-oriented perspective to evaluate the enlargement discourses of Members of the European Parliament from the Visegrad Group countries in the context of the Western Balkans' EU enlargement process.

The case study of the Visegrad countries' approaches towards the Western Balkans' European integration contributes to the research on the national enlargement policies of EU Member States and the research on EU enlargement in general. The case study of the Visegrad Group countries' enlargement policies towards the Western Balkans offers valuable insights into their impact on the EU enlargement process and their stances on the future of European integration. Moreover, the analysis of the Visegrad Group's collective approach towards the Western Balkans helps to explore the level of coordination of the Visegrad countries' enlargement policies.

Chapter 1 of the thesis discusses the Western Balkans' EU enlargement process, specifically highlighting the significance of the Western Balkans for the EU. It offers a brief review of EU

³² Lune, Howard, and Bruce L. Berg. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Pearson Education Limited, 2017.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Gray, David E. *Doing Research in the Real World*. London: SAGE Publications, 2018.

enlargement policy instruments and initiatives concerning the Western Balkans' enlargement, and analyses the current state of the Western Balkans' accession process, along with the main challenges the region is facing. Chapter 2 presents the thorough analysis of the Visegrad countries' approaches to the Western Balkans' EU enlargement. Subchapter 2.1. analyses the significance of EU enlargement as a foreign policy priority for the Visegrad Group countries. Subchapter 2.2. examines the Visegrad Group's coordinated efforts, specific initiatives, and collective contribution to the EU accession process of the Western Balkan countries. Subchapter 2.3., divided into four thematic subchapters about each of the Visegrad states, analyses the place of the Western Balkans' EU enlargement among the foreign policy preferences of the individual Visegrad countries, as well as their relations and cooperation with the Western Balkans in the context of EU enlargement. Chapter 3. employs the qualitative discourse analysis method to analyse enlargement discourses of the Visegrad Group countries' Members of the European Parliament. The discourse analysis in this chapter seeks to empirically evaluate justifications used by political actors from the Visegrad Group to promote the Western Balkans' enlargement on the European level. The thesis concludes with empirical, theoretical, and practical implications of the research, evaluating the results and the problems encountered and providing the general assessment of the Visegrad Groups' role in the process of EU enlargement.

1. The Western Balkans and the European Union enlargement

1.1. The significance of the Western Balkans for the European Union

The Western Balkans is a group of countries located on the Balkan peninsula in Southeastern Europe. The term ‘Western Balkans’ is a political neologism, which has generally been used by the EU institutions to refer to the part of the Balkan region that includes non-EU countries only³⁵. At present, the Western Balkans comprise six states in Southeastern Europe, namely, the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Kosovo*³⁶, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, and the Republic of Serbia, sometimes collectively referred to as the WB6. All of these countries aim to become EU Member States in the future. Currently, the Western Balkan region is considered one of the priority regions of potential EU enlargement. The WB6 have the EU membership perspective and are covered by the EU enlargement policy.

The Western Balkans were declared the priority of EU enlargement at the Thessaloniki European Council Summit in 2003. The European perspective is currently recognised for all of the Western Balkan countries. The countries are at different stages in their EU accession process. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, are recognised as official candidates for EU membership and have started membership negotiations with the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo* are recognised as potential candidates.

In recent years, the process of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans has effectively stalled and cannot boast of visible progress. Overall, since the Eastern enlargement of 2004–2007, the EU enlargement process has been slowing down, which saw only Croatia, considered a Western Balkan country at the time, joining the EU in 2013. The current WB6 have been in the enlargement queue for years. North Macedonia was granted candidate status back in December 2005 and had been waiting for membership negotiations to start for almost seventeen years until July 2022. Montenegro, Serbia, and Albania are also in the membership queue for a long time, since a candidate status was given to them in 2010, 2012, and 2014, respectively. This situation led to considerable disappointment among the Western Balkan societies.

³⁵ Croatia was considered a Western Balkan country before joining the EU in 2013. For the purpose of this thesis and in line with the current EU definition of the Western Balkan region, Croatia is not referred to as a Western Balkan country and is not included in this thesis.

³⁶ All references to Kosovo in this text, whether the territory, institutions, or population, shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

As of 2022, EU enlargement is generally supported by the EU citizens³⁷. The Russian invasion of Ukraine contributed to an increase in a positive attitude towards the perspective of further widening of the EU. Yet, large segments of the population and political elites from several Western European countries tend to have a negative attitude towards the potential EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, the issue known as enlargement fatigue. Before 2022, the share of EU citizens having positive and negative attitudes towards EU enlargement was virtually equal³⁸. High-level policymakers from these countries, affected by enlargement fatigue, often follow suit in opposing the Western Balkans' EU accession. This is evidenced by the reluctance of France and the Netherlands to proceed with the opening of the membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in October 2019. Despite reasonable concerns about the state of democracy, the rule of law, human rights protection, freedom of speech, and corruption issues in the candidate countries, their accession is also seen negatively for sentimental reasons connected with the stigmatisation and perception of the Balkan region as a volatile place with constant conflicts. This situation needs to be addressed by answering the underlying question, why do the Western Balkans matter?

The crucial importance of the Western Balkans for the EU stems first of all from its strategic location, and consequent implications for the whole system of European security. Being a European region, the state of affairs in the Western Balkans directly affects and concerns the EU. Due to the troubled recent past of brutal wars and conflicts and the present of still unhealed interethnic relations, the Western Balkan region is perceived as a region with a high potential for destabilisation. The Western Balkans also play a highly significant role in tackling other security challenges for the EU, such as uncontrolled migration and fighting terrorism. The stable security situation in the Western Balkans is essential for the stability of the EU and the future of European integration. For this reason, the EU has taken a leading role in the process of long-term stabilisation through democratic and economic transformation. The main tool for it is the EU enlargement policy.

The Western Balkans can be seen as a 'geopolitical gap' on the map of the EU. The region is located just in between Central European and Southeastern European EU Member States, and consists of politically vulnerable and economically underdeveloped countries, weakened by interethnic conflicts and a lack of strong democratic institutions. Since the early 1990s, the Western Balkan region became a place of geopolitical rivalry, where a large number of

³⁷ European Commission. "Standard Eurobarometer 97. Summer 2022. Public opinion in the European Union." Eurobarometer Survey, September 2022. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2693>.

³⁸ European Commission. "Standard Eurobarometer 96. Winter 2021–2022. Public opinion in the European Union." Eurobarometer Survey, April 2022. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2553>.

influential actors of international relations with different geopolitical goals have been involved. The role of strategic and geopolitical factors has significantly increased in recent years. In the context of the ongoing full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the possibility of destabilisation and escalation is once again seen as real. The tensions between Russia and the West have escalated to levels unseen since the end of the Cold War, and the Western Balkans continue to be one of the 'frontlines' of this rivalry. Russia's revisionist attempts and the threat it poses to the law-based system of international relations are putting a strain on European unity, and are intended to destabilise and weaken the EU. Despite the fact that three of the Western Balkan countries, namely, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, are members of NATO, the Alliance membership does not guarantee ultimate protection from Russia's destructive influence and attempts at provoking internal tensions, particularly in the cases of Montenegro and North Macedonia. The situation is even more precarious in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo*, who are not NATO members. Therefore, the Western Balkan countries, none of which are EU Member States and half of which are NATO members, are a weak spot in the European security architecture.

Russian influence in the region has traditionally been strong. At the turn of the 21st century, this influence was weakened. With time, Russia sought to restore its influence by concentrating its attempts on taking advantage of cultural and historical links, and economic and energy-dependence weaknesses. As was the case in the 19th century, Russia still appeals to the Orthodox Christians heritage in the religiously sensitive environment of the Balkan region. This is especially noticeable in the case of Serbia, where cultural, historical, and religious affiliation with Russia, together with the shared position on the Kosovo dispute, serve as the main drivers of the anti-Western sentiment. The ruling political elites of Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina are even more Russian-oriented and rely upon Russian support to sustain their political interests. To a lesser extent, similar trends can be observed in Montenegro and North Macedonia, where Russia exerts its influence primarily through religious agents and nationalist circles. Russia retains certain economic presence in the Western Balkans, especially in the energy sector.

The Chinese People's Republic, commonly referred to as China, is also getting actively involved in the region. The Chinese cooperation with the Western Balkan countries is concentrated on providing huge investments in infrastructure projects as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese investments are not conditioned upon European values, functioning democratic political system, and the rule of law mechanisms. China's involvement in the region

can result in a very strong influence on the Western Balkan countries, particularly on their democratic transition.

The influence of Turkey in the region is also steadily growing. At present, Turkey's prospects of EU membership are diminishing, which can be attributed to its continuous backsliding in democratic governance, caused by the rule of the incumbent President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan's administration has been marked with increasing authoritarianism, promotion of socially conservative policies, censorship of free speech, and expansionist foreign policy. In its foreign policy towards the Western Balkans, Erdoğan's Turkey seeks to establish its own sphere of influence based on the legacy of the Ottoman Empire³⁹. Turkey projects its influence chiefly over the Muslim populations of the region, most notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Albania, North Macedonia, and the Serbian region of Sandžak. The efforts are focused on economic and cultural presence, such as investments in infrastructure, cultural monuments, and religious sites, together with its involvement in the energy sector.

When the EU policy towards neighbouring regions is not effective, the United States of America (US) comes into play and takes the leading role in the process of democratisation of the region. At times, the US is more effective in exerting influence over the EU's immediate neighbourhood than the EU itself. The role of the US, a traditional partner of the EU, is very significant for the Western Balkans. It was the US that created the modern security structure in the Balkans and played a key role in ending the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s. One example of the US's role in the region is the conclusion of the Dayton Agreement, establishing peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina while at the same time imposing a burdensome internal structure in the country and the international community's control over it. Another example is the US policy on the Kosovo issue during and after the Kosovo War. The US military base in Kosovo* serves as a significant manifestation of this country's influence in the Western Balkans. The proclamation and recognition of Kosovo*'s independence is one of the most controversial and contentious issues of Balkan politics. On the one hand, it can be stated that, as of this moment, the recognition of Kosovo*'s independence has contributed to bringing stability to the region. However, the Kosovo issue is still not finally settled and the effects of the recognition on long-term peace in the Western Balkans remain unclear.

That said, the stabilisation and European integration of the Western Balkans is the responsibility of the EU's foreign policy. After all, one of the declared main goals of European integration is

³⁹ Öztürk, Ahmet Erdi, and Samim Akgönül. "Turkey – Forced Marriage or Marriage of Convenience with the Western Balkans." Chapter. In *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, eds. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis, 227–240. London: Routledge, 2019.

bringing peace to the European continent. For this reason, the democratisation of post-communist European countries is a natural goal of the EU foreign policy. Yet, the inability of the EU to exert any real influence on the democratic and economic transformation in the Western Balkan countries creates opportunities for other actors of international relations to influence the region in ways which suit their geopolitical interests. Slowing down the process of European integration of the Western Balkans puts the credibility of the EU enlargement policy at stake. Speeding up this process is necessary to confirm the EU's role as a normative power and a key political actor in Europe and its neighbourhood, and to improve its prestige in the international arena. A failure of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans would mean that the EU is incapable of stabilising countries in its immediate neighbourhood, not to mention more distant countries and regions. This would adversely affect the perception of the EU as an influential actor of international relations.

1.2. The Western Balkans EU enlargement: instruments and initiatives

The process of EU enlargement to the Western Balkan countries has played a key role in the stabilisation of the region by mitigation of internal conflicts and implementation of systemic political and economic reforms. The region is already strongly integrated with the EU in social and economic spheres. Despite the setbacks of the Western Balkans' European integration process and considerable disappointment among the countries' populations, it should be emphasised that the membership perspective still serves as an incentive to continue the implementation of reforms and strengthen regional cooperation.

The EU is the main actor involved in the process of stabilisation and development of the Western Balkan region. The EU's involvement in the Western Balkans traces back to the foundation of the Union. In fact, it was within the context of the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia, former members of which now constitute the core of the Western Balkan region, that the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU was born⁴⁰. The region thus became an important area for the implementation of its missions. The EU played an active role in attempting to de-escalate the situation in the Balkans, though not always effectively. The EU participated in the conclusion of the Dayton Agreement, ending the Bosnian War in 1995. During successive crises, the involvement of the EU was becoming more and more active. The EU played a key role in stabilising the situation in Kosovo. It positively influenced the

⁴⁰ Balcer, Adam. *Direction: Balkans! The Significance and Potential of Poland's Cooperation with the Western Balkan States*. Kraków: Klub Jagielloński. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2019.

settlement of the conflict between Macedonians and Albanians in 2001 in North Macedonia⁴¹. Finally, it helped to achieve a bloodless ‘divorce’ of Serbia and Montenegro in 2003–2006. Currently, the EU Member States have the consensus that the Western Balkan countries belong to united Europe.

The European perspective of the Western Balkans was recognised for the first time at the European Council summit in Santa Maria De Fiera in June 2000. The 2003 EU – Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki formally awarded the status of potential candidates to the Western Balkan countries and set European integration of the region as a priority of EU enlargement.

The Western Balkans enlargement process follows the EU enlargement procedure established as an institutionalised foreign policy tool within the framework of the EU enlargement policy. The legal basis of the EU enlargement policy is Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), which outlines the role of the EU institutions in the enlargement process and defines the fundamental criterium for EU accession. The article states that “any European state which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union”⁴².

A crucial element of the EU enlargement policy is the policy of conditionality based on the Copenhagen criteria. The Copenhagen criteria are the fundamental criteria upon which the eligibility of a country to join the EU is conditioned. These criteria were laid down as a historical decision at the Copenhagen European Council Summit in June 1993. There are three Copenhagen criteria: political, economic, and legislative. The political criteria foresee the requirement for candidate countries to have stable governmental institutions guaranteeing adherence to the values of democracy, the rule of law, and high standards of human rights protection, including the protection of minorities. The economic criteria require candidate countries to have a functioning market economy of a sufficient level to have the capacity of being competitive within the EU market. The legislative criteria foresee the requirement for candidate countries to bring their legislation into accordance with the so-called *acquis communautaire*, the legal acts which form the body of European law.

The political process of enlargement consists of three stages: the association stage, the candidate stage, and finally, the negotiations stage⁴³. Before a country applies for EU membership, it

⁴¹ At that time known as the Republic of Macedonia per the state constitution or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) per the UN-accepted designation.

⁴² Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C115/13, Article 49, 2008.

⁴³ Sedelmeier, op. cit.

typically signs an Association Agreement (AA). AAs are meant to help candidate countries prepare for achieving a candidate status and eventual subsequent full membership in the EU. AAs cover a wide range of issues, such as trade-related issues, political dialogue and cooperation, adherence to democratic principles, legal system harmonisation, and cooperation in areas such as environment, transport, industry, customs, and justice and home affairs. Once a country applies for EU membership it can be granted a candidate status based on the assessment by the European Commission. Dependent on a country's progress in adjusting to the Copenhagen criteria and AA provisions, the Commission further proposes to start membership negotiations with a candidate country.

The negotiations stage can be divided into two phases. The first phase is preparatory and is known as screening. The second phase is the negotiation as such. The screening process is carried out jointly by the Commission and each of the candidate countries. This process allows these countries to get familiar with the *acquis communautaire*, indicates their existing level of alignment with EU legislation, and outlines plans for further harmonisation. The screening foresees an examination of the *acquis* together with a candidate state in order to determine major gaps between the legislation, as well as potential difficulties the candidate countries could encounter in the implementation of the *acquis*. The goal of the screening procedure is to identify the areas of the *acquis* in which progress is needed to make the candidate countries' legislation compatible with the EU law. These areas are divided into chapters. The results of the screening of a chapter show whether this chapter could be opened for negotiations or whether further progress is still required before.

Negotiations are based upon the principle that each candidate country must adopt the entire set of existing EU legislation. The *acquis* itself is not negotiable. Negotiations concern the process of adoption, for example, how and when to implement the *acquis*. In principle, accession negotiations are conducted individually with each candidate country. After several rounds of negotiations, once the Commission and a candidate country have both agreed that the country has reached a sufficient level of readiness in a specific area, the chapter may be closed. All chapters, however, are closed only provisionally. A chapter may be reopened for further negotiations depending on political developments in the EU or a candidate country. Once the negotiations stage is complete, a Treaty of Accession will be signed. Such a treaty must then be ratified by all of the EU Member States and the candidate country. Once all necessary ratifications are completed, the candidate country joins the EU on the date specified in the treaty.

A significant element of the enlargement process is the financial assistance provided by the EU to candidate countries. In 2006, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) was created. It replaced several EU assistance programmes and financial instruments with one single instrument and legal framework. IPA supports candidate countries and potential candidates in key political, institutional, social and economic reforms with financial and technical help in order to adapt them to the EU standards.

In addition, the EU has developed specific policy tools to engage in the stabilisation of the Western Balkan region with the goal of its future accession. The most prominent example is the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP). The SAP is the EU's policy framework designed for its cooperation with the Western Balkan countries. The SAP was established in 1999 and formally endorsed at the European Council meeting in Zagreb in November 2000. The SAP aims at stabilising the region by establishing a free-trade area, promoting regional cooperation, and preparing the countries for eventual EU membership. The progress of SAP is merit-based. Financial aid, practical support and other forms of EU involvement depend on the fulfilment of conditions imposed by the EU on individual Western Balkan countries. These conditions usually require carrying out reforms to facilitate and enable further integration of a Western Balkan country into the EU. This means that the more reforms a country implements, the more aid and support it can obtain from the EU. At the same time, only the fulfilment of all conditions will enable full EU membership.

The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) is the most important element of the SAP. SAA is a form of AA designed specifically for the Western Balkan countries in the context of the SAP. SAA provides a legal framework for the relations between the Western Balkan states and the EU. The provisions of SAA relate to both political and economic issues that facilitate the EU accession process and deeper European integration of the Western Balkans. SAA regulates in detail matters related to political dialogue, regional cooperation, compliance with the EU values, economic relations, expansion of markets, and harmonisation of legislation. SAA also defines mechanisms for implementation, administration, and monitoring of the relations in all areas covered by SAA and establishes grounds for technical and financial support. The signing of an SAA is conditional upon a country's progress in the SAP.

SAA's were concluded separately with individual Western Balkan countries. North Macedonia is the first Western Balkan country that signed SAA, in 2001, and the first country in which SAA has entered into force, in 2004. The SAA with Albania was signed in 2006 and entered into force in 2009; with Montenegro – signed in 2007 and entered into force in 2010; with

Serbia – signed in 2008 and entered into force in 2013; and with Bosnia and Herzegovina – signed in 2008 and entered into force in 2015. The SAA with Kosovo* was the first SAA signed after the Lisbon Treaty, which conferred a legal personality to the EU, entered into force. Consequently, unlike previous SAAs, Kosovo*'s SAA was signed exclusively with the EU, meaning it did not need to be ratified by each EU Member State individually. The SAA with Kosovo* was signed in 2015 and entered into force in 2016.

The new enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans entitled “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans” was introduced by the European Commission in February 2018⁴⁴. The long-awaited Strategy sent a signal to the Western Balkan countries that the EU is making genuine efforts to renew its engagement in the region. At the same time, the document is very critical of the WB6, pointing out a number of structural weaknesses which stem from the lack of progress in reform implementation. Three priority areas where reforms are essential to moving forward in the EU accession process are highlighted in the Strategy: the rule of law, competitiveness, and regional cooperation and reconciliation. The Strategy considers Montenegro and Serbia as frontrunners in the accession process and has set 2025 as the potential year of their accession. However, taking current developments into account, accession in this time frame is extremely unlikely. The Strategy also introduces specific actions that the EU has committed itself to take in the following years to support the transformation efforts of the Western Balkans in areas of mutual interest. An Annex entitled “Action Plan in support of the transformation of the Western Balkans” includes six flagship initiatives: strengthening the rule of law, reinforcing engagement on security and migration, supporting socio-economic development, increasing transport and energy connectivity, launching a Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, and supporting reconciliation and good neighbourly relations⁴⁵.

It is important to highlight that it is the context of the Western Balkans’ enlargement which prompted the EU to adopt its new enlargement methodology in March 2020. The new methodology is designed to make the enlargement process more credible and dynamic and the conditionality clearer. The new methodology envisages a division of chapters into six thematic

⁴⁴ European Commission. “Communication From the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans.” February 6, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf.

⁴⁵ European Commission. “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans: six new flagship initiatives to support the transformation of the Western Balkans.” *Publications Office of the European Union*, August 31, 2018, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e3f0797b-28cb-11e8-b5fe-01aa75cd71a1>.

clusters⁴⁶. The first cluster named “Fundamentals” concerns the crucial chapters, namely, Chapter 23 “Judiciary and fundamental rights”, Chapter 24 “Justice, Freedom and Security”, Chapter 5 “Public procurement”, Chapter 18 “Statistics”, Chapter 32 “Financial control”, as well as the fundamental issues regarding economic criteria, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reform⁴⁷. The other five clusters are entitled “Internal Market”, “Competitiveness and inclusive growth”, “Green agenda and sustainable connectivity”, “Resources, agriculture and cohesion”, and “External relations”, and concern the related chapters⁴⁸. The revised methodology was primarily designed for the negotiation frameworks of North Macedonia and Albania, but Montenegro and Serbia decided to adopt the proposed changes as well.

There are other initiatives undertaken by the EU Member States to support regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The Berlin Process is notable in this respect. The Berlin Process is complementary to the EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans and serves as a platform for high-level cooperation between official representatives of the WB6 and their counterparts from the Berlin Process host countries. The participants include nine EU Member States, namely, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Slovenia, and the European Commission. The Process was set up in 2014 on Germany’s initiative. Western Balkan Summits held annually are the main platform for meetings of the participants. The annual presidency in the Berlin Process rotates among the host countries. The main goals of the Berlin Process were defined as the resolution of outstanding bilateral and internal issues, achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region, enhancing regional economic cooperation, and laying the foundations for sustainable growth⁴⁹. One of the initiatives of the Berlin Process is launching the Common Regional Market structured around the four freedoms in the Western Balkans.

The EU plays an important role in the stabilisation of the Western Balkans by participating in military and civilian missions in the region. Currently, armed forces of EU Member States participate as part of the EU-led EUFOR Althea military operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, intended to oversee the military implementation of the Dayton Agreement. The largest civilian mission ever launched under the EU’s CSDP is the rule of law EULEX Kosovo mission, aimed at supporting and coordinating rule of law institutions of Kosovo*. Police and judicial personnel

⁴⁶ European Commission, “A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans”

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “The Goals of the Berlin Process.” *Berlin Process*, accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-goals>.

from EU Member States is deployed as part of EULEX Kosovo. Earlier, the EU participated in the EUFOR Concordia peacekeeping mission and EUPOL PROXIMA police mission in North Macedonia and EUPM (European Union Police Mission) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU also contributed to stabilisation, regional cooperation, and political and economic reforms in the Western Balkans within the frameworks of a number of initiatives, such as the Southeastern European Cooperation Process (SEEC), Southeastern European Cooperative Initiative (SECI), the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, and particularly the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, which had unprecedentedly enormous importance for interstate relations in the Western Balkans and laid at the foundations of the SAP.

Concerning the Kosovo issue, the EU acts as the most committed advocate of the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo*. The EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina dialogue is a key effort in this regard. The Dialogue, launched in March 2011, is held in Brussels and is facilitated by the European Union High Representative, the Vice President of the European Commission, and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The main objective is achieving the normalisation of relations between the parties, including enhancing regional cooperation and economic connections.

1.3. Challenges in the process of the Western Balkans' European integration

Despite making a positive contribution to the overall stabilisation and development of the region, the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans has not fully achieved its desired outcomes. The reason for that lies in both insufficient efforts of the Western Balkan governments to carry out necessary reforms and the weakening of the EU's commitment to the region. The Western Balkan countries are still facing a number of fundamental challenges. The most significant challenges include bilateral disputes and lack of reconciliation between the Western Balkan countries, political instability, destructive influence of undemocratic foreign states, the issue of state capture, persistent problems with the rule of law, human rights protection, freedom of speech, prevalent corruption and organised crime. These systemic problems operate similarly in all Western Balkan countries, negatively affecting their process of democratic transformation. It should also be noted that the enlargement fatigue among the major EU Member States and the lack of commitment leading to formation of 'stabilitocracies' instead of democracies in the Western Balkans are the problems that originate from the EU side, thus diminishing the bloc's credibility.

The most crucial challenge for the EU enlargement in the region is the presence of severe interethnic conflicts and the lack of reconciliation between the Western Balkan countries. The ethnoreligious structure of the Western Balkan countries is extremely complex. Some countries of the region are among the most ethnically mixed countries in Europe. Relations between the major ethnic groups are strained and are marred by the living legacy of the 1990s wars and continuous political disagreements. Therefore, the potential for instability in the region is considered high. The two most important security issues are the unresolved Kosovo conflict and the internally divided and dysfunctional political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Resolving interethnic conflicts in the Western Balkans and establishing good relations between the region's countries and ethnic groups is a crucial task of the EU enlargement policy and the SAP in particular.

As already mentioned, the Western Balkan countries are at different stages in their EU accession process. Four of them are negotiating candidates, namely, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Montenegro and Serbia are considered frontrunners in the EU accession process and are most advanced in their membership negotiations. Montenegro and Serbia started their membership negotiations in June 2012 and January 2014, respectively. Montenegro has all negotiation chapters opened and three provisionally closed, while Serbia has eighteen chapters opened and two provisionally closed.

Montenegro has, arguably, the best opportunity of achieving full membership in the EU in the near future. The country has the best level of preparation to *acquis communautaire* among the candidate countries. Also, it aligns its foreign policy with the EU and has generally good bilateral relations with its neighbours. However, there is still a number of issues raising concerns about Montenegro's prospects. As of November 2022, Montenegro is still going through a political crisis. The latest European Commission Montenegro Progress Report of October 2022 highlighted "political tensions, polarisation, [and] the absence of constructive engagement between political parties"⁵⁰. The internal situation is further complicated by anti-Western, pro-Serbian, and pro-Russian sentiments displayed by a considerable part of the Montenegrin society, which serve as a destabilising factor. The report also stated that despite making progress in reforming the judicial system and fighting against corruption and organised crime, these areas still need considerable improvement⁵¹. Another issue is the unilateral

⁵⁰ European Commission. "Montenegro 2022 Report. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy." October 12, 2018, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2022_en.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

adoption of the euro by Montenegro as its official currency, although this is not seen as a particularly significant obstacle to Montenegro's EU accession process and is expected to be resolved through the negotiations process.

The case of Serbia is much more difficult. Being a negotiating candidate, Serbia, in recent years, has demonstrated tendencies of democratic backsliding. State power is getting increasingly concentrated in the hands of President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party government. Under his rule, Serbia has been steadily sliding away from its proclaimed European integration goals. The European Commission Serbia Progress Report of October 2022 highlighted the ongoing problems with media freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, handling of war crimes, human rights records concerning minorities, as well as corruption, organised crime, and money laundering⁵².

The most crucial and complex issues in the Serbian EU accession process remain its foreign policy alignment and its opposition to Kosovo*'s independence. The latest indicator of Serbia's clear lack of compliance with the EU foreign policy is the decision to refuse to join the EU-imposed sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. The Kosovo issue is even more pressing and impedimental to Serbia's accession process. Serbia considers Kosovo*'s unilateral proclamation of independence illegal and refuses to recognise its independence considering Kosovo an integral part of Serbia's territory as the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija. Currently, the normalisation of relations with Kosovo* is one of the preconditions to Serbia's EU membership. Serbia has threatened to reject its potential EU membership altogether if the recognition of Kosovo* is listed as a precondition⁵³.

Overall, the prospect of EU membership is not seen favourably by Serbian society anymore. According to the Ipsos poll from March 2022, for the first time in years, a majority of Serbs is opposed to joining the EU, with 44 per cent of participants being against membership and 35 per cent in favour⁵⁴. The support is even lower if the recognition of Kosovo* is set as a precondition for the membership. Therefore, Serbia's commitment to European integration is called into question. Together with the aforementioned problems with the rule of law and

⁵² European Commission. "Serbia 2022 Report. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy." October 12, 2018, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en.

⁵³ Vasović, Aleksandar. "Serbia Ready to Sacrifice EU Membership over Kosovo Deal." *Reuters*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-russia-kosovo-idUSKBN23P2G0>.

⁵⁴ Mastilović Jasnić, Ivana. "Prvi Put u Istoriji Većina Građana Srbije Protiv Ulaska u EU. Veliko Istraživanje Ipsosa: Ključni Razlog Za to Su Pritisci Iz Brisela Koje Trpimo Zbog Rusije." *Blic*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/prvi-put-u-istoriji-vecina-gradjana-srbije-protiv-ulaska-u-eu-veliko-istrazivanje/71wlnbr>.

worsening situations with civil liberties, the lack of foreign policy alignment and the impasse in the process of normalisation of relations with Kosovo* have seriously put the current progress of Serbia's EU accession process under the risk of obstruction or even termination.

North Macedonia and Albania are slightly behind in their EU accession process. In July 2022, both countries finally opened membership negotiations and are currently undergoing the screening procedure. North Macedonia is the first country among the WB6 to sign the SAA and to become a candidate, which happened in 2004 and 2005, respectively. However, the progress of this country in its EU accession process was obstructed for years because of disputes with neighbouring countries, particularly Greece and Bulgaria. The country's former official name, the "Republic of Macedonia", was the object of a dispute with Greece between 1991 and 2018. The name dispute was the biggest obstacle to the accession process, which resulted in Greece vetoing EU and NATO accession talks between 2008 and 2019. In 2018, the Prespa agreement with Greece was reached, under which the country would change its name to the "Republic of North Macedonia". As part of this deal, Greece explicitly withdrew its previous veto against North Macedonia's EU accession. After the issue was resolved, the European Commission gave its formal approval to start accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania in March 2020. However, the initiation of membership negotiations of North Macedonia was again blocked, this time by Bulgaria's dispute over identity, history, and language. Bulgaria negates the existence of a separate Slavic Macedonian language, judging it instead as a dialect or a separate standardised form of the Bulgarian language. North Macedonia is also accused of historical revisionism and denial of the Bulgarian identity in the country. In June 2022, France put forward a proposal to solve the dispute between the two countries. The same month, Bulgaria's parliament approved lifting the country's veto on opening EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia. In July 2022, North Macedonia's parliament also approved the French proposal, allowing the negotiations to commence.

The inclusion of the resolution of bilateral historical and cultural disputes into the EU accession process highlights the significance that interethnic conflicts still have in the Balkan region. Accepting painful compromises to the disputes with Greece and Bulgaria helped North Macedonia to move forward in its EU accession process. However, even today this does not lead to ultimate stability, as such manipulations with the identity question may backfire with illiberal nationalist opposition gaining support among the disappointed population. Nonetheless, the current progress was highly regarded by the EU. The European Commission North Macedonia Progress Report of October 2022 praised the country's efforts in strengthening democracy and the rule of law, and its commitments to the EU's common foreign

policy⁵⁵. Additionally, North Macedonia still faces problems similar to other Western Balkan countries, such as corruption and organised crime, but is making continuous progress in tackling these challenges.

Albania is coupled with North Macedonia in its accession process, causing it to wait for the resolution of North Macedonia's bilateral disputes in order to start its own EU membership talks. In comparison with North Macedonia, Albania's problems with corruption and organised crime are more substantial. The European Commission Albania Progress Report of October 2022 noted progress in these areas, while also stating that the situation with corruption and organised crime is still concerning. The Report pointed out areas of freedom of expression and media freedom as problematic and called for the continuation of judicial system reforms⁵⁶.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo* are both recognised as potential candidates and are at the back of the queue of the EU accession process. Bosnia and Herzegovina formally applied for EU membership in February 2016, while Kosovo* has not yet applied for EU membership. The European integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo* poses a significant challenge for all the parties involved due to complicated situations in their internal and foreign politics.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is the most ethnically mixed country in the Western Balkans. The three largest ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina are Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, constituting 50.1 per cent, 30.7 per cent, and 15.4 per cent of the country's population, respectively⁵⁷. The three ethnic groups have traditionally been separated by religious differences, since Bosniaks are Sunni Muslims, Croats are Catholic Christians, and Serbs are Orthodox Christians. Nationalist sentiments within the three ethnic groups led to the devastating Bosnian War, spurring huge animosity between their representatives, the effects of which are felt until this day. This hostility has stirred up ethnonationalist tendencies of the political elites and obstructed meaningful progress in achieving reconciliation and reforming the political system.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has arguably the most complicated political structure in the whole of Europe. The political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina was created by the Dayton Agreement,

⁵⁵ European Commission. "North Macedonia 2022 Report. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy." October 12, 2018, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2022_en.

⁵⁶ European Commission. "Albania 2022 Report. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy." October 12, 2018, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2022_en.

⁵⁷ According to the last population census in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

which foresaw the three ethnic groups accepting a painful compromise in order to bring an end to the Bosnian War. The system was designed to accommodate these ethnic groups within a single state and is heavily conditioned by their interests. Although such a political system was meant to become a temporary solution while searching for a better option after the peaceful settlement, it is still in force. The constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is an annexe to the Dayton Agreement, defined Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs as “constituent peoples”, while all other national minorities are referred to as “Others”⁵⁸. This fact serves as the best example of how inherent the interethnic relations between the three biggest ethnic groups of Bosnia and Herzegovina are to the functioning of the state. The conflicts between the three ethnic groups are the primary reason for the dysfunctionality of the state. Although achieving reconciliation between them is a challenging endeavour, it remains the most crucial task for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its European integration.

The administrative division of the country adopted in the Dayton Agreement is also extremely complicated. Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into two autonomous administrative units, so-called entities of equal status – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska. The ethnic structure of the country determined the entities’ political nature. The FBiH was intended as the Bosniak-Croat entity, while Republika Srpska as the Serb entity. The FBiH is further divided into ten autonomous cantons. Moreover, a few years after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, another administrative unit was added to the system of administrative division of Bosnia and Herzegovina – the Brčko District, a self-governing district in the northeast of the country. The entities have been assigned a wide range of competences, while the authorities at the state level have limited powers. Each administrative unit, whether an entity, a canton, or the Brčko District, has its own constitution, government, and assembly and has a number of exclusive competences. Thus, the bureaucratic apparatus of the state is extremely burdensome for decision-making and economic relations, which consequently enhances corruption and nepotism instead of combating them.

The system of central government is also extremely complex and is based on the division of power between the three ethnic groups and the entities. According to the Dayton Agreement, the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina is comprised of three representatives of the constituent nations and serves as the collective head of state. Elections to the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina are also based upon ethnic and territorial criteria and quotas, with the FBiH electing Bosniak and Croat members of parliament, and Republika Srpska electing Serb

⁵⁸ “Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (as Amended in 2009).” *National Legislative Bodies*, March 26, 2009, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b2ba8ab7.html>.

members. A citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina who wants to become a member of the Presidium or the Parliament must identify as a representative of one of the constituent peoples and be elected from the territory of the respective ethnic group's entity. According to the constitution, a representative of another ethnic group cannot become a member of the Presidium or the Parliament⁵⁹. The Dayton Agreement has also provided the international community with wide authority in civil, military and political matters. The institution of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was created to oversee the civilian implementation of the Dayton Agreement. The High Representative has substantial powers over the internal politics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including veto powers in particular matters.

Due to its clear ethnocentrism, the constitutional system of Bosnia and Herzegovina can hardly be considered compatible with the principles of democracy. A systemic constitutional reform seeking to create a functioning and democratic political system is of key importance for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The preservation of the country's territorial integrity and the success of its EU aspirations depend on the constitutional system reform. Constitutional reform is not explicitly identified by the EU as a precondition for starting membership negotiations, but it is clear that systemic reform is crucial for Bosnia and Herzegovina to fulfil its obligations under the SAA. However, meaningful progress has not been achieved despite the continuous engagement of the international community. The reason for this is, predictably, the unwillingness of ethnocentric political elites to give up their power over decision-making processes. Additionally, Bosnia and Herzegovina suffers from the problems typical for the Western Balkan countries, such as corruption, issues with media freedom and freedom of speech, as well as complicated relations with neighbouring countries.

Unfortunately, internal ethnic divisions only seem to increase with time. This is especially noticeable in the case of Republika Srpska. The political elites and a big part of the society of this entity are opposing the centralisation of state power. In fact, the idea of secession of the entity from Bosnia and Herzegovina is openly and continuously voiced by high-level politicians from Republika Srpska. A particularly vivid example is Milorad Dodik, the ex-President and Prime Minister of Republika Srpska, the incumbent Serb Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a long-term leader of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), the most influential Serb party in the country. Dodik has served as the political leader of Bosnian Serbs in various capacities since 1998. In October 2022, Dodik was declared the winner of Republika Srpska general elections and is on course to assume the office of the

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, Article IV.

President of the entity again in November 2022. Dodik's separatist policies are the biggest destabilising factor for the existence, proper functioning, and democratic transformation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He has openly called for secession on multiple occasions and threatened to hold an independence referendum. The latest turn in this saga is the political crisis of Dodik's own making, caused by his intentions to form a separate army, judiciary, and tax authority in Republika Srpska⁶⁰. Announced in September 2021, this plan would severely diminish the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additionally, Dodik's reliance on Russian political support is concerning. In September 2022, Dodik visited Moscow to meet the Russian President, where he endorsed the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Adding further to the list of internal destabilisation factors of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnian Croats can be mentioned. A considerable part of Bosnian Croats supports the division of the FBiH and the creation of a separate, exclusively Croat entity. The most notable proponent of this scenario is Dragan Čović, the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), the largest Croat party in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnian Croats are the smallest of the three constituent peoples, which raises concerns about their position becoming undermined within the state's political system. This idea is also potentially threatening to Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity and state power, though to a lesser extent than the Bosnian Serb separatism.

The reformation of the constitutional and administrative systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina is an incredibly difficult task. Chances of the country's disintegration are still high, and finding a compromise between the three constitutional nations about constitutional reform does not look realistic anytime soon. Any constitutional reform aimed at increasing the power of central institutions would result in a reduction in the powers of the entities, which the Bosnian Serbs are extremely unlikely to agree to. Systemic and constitutional reform without broad consensus is impossible, which excludes maximalist changes, such as abolishing existing entities, establishing a practically new system of administrative division, or withdrawing ethnic criteria for participation in the state's government. The reform should instead focus on achieving a more transparent system of organisation of the central government and uniformity of the structure of internal divisions of the entities. The whole reformation process requires active and genuine involvement of the EU while depending on the interest and goodwill of political elites of the constituent nations in the first place. The EU enlargement process should serve as the best incentive for this change.

⁶⁰ "Bosnian Serbs Demand Their Own Army." *DW News*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/bosnian-serbs-demand-their-own-army-leader-says/a-59341799>.

In June 2022, the European Council affirmed its readiness to grant the candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and invited the European Commission to report on the implementation of the 14 key priorities set out in 2019 by the Commission⁶¹. In October 2022, the European Commission, in its Progress Report, recommended candidate status to be granted to Bosnia and Herzegovina by the European Council on the understanding that certain conditions are met⁶². These conditions foresee the country undergoing major reforms, including judicial amendments and the law on conflicts of interest. These reforms should revitalise the process of a deeper reformation of the constitutional system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is essential for achieving further steps in the country's EU accession process.

The EU accession of Kosovo* is also a complicated process. Kosovo* faces a number of challenges, the most important of which is the issue of Kosovo*'s international recognition. Kosovo* is not recognised as a sovereign state by Serbia, the country Kosovo* proclaimed independence from, which considers it as its constituent Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija. Moreover, five EU Member States do not recognise Kosovo*'s independence, namely, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, and Slovakia. Serbia accepts the governing authority of the Kosovo* institutions as a part of the 2013 Brussels Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations, the first agreement signed within the framework of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. The Agreement envisages the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities, a planned self-governing association of Serb-majority population municipalities in Kosovo*. The association has not been formed since, with Kosovar leading politicians, such as the incumbent Prime Minister Albin Kurti, voicing concerns about its formation threatening Kosovo*'s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and violating Kosovo*'s constitution⁶³. As of now, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue has stalled without leading to any comprehensive normalisation of relations between the parties.

Another challenge for Kosovo* is the question of visa liberalisation with the EU. Kosovo* remains the only potential candidate or candidate without a visa liberalisation regime in place, meaning its citizens have to make a visa to enter the EU. Back in 2018, the European Commission stated that Kosovo* had met all benchmarks set out in the Visa Liberalisation

⁶¹ European Commission. "Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022 Report. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy." October 12, 2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2022_en.

⁶² Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). "Bosnia's EU Hopes Given Boost as Balkan States Get Mixed Progress Reports." *Balkan Insight*, October 12, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/12/bosnias-eu-hopes-given-boost-as-balkan-states-get-mixed-progress-reports>.

⁶³ Bami, Xhorxhina, and Perparim Isufi. "Kosovo Feels US, EU, Heat on Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities." *Balkan Insight*, BIRN, July 5, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/05/kosovo-feels-us-eu-heat-on-association-of-serb-majority-municipalities>.

Roadmap and should be granted visa liberalisation⁶⁴. However, this requires the unanimous approval of the EU Member States, which is hard to achieve considering that five EU countries still do not recognise Kosovo*. The European Commission Kosovo* Progress Report of October 2022 stated that Kosovo* has made progress but needs to intensify its efforts to fight corruption and strengthen democracy, public administration, and the rule of law⁶⁵. The report also remarked that the stability of the political institutions and the political environment have positively improved. One more issue is that Kosovo*, similarly to Montenegro, unilaterally adopted Euro as its currency. Meeting the convergence criteria is essential before Kosovo* can enter the EU and the eurozone. However, the most critical issue is the normalisation of relations with Serbia, without which Kosovo* cannot proceed in its EU accession process.

Additionally, there are several issues challenging the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans that originate from the EU side. One of the main challenges, in this respect, is the enlargement fatigue. The enlargement fatigue is broadly understood as the unwillingness of EU Member States to accept new members⁶⁶. The core of this problem is the traditional debate between widening and deepening. The enlargement fatigue is caused by the reluctance of several major EU Member States to prioritise EU enlargement, citing problems with the integration capacity and ‘democratic deficit’ of the EU⁶⁷. The integration capacity means the ability of the EU to integrate new members into the EU’s institutional system. Proponents of deepening emphasise that a significant institutional reform which would fix the disparities in the institutional system, such as a complicated voting system and the composition of the European Commission among others, should be conducted before accepting new members⁶⁸. Noteworthy, the enlargement fatigue may reflect domestic rather than European considerations and provoke a potential conflict between strategic and value-based considerations about the enlargement⁶⁹.

The enlargement fatigue often translates into a lack of commitment to the Western Balkans. The most notable example in this regard is France, which traditionally prioritises further deepening of the European integration process instead of widening of the EU. France famously blocked the start of membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in October

⁶⁴ European Commission. Press Release. “Visa Liberalisation: Commission Confirms Kosovo Fulfils All Required Benchmarks.” July 18, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_4562.

⁶⁵ European Commission. “Kosovo 2022 Report. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy.” October 12, 2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2022_en.

⁶⁶ Szołucha, Anna. “The EU and Enlargement Fatigue: Why has the European Union not been able to counter enlargement fatigue?” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 6, no. 1, 2010.

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

2019, citing the slow path of reforms and concerns about the rule of law, corruption, and backsliding of democracy⁷⁰. The Netherlands and Denmark supported France in blocking Albania. A crucial element of the enlargement fatigue is the unpopularity of further EU enlargement among certain EU Member States' societies, which further complicates the Western Balkans' EU enlargement. In this regard, France is again notable, with only 40 per cent of people supporting the enlargement and 46 per cent opposing it, according to the last Eurobarometer survey⁷¹. The level of support for EU enlargement is even lower in Austria, with only 33 per cent in favour and 56 per cent against⁷². Before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, citizens of many pre-2004 enlargement EU Member States held negative views about EU enlargement. According to the Winter 2021-2022 Eurobarometer survey, in France, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland the percentage of opposing EU enlargement was higher than supporting it⁷³.

There are several possible reasons for unfavourable opinions about the Western Balkans' enlargement among the EU Member States' policymakers and societies. First of all, the reason is a negative stereotype about the Western Balkan region as an unstable and undeveloped place. Although, this vision is fuelled by the lack of progress in the resolution of bilateral conflicts between the Western Balkan states. Secondly, it is the lack of visible successes in the democratic and economic transformation of the Western Balkans. The third reason is connected to the EU conditionality's role in maintaining the democratic standards in EU Member States. Democratic backsliding in certain EU Member States, particularly Poland and Hungary, has raised concerns about the strength of the EU conditionality. Consequently, some EU Member States are wary of potentially similar processes occurring in the Western Balkan states in the case of their eventual EU accession.

The lack of commitment of influential EU Member States has negatively affected the effectiveness of the EU enlargement policy and weakened the credibility of the EU, further damaging its capacity to make a meaningful impact on the reform processes in Western Balkan countries. As a consequence, the EU enlargement policy loses its credibility as the catalyst of the democratic and economic transformation of the region. Instead of experiencing pivotal democratic reforms, the WB6 have slowly developed into 'stabilitocracies', that is, countries with obvious democratic shortcomings claiming to work towards democratic reform and offer

⁷⁰ "EU blocks Albania and North Macedonia membership bids." *BBC News*, October 18, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50100201>.

⁷¹ European Commission. *Standard Eurobarometer 97*

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ European Commission. *Standard Eurobarometer 96*

stability⁷⁴. The lack of EU Member States' commitment further encourages corrupt populist political elites to maintain their authoritarian grip on Western Balkan countries' political structures and societal institutions, while undermining the EU accession process, hindering progress on reforms and weakening civil society. Undemocratic foreign powers use this situation to their advantage, presenting their visions of social and economic relations as attractive alternatives that, unlike those of the EU, do not require political reforms.

Due to the aforementioned challenges, the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans has effectively stalled in recent years. Western Balkan societies are seriously frustrated by the slowdown of the accession process. This situation causes disbelief in the EU's willingness to fulfil its promises of the European future for the region. Nevertheless, public opinion in the Western Balkan countries is still overwhelmingly supportive of European integration. Despite setbacks, the Western Balkan countries have demonstrated strong commitments to United Europe and made serious political compromises to get closer to EU membership.

The success of the Western Balkans' EU accession process depends on both progress of the states in political and economic reforms, as well as on genuine commitment and political will from the EU and its Member States. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has made European policymakers realise that stability in their immediate neighbourhood matters, thus once again raising the importance of the EU enlargement and increasing attention towards the Western Balkans. The Western Balkan states should use this opportunity to make valuable progress on their EU accession path. The progress in reforms can stifle the opposition of several EU Member States' political elites and societies to EU enlargement. At the same time, a lot depends on the ability of the EU to be a 'normative power' capable of spreading European values and democratic norms to its neighbourhood, together with its active engagement on multiple levels in the process of reforms in the Western Balkan countries. To achieve this, the EU Member States supporting enlargement, such as the Visegrad Group countries, should increase their efforts to positively influence the Western Balkan states' democratic and economic transformation and promote their interests on the European level.

⁷⁴ Zweers, Wouter et al. Report. *The EU as a Promoter of Democracy or 'Stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans?* Clingendael, February 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/the-eu-as-a-promoter-of-democracy-or-stabilitocracy>.

2. The Visegrad Group's relations with the Western Balkan countries in the context of the European Union enlargement

2.1. The European Union enlargement as the Visegrad Group's foreign policy preference

The Visegrad Group, also known as the V4, is an alliance of four Central European states – Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary. The Visegrad Group was formed on 15 February 1991 at a meeting of the President of Czechoslovakia Václav Havel, the President of Poland Lech Wałęsa and the Prime Minister of Hungary József Antall in the Hungarian town of Visegrad. The most important pillar of the V4 cooperation is the common interest of its members in successful EU and NATO integration, increasing the political weight of the Central European region within these alliances, and the economic development of the region.

The Visegrad Group is a unique and noteworthy example of cooperation between European countries. In comparison with other regional cooperation initiatives in Europe, the Visegrad Group is known for its loose institutionalisation. The Visegrad cooperation has a strong political dimension and is multi-layered, consisting of mutual periodical contacts at all levels – from the highest-level political summits, and expert and diplomatic meetings, to activities of regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs), think-tanks and research bodies, cultural institutions and numerous networks of individuals⁷⁵. Official summits of V4 prime ministers are held every year. Between these summits, one of the V4 countries holds the annual presidency and is responsible for drafting a one-year plan of action.

The so-called weak institutionalisation in the case of the V4 means higher flexibility. It allows the V4 countries to act independently in their foreign policies and react promptly to external developments according to their national interests while keeping the possibility of adopting common positions in the areas where the V4 countries find a common ground⁷⁶. The common positions are not legally binding, which allows perceiving the Visegrad Group as a coordination mechanism and cooperation platform⁷⁷. The low level of institutionalisation and the high level of flexibility is one of the reasons why the V4 became an inspiring model of regional

⁷⁵ The Visegrad Group. "Aims and Structure". Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/aims-and-structure>.

⁷⁶ Stępniewski Tomasz. *The Visegrad Group at 30: Achievements and Challenges*. Lublin, Institute of Central Europe, 2020.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

cooperation for the neighbouring countries aspiring to EU membership⁷⁸. However, the informality of the cooperation together with its vague goals and lack of coordination mechanisms has hindered the Group's ability to become an influential alliance with a common position on the EU level⁷⁹.

An important element of the Visegrad Group's activity on the international level is the cooperation with non-V4 partners in the V4+ format. The V4+ format involves meetings of Visegrad prime ministers and foreign ministers with respective representatives of another country or a group of countries. The V4+ format proved to be effective while developing cooperation with the partners in the EU, in neighbouring European regions, and beyond Europe. Cooperation with states aspiring to EU membership in the V4+ format is of particular importance. It allows the Visegrad Group countries to present themselves as advocates of the EU's 'open-door' policy, as well as to transfer their know-how about democratic transformation and European integration⁸⁰.

European integration is designated as top priority of the Visegrad Group from its foundation. The 1991 Visegrad Declaration is the first programme document of the Visegrad Group, which formed the basis of the cooperation. The Declaration defined full integration into the European political, economic, security, and legal system, building democratic states based on the rule of law and human rights protection, and creation of a free market economy as the main objectives of the Visegrad cooperation. The goal of European integration, as well as other objectives, was to be achieved by coordination of efforts⁸¹. Thus, the Visegrad Group did not take shape of a bureaucratized international organisation. The goals and cooperation mechanisms of the Visegrad Group were strengthened in the 1999 Contents of Visegrad Cooperation. According to this document, each V4 member state has to present concrete goals and tasks of the Visegrad cooperation in their annual presidency programmes.

Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, and Hungary became members of the EU in 2004. Despite fulfilling the main objective of the 1991 Visegrad Declaration, the Visegrad Group did not cease to cooperate. In 2004 in the Czech town of Kroměříž, the prime ministers of V4 signed a new Visegrad Declaration. The document defined two main objectives of cooperation: strengthening

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Gawron-Tabor, Karolina. *Współpraca państw grupy wyszehradzkiej w procesie integracji europejskiej w latach 1989-2009*. Dom Wydawniczy DUET, 2013.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ The Visegrad Group. "Visegrad Declaration 1991. Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412>.

the Central European identity and acting on the European level⁸². The V4 member states confirmed their commitment to the process of the EU enlargement. They declared readiness to help the states aspiring to become full members of the EU by sharing knowledge and experience about the accession process. The V4 countries also expressed commitment to using their regional and historical experiences to contribute to the formulation and realisation of the EU policy towards Eastern and Southeastern Europe⁸³. In the Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation attached to the Visegrad Declaration, the cooperation with third countries aspiring to join the EU was designated as one of the four priority areas⁸⁴. Three others are the Visegrad level, the EU level, and the NATO level.

The foreign policy priorities of each Visegrad state are not always the same. Poland is naturally more involved in cooperating with its Eastern European neighbours, particularly Ukraine, and views them as the primary target of the EU enlargement effort. Hungary is gravitating towards the Balkans and concentrates on the promotion of the Western Balkans' rapid accession to the EU. The main goal of Czechia and Slovakia is the promotion of democratic values in the world, particularly in the EU neighbourhood, meaning they are equally interested in the European integration of both Western Balkans and Eastern European countries. Such a situation, however, does not hinder the V4 states' mutual support for the European enlargement policy and European integration of both groups of countries and cooperation in this matter.

The V4 countries' national interests determine their support for European enlargement. In this regard, utility-based priorities, such as national security interests, geostrategic factors, and economic connections, are the key motivations for the Visegrad Group to support the EU enlargement. The V4 countries border the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, the two priority regions of potential EU enlargement. The Visegrad Group is economically connected with these regions, which makes the expansion of the EU single market desired for trans-border cooperation and economic development. A shared border makes these regions crucial for the Visegrad Group's security, and their EU accession would increase it.

It may even be assumed that the changing security architecture in Eastern and Southeastern Europe in the 1990s had a strong impact on the very concept of the Visegrad cooperation. Before the 1990s, the idea of deep regional cooperation in Central Europe was not

⁸² Gawron-Tabor, op. cit.

⁸³ The Visegrad Group. "Visegrad Declaration 2004. Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1>.

⁸⁴ The Visegrad Group. "Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412>.

unequivocally supported by Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, a single state at that time, because of differences in geopolitical priorities. In the 1990s, the state of affairs in Yugoslavia kept on deteriorating, and the USSR started the process of disintegration after the restoration of independence of the Baltic states. The situation in Yugoslavia pushed Hungary and Czechoslovakia to seek closer ties with Poland, which in turn was more open to cooperation because of instability to its East⁸⁵. As a result, the security situations in the current potential EU enlargement regions helped the Central European countries realise the utmost importance of sticking together in the face of common challenges. Consequently, stability in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe is still seen as a guarantee for stability in the Central European Visegrad Group.

Value-based priorities also play an important role. Whenever crises and internal problems of the EU diverted attention away from the enlargement policy, the Visegrad Group countries stressed that this policy is the EU's most effective foreign policy tool for the democratic transformation of the EU Southern and Eastern European neighbours, as was the case with the Central European states themselves⁸⁶. The Visegrad Group is regarded as a successful example of post-communist democratic and economic transformations, which is especially attractive for the Southeastern and Eastern European countries aspiring for full EU membership⁸⁷. For them, the V4 serves as a source of know-how about the European accession process and membership negotiations. The Visegrad Group consider sharing their experiences in democratisation and the EU accession with the neighbouring regions as their foreign policy priority. The idea of the post-communist 'return to Europe', expressed during the V4 countries' own EU accession process, also contributes to the Visegrad Group's perception of these neighbouring regions as essential parts of Europe and their possible accession as historical justice.

The V4 countries regard the EU enlargement policy as a policy area where they can successfully 'upload' their national interests and strategic foreign policy goals to the European policy level. Active engagement in the process of the EU enlargement allows the V4 countries to represent themselves as important players and agenda shapers on the European level and to strengthen their position in various negotiations within the EU. Poland's promotion of enhanced cooperation with Eastern European states and Hungary's promotion of the Western Balkans' EU enlargement are particularly noticeable examples of this. Furthermore, Hungary and Poland have specific national ideological approaches towards European integration, traditionally

⁸⁵ Gawron-Tabor, op. cit.

⁸⁶ Szpała, Marta. *Paradoxes of Stabilisation: Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Perspective of Central Europe*. Warsaw, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2016.

⁸⁷ Stępniewski, op. cit.

preferring widening over deepening. This enables these states to perceive the EU enlargement policy as a policy which they can lead in order to gain more influence on policymaking on the EU level and shape the direction of European integration. Hungary's and Poland's pro-widening stance is visible in the prioritisation of rapid enlargement rather than enlargement based on EU conditionality, as discussed in the next chapters.

An integral part of promoting the national interests of individual Member States at the European level is coalition building. Among the Eastern enlargement countries, the Visegrad Group is the only major coalition that has shown consistency in the coordination of positions and interests within the European collective decision-making process⁸⁸. This is emphasised by the fact that according to the EU Coalition Explorer, all Visegrad countries are found among each other's top five strategic partners⁸⁹. However, the V4 is not united on all European policies and is far from united on the issue of the future of European integration⁹⁰. The reason for that is the decline in democratic standards and the functioning of the rule of law system in Hungary and Poland. This situation has impeded the Visegrad cooperation on the EU level, as Czechia and Slovakia do not support Polish and Hungarian actions directed at opposing European values. Nevertheless, the Visegrad countries declare consensus in their support of the EU enlargement policy. The EU enlargement to new countries with similar national interests offers new possibilities for coalition building.

Successful coalition building has important implications with regards to the EU system of qualified majority voting. Qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council of the EU is a complex and peculiar political process. The gradual EU enlargement, especially the Big Bang enlargement of 2004 with the Visegrad Group joining the EU, has changed the balance between small and large EU Member States. The 2001 Treaty of Nice revised the QMV criteria taking the expected enlargement of 2004 into account and favoured small states disproportionately⁹¹. The current QMV criteria were set up by the Lisbon Treaty and are regulated by Article 16 of the TEU and Article 238 of the TFEU. A proposal is adopted by a qualified majority, which is reached when 55 per cent of the Member States (15 out of 27) vote in favour and when the population of the Member States in favour of the proposal exceeds 65 per cent of the total EU

⁸⁸ Kajánek Tomáš. "The Power of Small EU Member States after Brexit: How Powerful is the Visegrad Group?" *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Bitola: Institute for Research and European Studies 8, no. 1 (2022): 170–191.

⁸⁹ European Council on Foreign Relations. "EU Coalition Explorer." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/special/eucoalitionexplorer>.

⁹⁰ Kajánek, op. cit.

⁹¹ Ibidem.

population. To reject a proposal, a blocking minority of countries must consist of at least four Member States, with a population of at least 35 per cent of the EU population.

The Lisbon Treaty's new QMV system has significantly emphasised the power of the largest Member States to influence the decision-making process⁹². The new QMV system removed the mechanism of fixed weighted votes. Therefore, the demographic changes in the Member States, the potential EU enlargement or withdrawal of a Member State, as in the case of the UK, will automatically reflect on the weights of Member States' votes in QMV⁹³. If the Treaties regulating the QMV mechanism in the Council of the EU are not reviewed, small Member States will remain weakened in the QMV. In that case, the only possible way that would lead to the strengthening of small Member States in the QMV is the EU enlargement to other small states, for example from the Western Balkans. Most of the V4 countries are small, so the EU accession of new small countries would influence their possibilities to project power and 'upload' their shared national interests to the European policy level.

2.2. The Visegrad Group's collective approach to the Western Balkans' European integration process

Since their accession to the EU, the Visegrad Group countries have been among the most active European actors advocating for further EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. On the political level, the Visegrad Group has proved to be a staunch supporter of the Western Balkans' European integration and a committed advocate of these countries' interests on the EU level. The Visegrad Group countries continuously call on the EU to accelerate the Western Balkans' European integration. At the same time, the V4 encourages the Western Balkan countries to intensify their reform efforts and provide assistance by offering their experience of political and economic transformation and the EU accession process.

The V4 countries are active in their support of the Western Balkans' European integration both bilaterally and in the common framework of the Visegrad Group. Close cooperation with the region has been high on the Visegrad Group's agenda for years. V4 Annual Presidency programmes regularly designate the Western Balkans as one of the Group's main foreign policy priorities. The V4 activity in the process of the Western Balkans' European integration is focused on supporting successful political and economic transformation and strengthening ties between the Western Balkans and Central Europe. As noted by Jelica Minić, a Serbian expert,

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

“The V4 can be a bridge for the Western Balkans. Maybe the Visegrad Group could not play the role of the top driver, but it can better understand problems of Western Balkans and approach them on a more equal footing than other big European countries”⁹⁴.

The support for the European integration of the Western Balkans is entrenched in various Visegrad Group documents, such as the Kroměříž Declaration of 2004⁹⁵, the Bratislava Declaration of 2011⁹⁶, all presidency programmes of the V4 since 2004⁹⁷, and joint ministerial statements. The V4 is the only regional initiative in the EU that maintains a regular dialogue with the Western Balkan countries. Since 2009, regular summits of the foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group and their counterparts from the Western Balkan countries have been taking place in the V4+WB6 format. The V4+WB6 format is very flexible and gives a lot of freedom to choose the issues under discussion. Such summits allow political issues to be discussed in a broader perspective and often follow the goal of supporting the European aspirations of the Western Balkan countries and the creation of organisational platforms for meetings with wider groups of EU Member States. V4+WB6 summits are often attended by representatives of the European institution, particularly the European Commission, and other EU Member States.

The V4’s support for the European enlargement to the Western Balkans is motivated by multiple factors. Geographical, historical, cultural, and to a large extent linguistic proximity makes the Visegrad Group a natural advocate for the Western Balkans’ European integration. The Visegrad Group serves as a successful example of regional cooperation between the states with different, often traumatic, historical experiences. The Visegrad Group countries boast of experiences in their transitions to democracy and a free-market economy, together with the EU accession process, particularly membership negotiations. The V4 countries consider these experiences unique and easily transferrable to the Western Balkans due to their relatedness to the region’s context.

The security aspect is a crucial determinant of the importance of the Western Balkan enlargement for the Visegrad Group. All of the V4 members are engaged in the EU and NATO peacekeeping missions in the region to varying degrees. Their activities include peacebuilding

⁹⁴ Minić, Jelica et al. *European Integration of the Western Balkans – Can the Visegrad Group Countries Serve as Role Models*. European Movement in Serbia (EMinS), 2015.

⁹⁵ The Visegrad Group, “Visegrad Declaration 2004”.

⁹⁶ The Visegrad Group. “The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava>.

⁹⁷ The Visegrad Group. “Presidency Programs.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs>.

efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and supporting the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo* in the framework of the EU-led Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

Potential instability in the Balkans, a region sadly known for its interethnic conflicts, has the potential to affect the long-lasting peace and successful cooperation between the Central European states. Particularly important in this regard are the contexts of Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal divisions and ethnic minorities' aspirations and the strained relations between Serbs and Albanians because of the Kosovo dispute. A possible escalation in the region is undesired among the V4 countries, as it would likely ignite calls for revision of European borders along ethnic lines, creation of high-level autonomies in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities, or even imperialist sentiments to control territories ruled at some points in history. Consequently, the stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, and the whole of the Western Balkan region is crucial to the stability of the Visegrad Group countries and the wider Europe.

The issue of ethnic minorities and borders is a particularly sensitive subject for V4 countries due to their recent historical experiences. Czechia had a dramatic experience in the past when the German minority was used by Nazi Germany to legitimise the annexation of large parts of the Czech territory. At the time, in 1938, Western European powers decided to appease the aggressor and signed the infamous Munich Agreement, which saw Czechoslovakia ceding large swathes of its territory to Germany. Soon after, Slovakia had a similar experience with the Hungarian minority living in the south of the country, when it was transferred to Hungary by the First Vienna Award. These events rewarded aggressive expansionist policies, which, as a result, contributed to inciting World War II. On the other hand, a considerable part of Hungarian society still has a sense of grievance for the lost historical possessions, the so-called Trianon trauma. The Trianon treaty, concluding World War I for defeated Hungary, saw it losing two-thirds of territory it possessed at that time. As a result, today, millions of Hungarians live outside the borders of Hungary in neighbouring states. Hungary positions itself as a defender of Hungarians abroad, which is often used by political leaders of the country to escalate their rhetoric and demands concerning the status of the Hungarian minorities. Poland also experienced huge territorial and population changes during the last century, by being subject to the aggression of Germany and the USSR, while exercising its expansionist claims to Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary managed to overcome their troublesome and conflicted past, engaging in successful regional cooperation within the framework of the Visegrad Group, which, in its turn, contributed largely to the successful reconciliation between these states.

The Central European Visegrad model of reconciliation and cooperation is useful in improving the relations between ethnic communities in the Western Balkans. Painful historical experiences in the Western Balkans are more recent, which consequentially makes them more divisive and impedimental to cooperation. However, due to the cultural and historical proximity to the Western Balkans, the V4 countries have a better understanding of the regional context. This fact contributes to the assumption that the V4 serves as an inspiration for the Western Balkan countries and is capable of positively influencing the region by engaging in cooperation and helping to determine and offer more suitable solutions to overcome the divisions. The cooperation between the Western Balkan states inspired by the Visegrad Group model of cooperation is a desired result of the experience and know-how transfer.

The economic dimension of cooperation between the V4 and the Western Balkan countries is also important. Geographical proximity determines the interest of the Visegrad Group in economic cooperation with the Western Balkans. V4 is seeking to expand the European market to the region, which is mutually beneficial. The markets of the Western Balkan countries are rapidly developing and undergoing the processes of privatisation. These factors provide an opportunity for the V4 to play a more active role in the economy of the region⁹⁸. The Western Balkan countries are the priority countries of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) programmes for Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia⁹⁹. Poland is an exception in this regard due to the difference in foreign policy priorities. The Visegrad Group countries are cooperating with the Western Balkan countries in various sectors, such as infrastructure and energy, aiming to interconnect Central and Southeastern Europe and form long-term sustainable transborder economic ties.

The parliamentary dimension of cooperation between the V4 and the Western Balkans so far has not been very intensive¹⁰⁰. Since 2016, the Parliament of Poland periodically organises summits of presidents of parliaments of Central and Eastern European countries. These summits have been sporadically attended by representatives of parliamentary authorities of all the Visegrad Group countries and the Western Balkan countries except Kosovo*. The topics under discussion are the democratic transition in post-communist European countries, strengthening parliamentary cooperation, the role of parliaments in international politics, security, energy infrastructure, and transport policy¹⁰¹. Parliamentary speakers from the Visegrad Group

⁹⁸ Szpała, op. cit.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. "III Szczyt Przewodniczących Parlamentów Państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej." July 12, 2018, <https://www.senat.gov.pl/aktualnoscilista/art,10841,iii-szczyt-przewodniczacych-parlamentow-panstw-europy-srodkowej-i-wschodniej.html>.

countries were invited to take part in the 2019 and 2021 Conferences of Parliamentary Speakers of Southeastern European Countries organised by the Parliament of Hungary, which gathers parliamentary speakers from Hungary and Western Balkan countries. The main topic of these conferences was the future of the EU enlargement policy¹⁰².

It can be argued that the Visegrad cooperation has already become an inspiration for the development of various regional initiatives in the Western Balkans. One of the most prominent examples is Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), and its extension to the Western Balkans in 2006 (the so-called CEFTA 2006). CEFTA originated as a free trade agreement between the V4 countries but later spread beyond the Visegrad Group's borders, when other Central and Eastern European countries, namely Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria, became its members.

CEFTA enabled its parties to prepare institutionally to enter the EU single market. The main goals of CEFTA are to expand mutual trade in goods and services, eliminate barriers to trade between the countries involved, and foster investment in the region. CEFTA aimed at harmonising provisions on trade policy issues, such as competition rules and state aid, with the *EU acquis communautaire*. Once the V4 countries and other Central and Eastern European partners achieved full membership in the EU, CEFTA became irrelevant for them as they joined the EU single market. The fact that CEFTA helped them to advance in their economic transformation and to prepare for the successful EU accession served as an inspiration for the Western Balkan countries.

The original CEFTA agreement was signed by Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia on 21 December 1992 in Kraków. At first, the possibility of accession of other states was not foreseen. In November 1994, at the meeting of V4 prime ministers in Poznań, the Poznań Declaration was signed, in which the criteria for the admission of new countries to CEFTA were formulated for the first time. The potential member had to have an association agreement with the EU, be a signatory to the GATT (later WTO membership), and have free trade agreements with CEFTA countries. Thus, Slovenia joined CEFTA in 1996, Romania in 1997, Bulgaria in 1999, and Croatia in 2003. The original CEFTA members – the V4 countries – and Slovenia joined the EU and left CEFTA in 2004, while Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria remained its members. North Macedonia¹⁰³ joined the original CEFTA in January 2006.

¹⁰² Országgyűlés. “Conference of Parliamentary Speakers of Southeast European Countries in the Hungarian Parliament on 4 November 2019.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://v4.parlament.hu/en/-/conference-of-parliamentary-speakers-of-southeast-european-countries-in-the-hungarian-parliament-on-4-november-2019>.

¹⁰³ At that time known as the Republic of Macedonia per the state constitution or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) per the UN-accepted designation.

As most of the Central European members of CEFTA had left the agreement by joining the EU, it was decided to extend CEFTA to the Western Balkan countries. The expansion of CEFTA to include the Western Balkan countries was associated with the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), as well as with the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe – a plan for democratisation, consolidation of security and economic reconstruction on the basis of cooperation between the countries of the region and integration with international political and economic structures – the result of which was the creation of a network of bilateral free trade agreements between the countries of the region. On 19 December 2006, at the South East European Prime Ministers Summit in Bucharest, the new Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA 2006) was signed by the remaining Western Balkan countries, as well as the Republic of Moldova. United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) signed the agreement on behalf of Kosovo* in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and still represents it¹⁰⁴. CEFTA 2006 was substantially amended and specially designed to include new countries from Southeastern Europe. Following the necessary ratification processes, CEFTA 2006 entered into force across the various parties between July and November 2007. After Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, and Croatia in 2013, the WB6 and Moldova remain the parties to the agreement.

The EU considers regional cooperation between Southeastern and Eastern European countries as proof that they can successfully cooperate and integrate within the larger EU. Cooperation within CEFTA serves as proof that the Western Balkan countries are capable of sustaining extensive economic with each other and other European countries. Therefore, CEFTA can be considered one of the most efficient examples of the V4 know-how transfer to the Western Balkans¹⁰⁵. It proves that a model of cooperation developed for the Visegrad Group countries can be successfully implemented in the Western Balkans.

The cooperation within CEFTA became a push for a further enhancement of the economic integration between the Western Balkan countries. In November 2020, under the Berlin Process, the Western Balkan countries agreed to establish the Common Regional Market. This initiative aims towards the formation of a common regional market and is built upon the CEFTA Agreement¹⁰⁶. In parallel, three CEFTA countries, namely Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania, are moving ahead with the Open Balkan initiative aiming to establish the so-called

¹⁰⁴ Balkan Policy Research Group (BPRG). Policy Report. *Kosovo's Contested Representation in CEFTA – A Political and Legal Overview*, 2021, <https://balkangroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Kosovos-Contested-Representation-in-CEFTA-151021.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Szpała, op. cit.

¹⁰⁶ BPRG, op. cit.

Mini Schengen between these states, which implies the application of the four freedoms of the European Single Market in mutual economic relations.

The biggest problem for the functioning of CEFTA 2006, which simultaneously is one of the most contentious issues of Western Balkan politics, is the status of Kosovo*. Kosovo* in CEFTA is still represented by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). Changing Kosovo*'s representation in CEFTA is a complex legal issue with tremendous implications. After the declaration of independence, Kosovo* intensified its resistance to the UNMIK representation, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina increased their efforts to obstruct Kosovo*'s participation, as they blocked the entry and transit of the products of Kosovo¹⁰⁷. After the 2012 Agreement on Regional Representation and Cooperation – signed in the framework of the EU-led Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue – came to life, Kosovo* managed to replace UNMIK in some initiatives, but not in CEFTA. Three members of CEFTA, namely Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova, refuse Kosovo*'s full representation in CEFTA. The government of Kosovo* failed to proactively engage in the process, and the EU has never treated this issue with priority¹⁰⁸.

Examples of the V4's successful know-how transfers with the Western Balkan countries are not limited to CEFTA. The Visegrad Group provides expertise in managing twinning projects, the efficient use of pre-accession funds, the cooperation of NGOs, and scholarships for students. In this respect, the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) plays a crucial role. The IVF, established in 2000, is considered to be the only existing institution of the Visegrad Group. The aim of the IVF is to support the development of cooperation in culture, scientific exchange, research, education, exchange of students, development of cross-border cooperation and promotion of tourism¹⁰⁹. The IVF represents the civic dimension of the Visegrad cooperation and provides financing for activities of NGOs and individual citizens.

The IVF started opening to non-Visegrad applicants in 2004 after the adoption of the Kroměříž Declaration and the Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation. The Western Balkans soon became one of the main long-term priority regions. The IVF developed a special grant programme focused on cooperation between the civil societies and NGOs from the V4 and the Western Balkans with projects supporting democratic transformation, good governance, regional cooperation and reconciliation. The IVF facilitates contacts between NGOs and public administration of the V4 and the Western Balkan countries and enables student exchange

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ The Visegrad Group, "Aims and Structure".

between the two regions. Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania are the major recipients of the fund. Since 2013 the IVF has been awarding grants to NGOs from the Western Balkans, and since 2014 it has been sponsoring study visits to V4 countries for officials from this region (mobility programme for civil servants). However, the impact of these projects is marginal due to the limited resources available for cooperation with the Western Balkans¹¹⁰. This is best illustrated by the number of officials from the region who took part in this programme in 2014-2018: there were only a little over 30 of them, from only two countries¹¹¹.

Most importantly, the example of the IVF directly inspired the creation of a similar model of regional cooperation for the Western Balkan countries. After more than five years of negotiations, the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), based in Tirana, was established in 2017. The idea of establishing a fund in the Western Balkans originated at the V4+Slovenia summit in Prague in 2011, held under the Czech V4 Presidency¹¹². The same year, the initial plan of the WBF was developed by an international group of experts on civil society and regional cooperation from the International Centre for Democratic Transition (IDCT) in Budapest¹¹³. The WBF was formally established at another annual V4+WB6 summit in Prague in November 2015, when the Agreement on the Establishment of the WBF was signed¹¹⁴.

The WBF, modelled after the institutional and procedural know-how of the IVF, is an important instrument for enhancing regional cooperation in the Western Balkans¹¹⁵. The WBF is financed by the governments of the interested countries of the region, as well as the V4. The objectives of the WBS are the development of closer cooperation and strengthening of ties between the Western Balkans Contracting Parties, their integration into the EU, and common presentation to the third countries¹¹⁶. These objectives are pursued through the promotion and development of people-to-people contacts, cooperation among civil society organisations, cross-border cooperation, cultural cooperation, scientific exchanges, and research cooperation in the field of education¹¹⁷. The relevance of the WBF was also recognised by the EU, as it was directly

¹¹⁰ Balcer, *op. cit.*

¹¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹¹² The Visegrad Group. "Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group and Slovenia on the Western Balkans", November 4, 2011. <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2011/joint-statement-of-the>.

¹¹³ Szpała, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ Western Balkans Fund. "Agreement on the Establishment of Western Balkans Fund Signed", November 13, 2015, <http://westernbalkansfund.org/2015/11/13/agreement-on-the-establishment-of-western-balkans-fund-signed/>.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹¹⁶ Western Balkans Fund. "Mission of the Western Balkans Fund." Accessed November 12, 2022, <http://westernbalkansfund.org/mission/>.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

mentioned in the Sofia Declaration of the 2018 EU-Western Balkans Summit¹¹⁸. Therefore, the IVF can be considered another major successful example of the V4's know-how transfer.

Another initiative of the Visegrad Group aimed to strengthen the exchange of ideas and know-how is the V4-Western Balkans Expert Network on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights. The aims of the initiative are to be achieved by creating a pool of experts from both regions. The network was established on the initiative of the 2012-2013 Polish V4 Presidency.

The Visegrad Group and the Western Balkan countries have developed cooperation in the framework of various multilateral initiatives. An example of the multilateral platform of cooperation shared by V4 and Western Balkan states is the Central European Initiative (CEI). The CEI is the largest and oldest forum of regional cooperation and political dialogue in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The origin of the CEI lies in the creation of the Quadrangone initiative founded in 1989 in Budapest by Italy, Austria, Hungary and Yugoslavia. In 1990, Czechoslovakia was admitted and the initiative was renamed Pentagonale. In 1991, with the admission of Poland, it became Hexagonale. The current members of the initiative are the V4 states, Western Balkan states of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, as well as Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, Ukraine, and Belarus, which is now suspended. The main objective of the CEI is to work towards European integration and sustainable development through regional cooperation¹¹⁹. The CEI cooperates at the institutional level through a four-pillar system comprising governmental, parliamentary, economic and local dimensions. The CEI promotes good governance, rule of law and sustainable economic development for stability, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, security, and prosperity¹²⁰. The CEI is the oldest format of multilateral cooperation between the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans, which can serve as the confirmation of the natural gravity between them.

Another multilateral initiative where the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkan countries participate jointly is the Chinese-led 14+1¹²¹ format. 14+1 format is an initiative of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs intended to promote business and investment relations between China and countries of Central and Eastern Europe, such as the Visegrad Group states, the Western Balkan states except for Kosovo*, as well as Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, and

¹¹⁸ European Council. "Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit." May 17, 2018, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf.

¹¹⁹ Central European Initiative. "About us." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.cei.int/about-us>

¹²⁰ Ibidem.

¹²¹ Latvia and Estonia stepped out of the format on August 11, 2022.

Slovenia. The format's goals are to promote the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and enhance cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, transportation and logistics, trade and investment.

In the sector of justice and home affairs (JHA), the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans participate together in the Prague Process. The Prague Process is a targeted migration dialogue and a policy process promoting migration partnerships among its 50 members from Europe and Central Asia. The process was initiated during the Czech EU Presidency at the 1st Prague Process Ministerial Conference in April 2009. The 2nd Ministerial Conference was hosted by the Polish EU Presidency in Poznan in November 2011. The 3rd Ministerial Conference was held in Bratislava in September 2016 under the Slovak EU Presidency. The 4th Ministerial Conference took place in Prague in October 2022 under the Czech EU Presidency. The Prague Process is focused primarily on migration and asylum issues. Its objectives, as declared by the joint declarations, are strengthening cooperation in migration management, developing principles for close migration partnerships between their countries, and cooperating in preventing and fighting illegal migration¹²².

From the beginning of the 2015 migration crisis, the V4 countries have stressed the need for intensive communication with the Western Balkan countries, which are part of the so-called Balkan route for refugees. At the V4+WB6 summit in Prague in November 2015, foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkan countries shared their views on specific cooperation mechanisms and adopted a joint declaration. In this declaration, the V4 leaders committed themselves to coordinate procedures with the Western Balkan states and search for common European solutions. One of the outcomes of the meeting was a letter from the V4 foreign ministers supporting the European integration of the Western Balkan countries¹²³.

Multilateral cooperation between the V4 and the Western Balkans is visible in the energy sector. In January 2010, the Visegrad Group countries together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Austria signed the Declaration of the V4+ Energy Summit held in Budapest. The summit initiated the creation of several working groups, including a group on north-south interconnection¹²⁴.

States from both the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans participate in the EU Danube Strategy (EUSDR), one of the EU macroregional strategies. Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia

¹²² Prague Process. "What is the Prague Process?" Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/about>.

¹²³ Strážay, Tomáš. "V4 2015: neľahké hľadanie odpovedí na európske výzvy." *Ročenka zahraničnej politiky Slovenskej republiky*, 2016.

¹²⁴ Szpała, op. cit.

from the V4, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia from the Western Balkans are part of the EUSDR, together with Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine. The EUSDR is a long-term policy of the EU intended to develop coordinated policies and actions in the area of the Danube River Basin. The Strategy is focused not on funding, but rather on enhancing closer cooperation within the area. The EUSDR addresses a wide range of issues divided among 4 pillars and 12 priority areas, focusing on improving transport connections, energy connections, culture and tourism cooperation, water quality, biodiversity and other environmental issues, socio-economic development, and security¹²⁵.

One more perspective dimension of cooperation between the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans is the Three Seas Initiative. The Three Seas Initiative was established on the initiative of Poland and formally proposed by Poland and Croatia in 2016. It brings together 12 EU Member States located between the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea, namely, Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary, Austria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Croatia. The Western Balkans are regarded as an important region for this format of cooperation since four of its members are neighbours of Western Balkan countries. Currently, participation in the Initiative is fully available only to the EU Member States but it can be assumed that the Western Balkan countries will join the initiative once they complete their EU accession process. However, the Three Seas Initiative can already be beneficial for the Western Balkan states, as it promotes multilateral cooperation between Central Europe and the Western Balkans and coordination on their European integration path from EU Member States supporting enlargement¹²⁶ At the Three Seas summit in Bucharest in September 2018, the Three Seas Business Forum was inaugurated, to which private companies and public institutions from various countries, including the Western Balkan ones, were invited. In the final declaration of the Three Seas summit held in Slovenia in June 2019, the participant countries directly confirmed their openness to enhance partnership with the Western Balkan states¹²⁷. Representatives of companies from the Western Balkans also took part in the second Three Seas Business Forum.

However, despite previously positive influence, the Visegrad approach towards the region is now losing its legitimacy and credibility because of the worsening state of democracy in the V4 countries of Hungary and Poland. These developments are undermining the reputation of the

¹²⁵ EUSDR. "One Strategy – 12 Priorities." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://danube-region.eu/about/priority-areas/>.

¹²⁶ Balcer, op. cit.

¹²⁷ Ibidem.

Visegrad Group as a model of successful democratic transformation, regional cooperation and reconciliation and are weakening the V4's legitimacy as an advocate for the democratic transformation of the Western Balkans and their integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures.

The current state of affairs in the Visegrad Group and changes in the approach towards the WB6 of some of its members suggest that the support for the democratisation of the Western Balkans may not be as strong and genuine as it is claimed. Hungary is particularly noticeable in its futile attempts to strengthen its influence in the region and promote illiberal ideology at the cost of impeding the required reforms upon which the EU accession is conditional. Such an attitude rather empowers state capture in the Western Balkans by serving as an example for the autocratic rulers and corrupt political elites in the region of the effective exploitation of the benefits of EU membership without consequence. Western European leaders can get cautious about further enlargement due to the concern of new members becoming 'troublemakers' for the EU akin to Hungary and Poland.

The V4 countries need to be vigilant about this trend since their shared policy towards the Western Balkans is something they take pride in, seeing it as an example of their ability to successfully influence policymaking at the EU level. The current challenges threaten to erode the credibility of the Visegrad Group's involvement in the Western Balkan region even further and deepen the perception of it as a 'toxic' alliance. Saving the reputation of the V4 and positively influencing the Western Balkan region in the process of its European integration should be in the interest of its members. Despite primary responsibility for their positive image lying on the V4 states themselves, the success of this task, however, depends mainly on the EU, which needs to find ways to enforce rule of law and respect for principles of liberal democracy in its Member States to prevent similar developments in the Western Balkan countries.

2.3. The Western Balkans in the Visegrad Group countries' foreign policies

2.3.1. The Western Balkans in the foreign policy of Poland

Poland is a consistent supporter of EU enlargement. The EU enlargement policy is supported on the political level, while the public opinion of the Polish population regarding the EU enlargement enjoys high support. According to the data from the Summer 2022 Eurobarometer survey, 75% of Poles are in favour of the EU enlargement policy¹²⁸. This is the third highest percentage of EU enlargement support in the EU currently, after Lithuania and Malta.

¹²⁸ European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 97"

The Western Balkans are considered an important region for Poland. Poland supports European integration of the Western Balkans and is an advocate of rapid EU enlargement to the region. From the Polish perspective, the acceleration of the accession process will lead to a comprehensive political and economic transformation of the Western Balkan countries¹²⁹. The generally positive stance on the Western Balkans' enlargement, however, does not always translate into active policy towards the region. Poland still does not fully perceive the Western Balkans as an attractive area for political expansion. According to the data from the 2020 EU Coalition Explorer survey, the enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans is in the fourteenth place among EU policy priorities, drastically lower than for the fellow V4 states¹³⁰. In comparison, Eastern Europe and Russia policy is the first on the list of Poland's political priorities. Despite not being on the top of the list of foreign policy priorities, Polish diplomacy's interest in the Western Balkans and its involvement in cooperation with the region are constantly growing.

European integration of the Eastern European countries, particularly Ukraine, is Poland's longstanding priority in the context of the EU enlargement. The prioritisation of Eastern Europe over the Western Balkans in terms of enlargement is determined by geographical, geopolitical and historical factors, and the implications they have for the country's security. Poland is located to the north of the remaining V4 countries, which are separated by the mountain ranges of the Sudetes and the Carpathians. Such a location has a huge influence on the country's geopolitical priorities, making Poland naturally lean towards the East-West direction. Among the V4 states, Poland is the only country which borders Belarus and Russia in its exclave of Kaliningrad, previously known as Königsberg, as part of the region of East Prussia. The borders with these political rivals are lengthy. Russian policy and military actions towards Polish eastern neighbours and their consequences constitute a direct threat to Polish security.

History plays a major role in the prioritisation of the Eastern European vector of Polish foreign policy as well. For a long period of its history, both during the royal and the early 20th century republican periods, Poland used to control huge parts of the present-day territories of Ukraine and Belarus. Such a historical connection has created numerous ties between those countries. There is still a substantial number of ethnic Poles or people with Polish origins living in the territory of Ukraine and Belarus. Another historical aspect determining Polish prioritisation of the East-West axis is Poland's historical role as a place of clashing interests of aggressive bigger

¹²⁹ Balcer, *op. cit.*

¹³⁰ EU Coalition Explorer, ECFR.

powers from the West and the East. As a result, Poland is naturally seeking to maintain a constructive relationship with Germany to its West and to strengthen its security to its East.

These factors have determined the main goals of Polish foreign policy. At the start of its post-communist transition, Poland's main goal was to become part of the West by joining the EU and NATO and subsequently gaining influence there. At the same time, the East has always been a region of the utmost importance for Poland's national security and its development as an influential European power. Since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Polish foreign policy continued to be focused along the East-West axis. Being far bigger in size than the remaining V4 countries, Poland perceives itself as a country capable to be an influential regional leader. Poland's goal was to break away from the Russian sphere of influence and become a regional power capable of influencing the post-Soviet independent states of Eastern Europe by sharing its experience of democratisation and Europeanisation.

Poland is, in fact, the core actor driving the EU's Eastern policy after the country's accession to the bloc, contributing to the formation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Poland proposed the initiative to create the eastern dimension within the ENP, presenting it as an individual proposal, rather than a common V4 one, with an attempt to present itself as an influential independent actor¹³¹. The support to Eastern European countries on their European path has dominated Polish foreign policy to a large extent, while the neighbouring areas to the south of Poland were not prioritised or given enough attention.

The North-South axis has gained weight in the foreign policy of Poland relatively recently. Poland has the potential to become an influential power in the Western Balkans given the dynamics of its economy, close geographic location, cultural and historical ties, and status within the EU and NATO¹³². In recent years, Poland started increasing its involvement in various regional projects and initiatives directed at cooperation with the Southeastern European countries. Poland's involvement in the Berlin Process and the Three Seas Initiative are the foundations of the increasing activity of Polish diplomacy in the Western Balkans.

Poland, as a country that has gone through a long process of political and economic transformation and has consistently pursued strategic foreign policy goals, supports similar efforts made by other countries, including those in Southeastern Europe. Polish experience in the socio-political transformation, the successful process of accession negotiations with the EU and the implementation of the EU's conditionality requirements is a valuable asset for know-

¹³¹ Copsey, Nathaniel, and Karolina Pomorska. "The Influence of Newer Member States in the European Union: The Case of Poland and the Eastern Partnership." *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 3 (2013): 421–443.

¹³² Balcer, op. cit.

how transfer. Poland can offer expert assistance and share its experience with other European countries having European aspirations, such as the Western Balkan countries. It was also widely assumed in Poland that successful EU enlargement of the Western Balkan countries would help bring the next stage of enlargement to the Eastern neighbourhood closer. However, due to the recent events connected to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this country, as well as Moldova and Georgia, was granted the European perspective. Nevertheless, this fact does not obstruct Polish support for the Western Balkans' EU enlargement.

The main factors motivating Poland to support the Western Balkans' EU enlargement and increase its interest and influence in the region are security and geostrategic considerations. The Western Balkans play a crucial role for Polish national security due to the involvement of foreign powers important for Poland from a geopolitical standpoint, such as the US and Russia. The EU and NATO enlargement to the Western Balkans are seen by Poland as the most important instrument for the region's stabilisation¹³³. Therefore, Poland considers the stabilisation of the Western Balkans and their Euro-Atlantic integration as its strategic goals.

The security of the Western Balkans and their integration into the EU and NATO are of the utmost importance to Poland in the context of increasingly aggressive Russia. Being the main threat to Polish security, Russia perceives the region as one of the main areas of its political rivalry with the West. In the Polish context, stability in the Western Balkans is perceived as a crucial condition to guarantee the security of the entire Europe, and Central Europe in particular. The potential instability in the Western Balkans would cause the deterioration of the security of the EU Member States with EU external borders. Any possible destabilisation in the Western Balkans would also affect the main priority of Polish foreign policy – Eastern Europe. As the attention of the EU and NATO is now concentrated on helping Ukraine, the instability in the Western Balkans, particularly in Kosovo* and Bosnia and Herzegovina, is the desired scenario for Russia, which is seeking to open the wounds of recent conflicts to destabilise, weaken, and divide the whole EU with the aim of diverting the aid provided to Ukraine to counter the Russian invasion. At the same time, Poland sees the US as its particularly important ally and a crucial player in the area of European security. Poland is one of the most reliable allies of the US in terms of security cooperation, contributing to the US military missions abroad and closely cooperating within NATO. The support for a deeper inclusion of the Western Balkan countries in cooperation with NATO strengthens Poland's relations with the US and goes hand in hand with the countries' European integration.

¹³³ Ibidem.

The prioritisation of security in the cooperation with the Western Balkans and the promotion of their EU accession has been confirmed by Polish officials on multiple occasions. Most recently, at the Western Balkans Summit in November 2022, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki highlighted security as the main factor determining the crucial importance of the Western Balkans' EU enlargement for Poland and the EU and expressed his satisfaction by the fact that three of the six Western Balkan countries are members of NATO, calling it "the expansion of the security space"¹³⁴. He stressed the necessity to counter the growing influence of foreign actors in the region and called on the EU to "fill the void" by accelerating the Western Balkans' EU enlargement¹³⁵. Morawiecki also emphasised, "Today we are at a moment of very profound interdependence between what is happening in the south of our continent, in the west, in the north and, above all, what is happening in the east", pointing at the importance of the stability in Eastern Europe for the stability of the Western Balkans, and vice versa¹³⁶.

Poland aspires to play a more important role in both the EU and NATO, which determines its interest to be involved in their structures operating in the region. Poland is significantly involved in the EU and NATO missions in the Western Balkans. The security dimension is a policy area to which Poland has been committed the most over time. However, this involvement does not lead to a significant role of Poland in determining the security policy of the EU and NATO in the Western Balkans¹³⁷.

During the last decade of the 20th century, more than 10,000 Polish soldiers have served in various security missions in the Western Balkans. The following are the United Nations (UN) missions in which Poland was a participant: UNPROFOR (1992–1995), UNMIBH in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995–2002), UNPREDEP in North Macedonia¹³⁸ (1995–1999), UNMIK in Kosovo* (since 1999)¹³⁹. The NATO missions with Poland's participation include IFOR/SFOR (Stabilisation Force) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1996–2004), AFOR (NATO's Albania Force) in Albania (1999), Essential Harvest/Amber Fox/Allied Harmony in North Macedonia (2001–2003), KFOR in Kosovo* (since 1999)¹⁴⁰. The EU security and civil missions with Poland's

¹³⁴ Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. "Premier Mateusz Morawiecki na Szczycie Bałkanów Zachodnich: dziś, po raz kolejny Polska kontynuowała nasze działania na rzecz integracji europejskiej." November 3, 2022, <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/premier-mateusz-morawiecki-na-szczycie-balkanow-zachodnich-dzis-po-raz-kolejny-polska-kontynuowala-nasze-dzialania-na-rzecz-integracji-europejskiej>.

¹³⁵ Szymański, Wojciech. "Morawiecki w Berlinie: polityczną próżnię na Bałkanach wykorzystują inni." *Deutsche Welle*, November 3, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/pl/morawiecki-w-berlinie-polityczna-pruznia-na-balkanach-wykorzystuja-inni/a-63641163>.

¹³⁶ Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, op. cit.

¹³⁷ Balcer, op. cit.

¹³⁸ At that time known as the Republic of Macedonia per the state constitution or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) per the UN-accepted designation.

¹³⁹ Balcer, op. cit.

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem.

participation include EUFOR Concordia in North Macedonia (2003), EUPM in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2003–2012), EUPOL Proxima in North Macedonia (2004–2005), EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina (since 2004), and EULEX in Kosovo* (since 2008)¹⁴¹.

Currently, there are three missions in the Western Balkans in which Polish soldiers and policemen are taking part: KFOR and EULEX in Kosovo*, and EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Poland has the seventh largest contingent in KFOR, of which Poles make up 6% of personnel. The Polish contingent is also one of the largest in the EU military mission EUFOR Althea, which also accounts for around 6% of the forces. The EU mission in Kosovo (EULEX) currently has 500 members, 340 of whom are police officers. Polish police officers, numbering 95 people, form the largest national police contingent.

Polish citizens used to hold key positions in international structures in the Western Balkans¹⁴². Former Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki served as the UN Special Envoy in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992–1995. Henryk Sokalski was Head of Mission of UNPREDEP in North Macedonia in 1995–1998. In 2000–2005, Marek Nowicki held the position of the International Ombudsman in Kosovo*. However, the role of Poland in the security structures of the EU and NATO in the region is not a leading one, which means that at the moment Poles do not hold key managerial positions. The highest position currently held by a Pole is the head of the operational pillar of EULEX.

Despite considerable progress in the cooperation with the Western Balkan countries and the growing interest in it, the bilateral relations of the highest level between Poland and individual countries of the region still have not developed into strong and permanent connections¹⁴³. Leading politicians of Poland and the Western Balkan partners rarely pay official visits to each other's countries. Visits of Polish presidents and prime ministers are often limited to visiting Polish contingents or participating in multilateral conferences. President Lech Kaczyński visited the Western Balkans three times, while President Bronisław Komorowski twice. The incumbent President Andrzej Duda has visited the region only once so far when in 2019 he visited Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania to participate in a regional summit¹⁴⁴. At the same time, his visit was the first in history that a Polish president visited Albania. Prime Minister Donald Tusk visited Serbia twice, and Montenegro and Kosovo* once. Prime Minister Beata Szydło, in turn, paid one visit to the Western Balkans, to Albania. This was the first-ever visit by a Polish Prime Minister to Albania. The incumbent Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

not yet visited any of the countries of the Western Balkans. In January 2019, a visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina was planned, where he had to meet the Bosnian prime minister and the Polish contingent in EUFOR Althea. However, the visit was cancelled due to the Prime Minister's illness¹⁴⁵. Presidents and prime ministers of the Western Balkan countries also very rarely come to Poland. Their visits to the country are often connected with meetings of international organisations or initiatives and multilateral rather than bilateral. In 2017 the Prime Minister of Albania visited Poland for the first time in 13 years. The last time the Prime Minister of Serbia visited Poland was in 2013. In 2018, the Prime Ministers of North Macedonia and Warsaw met in Warsaw for the first time in history¹⁴⁶.

On the other hand, the activity of Polish foreign ministers in the Western Balkans increased significantly in recent years. For example, in 2022, Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau paid official visits to all the Western Balkan countries. In June 2022 he visited Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, and in July 2022 he visited Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo*. In the recent history of Polish foreign policy such an intensity of meetings with the Western Balkan partners was unprecedented¹⁴⁷. The growing interest of Poland in the Western Balkans is confirmed by the establishment of the Skopje (2010), Belgrade (2017), and Tirana (2018) conferences by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁴⁸. These conferences are aimed at sharing the Polish experience from the accession process to the EU. The format of the conferences involves annual meetings of experts on European integration coordinated by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Subject matters of the meetings are indicated by the Western Balkan partners themselves.

One of the most contentious issues in Western Balkan politics is the recognition of the independence of Kosovo*. The positions of individual Visegrad Group member states differ on this matter. Poland's position on this issue is specific as well. Although Poland has recognised Kosovo* as an independent state, like 23 of the EU members, at the same time it is the only one of these countries that did not establish diplomatic relations with Pristina. As a result, the bilateral relations between Poland and Kosovo* have no intensity. As Poland has not yet established diplomatic relations with Kosovo*, there are no legal grounds to provide Polish citizens with consular assistance in Kosovo*. Hungary represents Poland in Kosovo* in consular matters, including helping Polish citizens arrested and injured in accidents or as a

¹⁴⁵ *TVN*. "Chwilowa niedyspozycja zdrowotna. Premier nie poleciał do Bośni." January 4, 2019, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/mateusz-morawiecki-chory-odwolal-wizyte-w-bosni-i-hercegowinie-ra897302-2286329>.

¹⁴⁶ Balcer, op. cit.

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

result of violent crimes¹⁴⁹. However, the level of relation has recently been upgraded. On 8 November 2022, the Polish government concluded an agreement with the government of Kosovo* in the form of an exchange of notes on the establishment of consular relations¹⁵⁰.

Poland's decision to recognise Kosovo* was made in the context of Polish relations with the US and rivalry with Russia¹⁵¹. However, Poland's attitude towards Kosovo*'s independence is somehow distanced and, in a way, contradicts Warsaw's declared support for the US foreign policy in Europe. Such a position stems mainly from the cautious reaction of a large part of the Polish political elite of the country to 2008 Kosovo*'s declaration of independence. The reason for the following reaction is the belief that such an act could be treated by Russia as a pretext to legitimise aggressive actions against the post-Soviet states by supporting separatist entities. Such an opinion was expressed by the then President Lech Kaczyński¹⁵². In fact, Russia is the only country which has steadily recalled the so-called Kosovo precedent to legitimise its actions directed at dividing the neighbouring countries it formerly colonised. On the contrary, the government of Poland, led by the then Prime Minister Donald Tusk, supported the recognition and made the respective decision.

The Western Balkans' enlargement is important for Poland also in the regional Visegrad dimension. Poland actively supports common statements and actions directed towards the Western Balkans. On the initiative of the Polish Presidency in the Visegrad Group in 2016-2017, a decision was made to establish a Visegrad Network of Experts on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights for the Western Balkans¹⁵³. It aims to support the democratic transformation processes in the region and share experiences to help in the accession negotiations with the EU.

At times, the activity of Hungary, a fellow Visegrad Group country, presents a specific challenge for Poland. Contemporary Hungary has a different policy towards the Western Balkans, which is often inconsistent with the EU and Polish policies. Despite historically close relations between Poland and Hungary, which are frequently boosted by the current rule of law problems present in both states, the national interests of Poland in the Western Balkans are at odds with the interests of the current Hungarian leadership. The most acute question concerns

¹⁴⁹ Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. "Kosowo." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.gov.pl/web/macedonipolnocna/kosowo-idp>.

¹⁵⁰ Gazeta Prawna. "Polska i Kosovo nawiązały stosunki konsularne." November 8, 2022. <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/8584267,polska-kosowo-stosunki-konsularne.html>.

¹⁵¹ Lachert, Jakub, and Róbert Gönczi. *Kosovo in Foreign Policies of Poland and Hungary*. Warsaw Institute, 2021, <https://warsawinstitute.org/kosovo-foreign-policies-poland-hungary>.

¹⁵² Ibidem.

¹⁵³ Balcer, op. cit.

Budapest's uncritical support for the decisively pro-Russian and anti-Western elites of Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which frequently threaten the prospect of the European integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the security of the entire Western Balkans region. In the context of the Russian security threat amidst the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, support for this entity's pro-Russian vector poses a serious threat to the stability of the region, as well as a direct threat to Polish strategic interests and national security.

Another important dimension of cooperation with the Western Balkans is the Three Seas Initiative, which may be even more important for Poland than the common approach to the region within the Visegrad Group's framework. Poland has played an important role in the formation of the Three Seas Initiative format being its initiator and the main promoter. The idea of this format was influenced by the early 20th century Polish geopolitical concept of Intermarium, which envisioned the unification of countries of Central and Eastern Europe situated between the Black, the Baltic, and the Adriatic Seas into a single political entity. The Three Seas Initiative aims to enhance the regional dialogue and design common development projects between the parties. The initiative was launched in 2015 by the formal proposal of Poland and Croatia. In the context of relations with the Western Balkan countries, the fact that Poland's most active partner in this forum is Croatia is of key importance. Croatia has strong relations with the Western Balkan states in multiple dimensions. Considered a Western Balkan country before it joined the EU, Croatia has historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and geographical ties to the region. Croatia shares borders with three Western Balkan countries, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia. This makes Croatia an important economic partner for most countries in the region, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In October 2022, President Duda, during the official visit of Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović, offered Montenegro to become a cooperating partner of the Three Seas Initiative¹⁵⁴. The main topics of discussion were military and energy security, support for Ukraine, and European integration. At the meeting, Polish President confirmed that Poland supports European integration of Montenegro and other Western Balkan states and declared commitment to the EU's 'open door' policy¹⁵⁵. Poland sees the Three Seas Initiative as the main tool for promoting its interests and raising its influence in the Western Balkan region. If Montenegro becomes a cooperating partner of the Initiative, it will be the second country with such status after Ukraine which was granted a cooperating partner status at the Three Seas Summit in Riga

¹⁵⁴ *TVN*. "Prezydent: zaproponuję, by Czarnogóra uzyskała status partnera współpracującego z Inicjatywą Trójmorza." October 27, 2022, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/prezydent-andrzej-duda-zaproponuje-by-czarnogora-uzyskala-status-partnera-wspolpracujacego-z-inicjatywa-trojmorza-6183057>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

in June 2022. The cooperating partnership is a new type of partnership within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative created for non-EU countries aspiring to join the EU¹⁵⁶.

The Berlin Process is another important initiative for Poland in its engagement in the Western Balkans' EU enlargement process. For Poland, participation in the Berlin Process can be considered a breakthrough in cooperation with the Western Balkan countries. Poland was invited to this format by Germany in 2018, which made Poland one of the ten EU Member States participating in the Process alongside the Western Balkan countries and the European Commission. Poland was designated to hold the rotating Presidency of the Process for the 2019 year. The practical dimension of the Polish Presidency concerned the organisation of the Berlin Process summit in Poznan on 4-5 July. During the summit, Poland presented its own experience of political and economic transformation, accession negotiations and practical application of EU funds. Four priorities of the Polish Presidency of the Berlin Process were economy, interconnected infrastructure, the civil dimension (including civil society, think tanks, youth and culture), and security.

Poland demonstrates certain activity in the parliamentary dimension of cooperation with the Western Balkan states. Since 2016, annual summits of presidents of parliaments of Central and Eastern European countries have been held in Poland on Poland's initiative. These summits have been attended by representatives of parliamentary authorities of all the Western Balkan countries, except Kosovo*. Among other initiatives, the "Carpathian Europe" format can be mentioned. The format was established in 1999 on the basis of a Polish initiative. Central European countries located along the Carpathian Mountains range take part in the format. Thus, among the Western Balkan countries only Serbia participates in the initiative. However, this format does not have a significant practical impact on Poland's cooperation with the region and with Serbia in particular.

One more form of cooperation between Poland and the Western Balkans in the context of the EU enlargement is the Academy of Enlargement which was created by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland in 2015¹⁵⁷. The task of the Academy of Enlargement is to work on a wide range of issues important in the process of adaptation to the *acquis communautaire*. The subjects covered are foreign affairs, European integration, security, agriculture, economy, and justice and home affairs. The Academy involves annual training courses for officials from the Western Balkans. In 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland established the

¹⁵⁶ Evropejska Pravda. "Ukrajina otrymala status partnera-učasnika inicyatyvy Trymorja." *Ukrajinska Pravda*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2022/06/21/7141676/>.

¹⁵⁷ Balcer, op. cit.

“Reconciliation and Remembrance” seminar. It aims at sharing the experience of Polish-German reconciliation as an example to inspire the improvement of relations between the Western Balkan countries and ethnic groups¹⁵⁸.

The economy does not play a significant role in Poland’s support of the Western Balkans’ enlargement. The economic ties of Poland with the Western Balkan countries are developed only to a limited extent. Due to their size and limited demographic potential, the countries of the region do not play an important economic role for Poland and are not seen as attractive markets to expand¹⁵⁹. If measured in purchasing power parity (PPP), the economies of all the Western Balkan countries combined are more than four times smaller than the GDP of Poland alone. The total share of the Western Balkan countries in the Polish trade balance is negligible and comprises less than 0,5% of its total trade. According to Polish statistical data, Serbia accounts for nearly 60% of trade with the countries of the region, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia each account for 15%¹⁶⁰. The trade in services between Poland and the Western Balkan countries is also limited. Polish foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region is negligible as well. Serbia is the main destination for Polish investors and accounts for 85% of Polish FDI in the Western Balkans¹⁶¹. Polish FDI in the region constitutes only 1% of all Polish direct investment abroad. At the same time, Poland does not rank among the top ten most important trading partners of any Western Balkan country, except Serbia. The intensification of economic cooperation between Poland and the Western Balkan countries is a significant challenge due to the lack of promotional infrastructure in the region¹⁶². The potential for the development of trade relations is limited by insufficiently developed communication infrastructure on the North-South axis, such as road and rail. This makes the Three Seas Initiative framework crucial for the development of communication and energy infrastructure between Poland and Southeastern Europe¹⁶³.

The Western Balkans were never seen as a priority of Polish development policy. Poland provides the Western Balkan countries with very modest financial resources. The lack of funds for Polish development aid in the Western Balkans significantly reduces the influence of Polish public diplomacy in the region. Polish participation in the Berlin Process has raised Poland’s contribution to the region in terms of financial aid. During the Polish Presidency in 2019, more than 100 political, social, cultural and publishing projects were carried out. Poland donated

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

more than 1,5 million euros to infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans region, supporting, among others, projects to fight corruption¹⁶⁴.

Social relations between Poland and the Western Balkan countries are not at a high level as well. Poland's ties with the Western Balkan countries in terms of labour migration and academic cooperation are also limited. The number of economic migrants from the region working in Poland is very low. A similar situation is observed in higher education, as the number of students from the region in Poland is minimal. An important area of cooperation in the social dimension between Poland and the Western Balkan countries is tourism. Poland plays an important role in the tourist sector of the region. The tourist sector occupies a significant place in the economies of such Western Balkan countries as Montenegro and Albania, which are the main destinations for Polish tourists in the Western Balkans. In 2018, Polish tourists accounted for almost 4,5% of overnight stays of foreigners in the region, which makes them the sixth largest foreign tourist group¹⁶⁵. In North Macedonia, Poland holds first place among the EU Member States and third place generally by the number of tourists, which constituted 5% of all foreign tourists staying in the country¹⁶⁶. In Albania, almost 3% of foreign tourists came from Poland, which gave them third place among the EU countries and fifth generally¹⁶⁷. Each year the number of Polish tourists in the region is growing, which increases awareness about the Western Balkans in Polish society and interest in greater involvement of Poland in the region.

Overall, Poland supports European integration of the Western Balkans and considers the region important, first of all for its significance for Polish and European security. However, the lack of defined political and economic interests in the Western Balkans result in a limited role in the shaping of the EU enlargement policy towards the region. Poland's influence mainly boils down to political declarations of willingness to cooperate and share experience in democratic and economic transformation and the process of the EU accession. The region's security dimension is the only sphere in which Poland can boast of significant contribution.

Polish involvement in the cooperation with the Western Balkans differs significantly from that of other Visegrad partners. In general, Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia have higher levels of engagement in the region and are more active both in bilateral cooperation and the Western Balkans' enlargement promotion. Poland is less involved in common activity with the Visegrad

¹⁶⁴ "Premier Mateusz Morawiecki na Szczycie Bałkanów Zachodnich", op. cit.

¹⁶⁵ Balcer, op. cit.

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

Group and prefers to pursue its goals in cooperation with the region through other platforms, such as the Berlin Process and the Three Seas Initiative.

2.3.2. The Western Balkans in the foreign policy of Hungary

The Western Balkans is a particularly important region in the foreign policy of Hungary. There is a political consensus in Hungary on the support of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. The EU enlargement enjoys huge support from the Hungarian public as well. According to the data from the Summer 2022 Eurobarometer survey, 70% of Hungarians are in favour of the EU enlargement policy¹⁶⁸. This is currently the sixth highest percentage of EU enlargement support in the EU after Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Spain and Latvia, and on the same level as Slovenia. According to the data from the 2020 EU Coalition Explorer survey, the enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans is in second place among EU policy priorities, standing behind only the migration policy¹⁶⁹.

Hungary is the only V4 country which has a direct border with the Western Balkans, as it directly borders Serbia. As a consequence, the Hungarian border with Serbia is an external border of the EU. Hungary also borders Croatia, which puts Bosnia and Herzegovina in close proximity. The geographical location makes Hungary a natural advocate for the Western Balkans EU integration due to the strategic importance of the region for Hungarian geopolitical and economic interests. Budapest stands on the position that the security of the Western Balkans is a genuine European security interest, and that the fastest way to achieve the security of the Western Balkans is through European integration¹⁷⁰.

Hungary's interest in the Western Balkans is determined not only by its geographical proximity to the region but also by centuries-long historical connections. Hungary intermittently ruled over different parts of the territories of the present-day Balkan countries. Particularly notable is the Hungarian rule over Vojvodina, which was integrated directly into the Kingdom of Hungary, as well as over half of present-day Croatia as the autonomous Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia within the Kingdom of Hungary. Serbia and Croatia remain the most important Balkan

¹⁶⁸ European Commission. "Standard Eurobarometer 97"

¹⁶⁹ EU Coalition Explorer. ECFR, op. cit.

¹⁷⁰ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Podgorica. "Szijjártó Péter Külgazdasági És Külügyminiszter Hivatalos Montenegrói Látogatása." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://podgorica.mfa.gov.hu/news/szijjarto-peter-kuelgazdasagi-es-kueluegyminiszter-hivatalos-montenegroi-latogatasa>.

countries for Hungary¹⁷¹. These historical connections play a substantial role in the context of Hungarian relations with the Western Balkan countries.

In the 20th century, Hungary, as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was in conflict with the Serbs in both World Wars. When the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia started to disintegrate, Hungary endorsed the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, fearing the emergence of a powerful and increasingly nationalist Serbia¹⁷². During the wars of 1991-1995, Hungary remained neutral and accepted many refugees from the former Yugoslavia, including ethnic Hungarians from Vojvodina. During the Kosovo crisis in 1999, and shortly before the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, Hungary became a member of the Alliance and made its airspace available for its new allies.

The question of the Hungarian minority is one of the crucial issues determining the Hungarian policy towards the Western Balkans. The Hungarian “national policy” is a fundamental principle of its foreign policy. This policy implies that the Hungarian state is responsible for protecting the interests of Hungarians not only within, but also outside of Hungary¹⁷³. One of the aims of this policy is to promote the strengthening of self-determination rights of Hungarians in neighbouring countries preferably by the creation of Hungarian national autonomies¹⁷⁴. There is a 250,000-large Hungarian minority in the Serbian autonomous region of Vojvodina¹⁷⁵. Hungarians constitute a majority in the north of the region and are the second largest ethnic group in Vojvodina after Serbs. The Hungarian language is recognised as an official language in Vojvodina. The willingness to stabilise the region and ensure the security of the Hungarian minority is one of the most important factors determining the Hungarian support for the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans.

The European integration and NATO membership of the Western Balkan states remain the main long-term goals of Hungary’s foreign policy towards the region. Hungary supports the opening of all negotiation chapters with Serbia and Montenegro¹⁷⁶. Hungary was also very active in encouraging the EU institutions and other EU Member States to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania as soon as possible. After the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the Hungarian government declared that enlargement is “the most important

¹⁷¹ Szpała, op. cit.

¹⁷² Ibidem.

¹⁷³ Lachert and Gönczi, op. cit.

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁵ According to the 2011 Serbian population census.

¹⁷⁶ Żornaczuk, Tomasz, and Veronika Józwiak. “Changes in Hungary’s Policy towards the Western Balkans.” The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), October 23, 2018, https://pism.pl/publications/Changes_in_Hungary_s_Policy_towards_the_Western_Balkans.

tool for the EU to be strengthened” and encouraged the EU to speed up the enlargement¹⁷⁷. Hungary also calls on the Visegrad Group to support the European integration of the Western Balkans more actively.

Hungary’s support for the European integration of the Western Balkans is not limited to merely frequent declarations for the need to accelerate this process. Hungary is proactive in its efforts to achieve this goal. Hungary played a decisive role in the quick completion of accession negotiations with Croatia, a Western Balkan country at that time, in June 2011, shortly before the end of the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the EU¹⁷⁸. Hungarian diplomat Olivér Várhelyi currently serves as the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement.

Hungary is engaged in various regional cooperation formats with the Western Balkan states. Under pressure from the United States of America (USA), Hungary joined the Southeastern European Cooperative Initiative (SECI) in 1996, being the only V4 country to do so¹⁷⁹. SECI is a multilateral regional initiative initiated by the EU and the USA within the framework of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). SECI aims at strengthening regional cooperation, developing a sustainable economic strategy for the Southeastern Europe region, focusing on trans-border cooperation programmes and projects in the fields of development of infrastructure, trade, traffic, security, energy, environment and the private sector, and facilitating further European integration of its members. All of the Western Balkan states are members of the initiative, except Kosovo*, which is an observer.

In 1999, Hungary also started the so-called Szeged Process within the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe. The Szeged process was launched to support the democratisation of Serbia and strengthen its independent media but later extended its scope to include all the Western Balkan countries. Since 2004, the focus of the process has been the European integration perspective and promoting regional cooperation by strengthening relations between municipalities, developing cross-border projects, facilitating cooperation between Euroregions, trade development, promoting liberalisation, encouraging investment, and promoting judicial reforms¹⁸⁰.

One more achievement of Hungary is the initiation of multilateral parliamentary cooperation with the Western Balkan states. The Conference of Parliamentary Speakers of Southeastern European countries was established in 2004 on the initiative of Hungary. The biennial

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Szpała, op. cit.

¹⁸⁰ Lachert and Gönczi, op. cit.

conference is organised by the Hungarian National Assembly and is held in the Hungarian Parliament. The conference gathers parliamentary speakers from Hungary and the Western Balkans. Speakers of parliaments of autonomous regions of the Western Balkan countries can also take part in the conference. The conference has enabled the exchange of information between the parliaments of Southeastern European countries¹⁸¹.

Hungary is engaged in NATO missions in the region. Hungarian soldiers have participated in IFOR and SFOR operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1996, and currently are part of the EUFOR Multinational Battalion. The Hungarian embassy in Podgorica served as NATO Contact Point before Montenegro acceded to the Alliance in June 2017¹⁸². Hungary was also responsible for the supervision of civilian flights after the reopening of airspace over Kosovo* in 2014¹⁸³. The Hungarian contingent in Kosovo* is the third largest among the operational forces of the international KFOR mission¹⁸⁴. From the beginning of November 2021, the Hungarian armed forces' delegation in the UN's KFOR mission acquired the commanding position¹⁸⁵. This occasion signifies the first time a Central European state reached the highest position in any leading UN mission.

In terms of security, another argument that Hungary has used to accelerate the enlargement process is the 2015 migration crisis and general concerns about illegal migration. The issue of migration is treated as the most important security threat by the Hungarian government. Hungary has emphasised the key role of the Western Balkan states in controlling one of the main migration routes to the EU, the so-called Balkan route, on multiple occasions to motivate support for the Western Balkans rapid accession. The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó stated that by expanding the EU to include the countries of the Western Balkans, serious stability could be given to the region¹⁸⁶. According to Szijjártó, it is crucial to stop mass illegal migration, and stable Western Balkans can resist migration pressure better¹⁸⁷.

The economy is one more important reason for and sphere of the Hungarian engagement in the Western Balkans. Due to the region's proximity, Hungary is interested in expanding the

¹⁸¹ Országgyűlés, op. cit.

¹⁸² Żornaczuk and Jóźwiak, op. cit.

¹⁸³ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁴ Gönczi Róbert. "Hungary in Command – The Importance of the KFOR Mission from Hungarian Perspective." Warsaw Institute, April 27, 2021, <https://warsawinstitute.org/hungary-command-importance-kfor-mission-hungarian-perspective>.

¹⁸⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁶ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Podgorica. "Szijjártó: Magyarországnak Nemzetbiztonsági És Nemzetgazdasági Érdeke Is Az Eu Nyugat-Balkáni Irányú Bővítése." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://podgorica.mfa.gov.hu/news/szijjarto-magyarorszagnak-nemzetbiztonsagi-es-nemzetgazdasagi-erdeke-is-az-eu-nyugat-balkani-iranyu-bovítése>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibidem.

European single market to the Western Balkans, which would strengthen the Hungarian economy. Hungary already has big influence on the economies of the Western Balkan countries contributing to their development due to its investments and logistical ties. Hungarian Export Promotion Agency (HEPA) is an effective tool for the economic influence of Hungary on the region. HEPA helps with general export activities through the operation of special financial instruments in the target region of the Western Balkans, mainly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro¹⁸⁸. HEPA was able to create the Western Balkans Investment Support (WBIS) – a grant which can be used by the beneficiary organisations for the development of a subsidiary or majority-owned joint venture operating in the target countries¹⁸⁹. Hungary also provides support to the Western Balkans in their green transition through the well-developed agricultural sector of Hungary. The Hungarian government has launched the Western Balkans Green Centre (WBGC), which is a know-how kickstart for sustainability in the region¹⁹⁰. Through WBCG the Western Balkan countries can receive 1,2 million euros of investments to proceed with the green transition.

Hungary organises various cultural events promoting Hungarian art and culture in the Western Balkan countries. Hungarian authorities have organised several lectures informing about the Visegrad Group’s model of cooperation and the European integration process experiences. Hungary provides students from the region with the opportunity to study in Hungarian higher education institutions, offering a substantial number of scholarships in the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship programme.

Despite the EU accession of Western Balkan countries being a long-term political priority of Hungary, nowadays it is rather hard to separate the genuine national interests of Hungary from the interests of the current Hungarian government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party. Measures taken by Hungary in the Western Balkans indicate a change in the country’s approach to the region. The current government’s promotion of the Western Balkans European integration pursues goals determined by its ideology and political interests, which often clash with the interests of other Visegrad and EU countries. Hungary, represented by the Fidesz government, has different motivations for its engagement in the Western Balkans. The backsliding of democracy in Hungary and persistently increasing authoritarian tendencies of Victor Orbán’s rule is a noticeable matter of concern for the EU. On 15 September 2022, the European Parliament in its resolution stated that Hungary could no longer be considered a full democracy and had become a “hybrid regime of electoral autocracy”, citing a breakdown in

¹⁸⁸ Lachert and Gönczi, op. cit.

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

democracy, fundamental rights, and the rule of law¹⁹¹. This situation also affects Hungary's enlargement policy, which is driven by its government's ideological approach towards European integration.

Hungary's engagement in the domestic politics of the Western Balkans can hinder achieving the objective of rapid EU accession of the countries of the region. It is based on supporting selected political parties, even if it is done at the expense of the security, stability and progress of European integration of the Western Balkan countries. Orbán engages explicitly with partners displaying characteristics compatible with his illiberal ideology, facilitating state capture in the WB6. Orbán's vision of influential Hungary instrumentalises "traditional values" sentiment in Central Europe as a tool to achieve political power to challenge the influence of the dominant Western EU Member States and the whole system of liberal values. The idea of Orbán is to create a coalition of potentially like-minded countries in the EU. From this perspective, despite seemingly reasonable criticism of the Western EU Member States for slowing down the Western Balkans European integration, Hungarian calls to speed up their accession look like efforts directed at weakening and dividing the EU by stirring up anti-democratic sentiments and sabotaging reforms in candidate countries. Such measures previously unknown in Hungary's policy towards the region became increasingly visible. This is particularly evident in the relations with Serbia, Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

Orbán in his speeches has harshly criticised the EU over its attitude towards Western Balkan states. His appeals were made in a trademark populist style. His speech at the Conference of the Parliamentary Speakers of Southeastern European countries and the V4, held on 21 September 2021 in Budapest, is a perfect example of Orbán's ideology and grievances. He accused the Western EU Member States of perceiving the Balkans as a buffer zone "with which Western Europeans protect their own peaceful, safe, prosperous and comfortable lives"¹⁹². He also snubbed the West for not helping the Balkan countries to fight the invaders from outside, accusing them of willingness to keep military conflicts within the Balkans so that those conflicts do not slip to Western Europe. As an example, Orbán highlighted the Battle of Kosovo of 1389, where, according to him, Serbs were helped to face the invading Ottomans only by Hungarians and Poles. Addressing the Western Balkan states, Orbán said, "if you ask whom you can count

¹⁹¹ European Parliament. "Existence of a Clear Risk of a Serious Breach by Hungary of the Values on Which the Union is Founded." September 15, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0324_EN.html.

¹⁹² Miniszterelnök. "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the Conference of the Parliamentary Speakers of Southeast European Countries and the V4." September 24, 2021, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-conference-of-the-parliamentary-speakers-of-southeast-european-countries-and-the-v4-2>.

on in the European integration of the Balkans, I have to say that you can count on the same people as in the Battle of Kosovo”¹⁹³.

In his speech, Orbán described the V4 and Central Europe as an emerging centre of political and economic dominance in the EU. In his opinion, this will also extend to the EU enlargement policy, where pro-enlargement V4 countries will dominate the decision-making process. At the same time, Orbán stated that “for Hungary, the most important argument for EU membership is [...] that it gives access to markets”. This statement exposes Orbán’s negative stance towards further deepening of European political integration and sends a message to Western Balkan illiberal politicians that once their countries join the EU, they can exploit the economic benefits of the Union while ignoring political alignment and democratic values. In this regard, one more accusation made by Orbán was that Western European countries “only want to skim off the top of the economies of the Balkans, to gather profit-making opportunities”. He stated that the V4 “looks upon the Balkans not only as a simple economic target but as an enormous opportunity with which we can enlarge Central Europe” and that “for the peoples of the Balkans the road to the EU leads through Central Europe”¹⁹⁴. Such a speech is an attempt to stir up the anti-Western anti-liberal sentiment among the Western Balkan countries, which Orbán wishes to exploit for his political goals by making Central Europe a group of influential illiberal states. This rhetoric directly endangers the process of democratisation of the region and consequently its European integration progress.

Among the Western Balkan countries, Serbia is the main priority of the Hungarian foreign policy. This can be confirmed by a number of bilateral visits of politicians of various ranks in recent years. Prime Minister Victor Orbán and Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó visited Serbia multiple times in 2020 and 2021. Szijjártó has already visited Serbia three times in 2022. The most recent visit occurred in September 2022, when he attended a summit of the Open Balkan initiative in Belgrade. The highest-level politicians have openly voiced support for Serbia’s rapid accession to the EU on multiple occasions¹⁹⁵. According to Orbán, “the EU needs Serbia more than Serbia needs the EU”¹⁹⁶. Szijjártó emphasised that Hungary supports Serbia in everything, economically and politically, as well as on the road to EU membership.

¹⁹³ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “A Migrációs Helyzetről Is Tárgyalt Belgrádban Szijjártó Péter.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/a-migracios-helyzetről-is-targyalt-belgradban-szijjarto-peter>.

¹⁹⁶ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Vučić: A Vajdasági Magyarok Hidat Képeznek Szerbia És Magyarország Között.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/vucic-a-vajdasagi-magyarok-hidat-kepeznek-szerbia-es-magyarorszag-koezoett>.

The Hungarian relations with Serbia were complicated in the past, but are considered friendly in the present. The current Hungarian governmental officials often call the current state of bilateral relations a historic peak. During a visit to Belgrade in March 2022, Foreign Minister Szijjártó highlighted the importance of peaceful coexistence in Central Europe and stated that Hungary and Serbia managed to turn a former hostile relationship into a strategic partnership and even friendship¹⁹⁷. During a meeting with the Serbian minister of foreign affairs Nikola Selaković in Szeged in April 2022, Szijjártó reiterated his praise of “excellent” relations with Serbia and turning historical animosity into friendship. The rhetoric of the Hungarian Foreign Minister alludes to the Visegrad context of peaceful coexistence and overcoming interethnic conflicts, yet the real reasons for such relations stem from the pragmatic interests of both countries’ governments.

According to the foreign minister Szijjártó, Hungary has economic, security and affinity reasons for supporting the European integration of Serbia. The economic reason, which applies to the whole region, is that the economic growth rate of the Western Balkans exceeds the growth rate of the EU, and the integration of the rapidly growing economies is necessary for increasing European competitiveness¹⁹⁸. Trade levels between the two countries are constantly improving. In the Western Balkans, most of the Hungarian capital is currently invested in Serbia. Foreign Minister Szijjártó emphasised that significant investments are being made in the fields of agriculture, food processing, and the engineering industry¹⁹⁹. As of 2022, Hungary is Serbia's third most important EU trading partner after Germany and Italy. Prime Minister Orbán sees strengthening of the Serbian-Hungarian economic relations as a tool to accelerate Serbia’s path to the EU²⁰⁰. The Serbian investigative media outlet CINS has reported that Hungary has invested more than 70 million euros in Serbia in recent years to expand its influence²⁰¹. To increase trade cooperation even further, new transport infrastructure is projected. As of November 2022, the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway, a flagship project under the

¹⁹⁷ Hungary Today. “FM Szijjártó: Hungary, Serbia Form ‘Historic Friendship’.” March 21, 2022, <https://hungarytoday.hu/fm-szijjarto-hungary-serbia-form-historic-friendship>.

¹⁹⁸ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Magyarország Szorgalmazza, Hogy Még Idén Nyíljon Meg Minél Több Uniós Csatlakozási Fejezet Szerbiával.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/magyarorszag-szorgalmazza-hogy-meg-iden-nyiljon-meg-minel-toebb-unios-csatlakozasi-fejezet-szerbiaval>.

¹⁹⁹ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Szerbiába Érkezik A Legtöbb Magyar Tőke A Nyugat-Balkánon.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/szerbiaba-erkezik-a-legtoebb-magyar-toke-a-nyugat-balkanon>.

²⁰⁰ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Szerbiának És Magyarországnak Együtt Kell Megvédeni Határait.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/szerbianak-es-magyarorszag-nak-egyutt-kell-megvedeni-hatarait>.

²⁰¹ Marković, Stefan. “Religion, Politics and Football – Orban’s Way to Tighten His Grip in Vojvodina.” *Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.cins.rs/en/religion-politics-and-football-orbans-way-to-tighten-his-grip-in-vojvodina>.

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, is in the process of construction and is expected to be completed by 2025. The reconstruction of the Szeged-Subotica railway is also underway and is expected to be completed by the end of 2022. Foreign Minister Szijjártó also stated that the maintenance and development of smooth traffic between Serbia and Hungary is extremely important for bilateral relations. Modernisation of transport infrastructure must give impetus to even further development of trade cooperation.

The next reason behind the support is security. According to Szijjártó, Hungary considers Serbia a key player in terms of the stability of the Western Balkan region. He underlined that “a stable and rapidly developing Serbia means a stable and rapidly developing Western Balkans”²⁰². Szijjártó pointed out that since Hungary is interested in the stability of the Western Balkans, it supports the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and hopes that the outcome of the dialogue will be mutually beneficial and based on a mutual agreement²⁰³. For Hungary, the question of security also includes the issue of migration. Illegal migration is one of the most crucial bilateral issues which is frequently raised at the highest level of relations between the states. Foreign Minister Szijjártó pledged to help Serbia to protect its border multiple times during the official visits to Serbia²⁰⁴. Similar assurance to protect Serbia's southern borders in the form of technical or personal contribution was given by prime minister Orbán²⁰⁵. Serbia's accession to the EU would mean that Hungary's southern border would no longer be the EU's external border. As a result, the level of Hungary's security would increase.

The energy sector is also crucially important for Hungarian-Serbian relations. Both Serbia and Hungary are willing to cooperate with Russia in the energy sector, and have cooperation agreements with the Russian Gazprom in place. Such relations with Russia are labelled as “pragmatic”²⁰⁶. From the Hungarian point of view, the fact that no natural gas arrived in Central Europe from the south threatened the region's energy security²⁰⁷. In order to increase the amounts of gas flowing to the countries from the south, the TurkStream gas transportation corridor was established and opened in January 2020, and infrastructure capable of receiving 6

²⁰² Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Magyarország Szorgalmazza, Hogy Még Idén...”, op. cit.

²⁰³ Ibidem.

²⁰⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia. “Selaković and Szijjártó: The relations between Serbia and Hungary are unprecedented in our modern history.” July 4, 2022, <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/selakovic-and-szijjarto-relations-between-serbia-and-hungary-are-unprecedented-our-modern-history>.

²⁰⁵ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Szerbiának És Magyarországnak Együtt Kell...”, op. cit.

²⁰⁶ *Reuters*. “Hungary's Orban expects gas deal with Russia this summer.” July 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-pm-sees-deal-with-russia-by-end-summer-more-gas-supplies-2022-07-29>.

²⁰⁷ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Miniszteri Látogatás – Belgrád.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/miniszteri-latogatas-belgrad>.

billion cubic metres of gas was created on the border of Hungary and Serbia²⁰⁸. During his last visit to Serbia in September 2022, Foreign Minister Szijjártó stated that TurkStream is “the only safe transit” of gas to Hungary and praised the Western Balkan states for ensuring “a safe and reliable transit”²⁰⁹. In October 2022, Hungary and Serbia have agreed to build a pipeline to supply Serbia with Russian crude oil²¹⁰.

The region of Vojvodina is one of the key factors determining Hungarian interest in Serbia and its European integration. Vojvodina is seen as a link connecting the two states, which is used by Hungary to increase its influence in Serbia. According to Szijjártó, Serbia provides the widest range of rights to the ethnic Hungarian minority inhabiting the region, which creates the affinity reason for supporting Serbia’s European integration²¹¹. Prime Minister Orbán also regards the system of protecting the rights of national communities as exceptional and unparalleled. During his meeting with Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić in Subotica in April 2019, he stated that “if the national minorities policy that Serbia is pursuing was common throughout Europe, then the whole of Europe would have much less tension. and you could live your life more happily and calmly”²¹². During the visit to the Serbian town of Palić, situated on the border with Hungary, in June 2020, Péter Szijjártó praised the role of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ), the largest Hungarian minority interests political party in Serbia, in the development of the region. According to Szijjártó, only VMSZ can ensure further successful Serbian-Hungarian cooperation and strong representation of Hungarian interests in Serbia²¹³. The chairman of VMSZ, István Pásztor, has described Viktor Orbán as a “natural, unquestionable ally”, and also voiced his hope that Fidesz would remain in power in Hungary²¹⁴. Hungary greatly contributes financially to the development of Vojvodina as well, increasing its economic influence in the province and Serbia as a whole.

²⁰⁸ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “A Szomszédos Országok Közül Szerbiával Van A Legjobb Kapcsolata Magyarországnak.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/a-szomszedos-orszagok-koezuel-szerbiaval-van-a-legjobb-kapcsolata-magyarorszag-nak>.

²⁰⁹ *The Budapest Times*. “Szijjarto attends Open Balkan Summit in Belgrade.” September 2, 2022, <https://www.budapesttimes.hu/hungary/szijjarto-attends-open-balkan-summit-in-belgrade>.

²¹⁰ *Reuters*. “Hungary, Serbia agree to build pipeline to ship Russian oil to Serbia.” October 10, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-serbia-agree-build-pipeline-ship-russian-oil-serbia-hungarian-govt-2022-10-10>.

²¹¹ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Magyarország Szorgalmazza, Hogy Még Idén...”, op. cit.

²¹² Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “A Széles Körű Megegyezés Kidolgozására Összpontosít Szerbia És Magyarország.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/a-szeles-koeru-megegyezes-kidolgozasara-oesszpontosit-szerbia-es-magyarorszag>.

²¹³ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. “Szijjártó Péter: Látható Az Ugrásszerű Fejlődés Vajdaságban.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://belgrad.mfa.gov.hu/news/szijjarto-peter-lathato-az-ugrasszeru-fejlodes-vajdasagban>.

²¹⁴ International Press Institute. “Hungarian Capital in Foreign Media. Three Strategic Models of Influencing the Neighbourhood.” 2022, <https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/hu.pdf>.

In the relations with Serbia, Orbán firmly supports the current government led by President Aleksandar Vučić, who displays similar authoritarian, populist and illiberal traits. Orbán described Hungary and Serbia as proud countries with strong national feelings, a strong cultural self-awareness, and a culture based on Christianity, which they want to preserve²¹⁵. One more issue bringing Orbán's Hungary and Serbia together is their noticeable support of Russia at the time of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Hungary has so far joined the sanctions but has impeded on their adoption process and is openly calling to lift them, while Serbia refused to join the European sanctions on Russia altogether.

The special "illiberal" relationship between the two states was formalised in Budapest on 8 September 2021, when the Prime Ministers of Serbia and Hungary, Ana Brnabić and Viktor Orbán, respectively, signed an agreement on cordial relations and strategic partnership²¹⁶. The Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement said that the agreement will create institutional frameworks for further improvement of relations between Serbia and Hungary and realisation of joint projects in many areas²¹⁷. At the signing procedure, Orbán said that Hungary and Serbia are tasked by history to "defend Europe again" from "invading" migrants and that their common goal is to "protect and rebuild Central Europe"²¹⁸. According to Vladimir Međak, the vice-president of the European Movement in Serbia, by advocating Serbia's membership in the EU, Orbán is not only strengthening Hungary's influence in Serbia and the region, but also improving his country's position in Brussels by presenting itself as an important player in the Western Balkans²¹⁹.

It can be stated that Orbán sees Serbia as a potential illiberal ally, which can help him destabilise the EU and push forward with his vision of conservative illiberal Europe. This explains the statements about the importance of rapid EU accession of Serbia and its absolute readiness to become a full member. In June 2021, Orbán even included the immediate accession of Serbia into the EU as one of seven steps of his proposed vision to reform the EU, which also included points to weaken the EU institutional system, particularly the European Parliament, strengthen the role of national parliaments and national constitutional courts, and remove the concept of

²¹⁵ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád. "Szerbiának És Magyarországnak Együtt Kell...", op. cit.

²¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia. "Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between Serbia and Hungary." September 8, 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/news/strategic-partnership-agreement-signed-between-serbia-and-hungary>.

²¹⁷ Ibidem.

²¹⁸ Stojanović, Milica. "Serbia, Hungary Will 'Rebuild, Protect, Central Europe', Orbán Says." *Balkan Insight*, September 8, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/08/serbia-hungary-will-rebuild-protect-central-europe-orban-says>.

²¹⁹ Čačić, Darko. "Vucic and Orban formalise their 'special relationship'." *Euractiv*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/vucic-and-orban-formalise-their-special-relationship>.

“ever closer union” from the founding documents of the EU²²⁰. From this perspective, strong pro-Serbian lobbyism by Orbán’s government, in reality, is harmful to Serbia and its European integration. While Serbian accession to the EU is in Hungary’s strategic interest, it is illiberal Serbia that the current Hungarian government wants to join the EU immediately. However, this image of Serbia, promoted by Hungary, only hinders its EU integration process²²¹. The accession of such a state is impossible not only due to not fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and being incompatible with the European values, but also because it is undesirable for most of the EU members.

Hungary is also very active in its support of the European integration of Montenegro. Montenegro and Hungary cooperate in various fields, such as tourism, investments, innovations and culture. Hungary provides expert assistance in the process of negotiating the accession chapters. Hungarian officials have frequently stated that both Montenegro and Serbia should be accepted to the EU before 2025. In October 2020, Victor Orbán emphasised that Hungary continues to support the rapid admission of all Western Balkan countries, but especially Serbia and Montenegro²²².

Orbán attempts to weaken democracy in Montenegro. The Fidesz government supports the Social Democratic Party of Montenegro, which has been the main government force since the early 1990s²²³. Its long-standing leader, Milo Đukanović served either as prime minister or as president since 1991, except for a total of about four years. Currently, he is serving as the President of Montenegro. Đukanović is frequently seen as a corrupted and undemocratic politician, who is frequently accused of abuse of power and alleged involvement with organised crime and money laundering.

Orbán said, that, in a political sense, the Hungarian government sees Montenegro as a Central European country²²⁴. This may serve as an indication of the Hungarian government’s support for cooperation with Montenegro and other Western Balkan countries within extended Central European cooperation initiatives, such as the Three Seas Initiative, as well as the implementation of the Visegrad practices of cooperation. Most importantly, such a perception

²²⁰ Deme, Daniel. “PM Orbán: 7 Steps to Reform the EU.” *Remix News*, June 20, 2021, <https://rmx.news/article/pm-orban-7-steps-to-reform-the-eu>.

²²¹ Čačić, op. cit.

²²² Magyarország Nagykövetsége Podgorica. “Orbán Viktor: Magyarország Továbbra Is Minden Balkáni Ország, De Különösen Szerbia És Montenegró Gyors Felvételét Támogatja.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://podgorica.mfa.gov.hu/news/orban-viktor-magyarorszag-tovabbra-is-minden-balkani-orszag-de-kueloenoesen-szerbia-es-montenegro-gyors-felvetelet-tamogatja>.

²²³ Żornaczuk and Józwiak, op. cit.

²²⁴ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Podgorica. “Orbán Viktor Miniszterelnök Hivatalos Montenegrói Látogatása.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://podgorica.mfa.gov.hu/news/orban-viktor-miniszterelnok-hivatalos-montenegroi-latogatasa>.

is compatible with the idea of Orbán to turn the whole of Central and Southeastern Europe into a group of potentially like-minded illiberal countries to challenge the Western EU members as well as core European values which the Union is built upon.

The position of Hungary on the relations with Kosovo* has its specificities as well. Hungary was one of the first few states to recognise Kosovo* as an independent country back in 2008. The reason behind this decision may be attributed to the Hungarian “national policy”. The independence of Kosovo* was supported, as it resonated with the Hungarian foreign policy goal of promoting the creation of Hungarian autonomies in neighbouring countries²²⁵. Hungarian relations with Kosovo* are on a good level. As already mentioned, Hungary is a leading country in the KFOR mission, holding the commanding position. Hungary and Kosovo* also develop cooperation in the economy and cultural spheres. In February 2022, Foreign Minister Szijjártó paid an official visit to Kosovo*.

Hungary expresses its full support for the European integration of Kosovo*. Prime Minister Orbán said that Hungary will assist Kosovo* on its European path and will be engaged in encouraging Member States of the EU, which have not yet recognised Kosovo*, to do so²²⁶. Yet, there is one partner in the region carrying more significance for the foreign policy of Hungary – Serbia. Although Hungary recognised Kosovo*’s independence, it abstained during the vote on the accession of Kosovo* to Interpol. Hungary also accepted the establishment of the Kosovo* military with reservations, which were particularly important for Serbia²²⁷. Close relations between Orbán and Vučić can negatively affect the Hungarian-Kosovan relations, as the relations with Serbia are seen as more strategically important by the current Hungarian leadership. Further strengthening of the illiberal relations with Serbia may result in hampering the progress of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and consequently the perspectives of the European integration of Kosovo*.

Hungary fully supports Albania joining the EU. Hungary provides experts to the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to assist in the integration process²²⁸. The volume of trade between Hungary and Albania is also steadily growing. For example, in 2018 the turnover of goods

²²⁵ Lachert and Gönczi, op. cit.

²²⁶ President of the Republic of Kosovo. “President Atifete Jahjaga was received by the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://president-ksgov.net/en/news/president-atifete-jahjaga-was-received-by-the-prime-minister-of-hungary-viktor-orban>.

²²⁷ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Belgrád, op. cit.

²²⁸ Magyarország Nagykövetsége Tirana. “Magyarország Az Egyik Legfontosabb Uniós Politikának Tartja A Bővítést.” Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://tirana.mfa.gov.hu/hun/news/magyarorszag-az-egyik-legfontosabb-unios-politikanak-tartja-a-bovitest>.

increased by 35 per cent to 114 million euros²²⁹. Hungarian companies have become some of the most serious players in Albania in recent years. The speed of growth of Hungarian investments in Albania is remarkable. For example, the Hungarian low-cost carrier Wizz Air started operating in Albania in April 2017 with only the route Tirana-Budapest. Consequently, it has transformed the Tirana airport into its base, with flights to over 52 destinations, occupying a substantial 51 per cent share of Albania's market²³⁰. OTP Bank, the largest commercial bank in Hungary, acquired a 100 per cent stake in Societe Generale Bank Albania in 2019 and in the Albanian subsidiary of the Greek Alpha Bank in December 2021²³¹. In Albania, Orbán's partners with the right-wing Albanian Democratic Party of the former Prime Minister Sali Berisha, who is now its chairman. The party has remained in opposition since 2013 after Berisha's resignation. His undemocratic government, accused of widespread electoral violations, has caused Albania to fall behind in the process of European integration²³². In May 2022, Orbán sent a letter to Berisha, in which he assured Berisha that he would remain committed to defending shared Christian-conservative values, even though the majority of Albania's population is Muslim, and wished him success²³³.

Hungarian relations with North Macedonia are the clearest example of Orbán's destabilising approach to the region. In his rhetoric, Orbán has blamed the Western EU Member States for slowing down North Macedonia's European integration process and made calls for an immediate start of the accession negotiations with the country. However, the Hungarian involvement in North Macedonia's internal politics demonstrates a different approach. The Hungarian Prime Minister supports the largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, which often acted undemocratically while being in power from 2006 to 2017²³⁴. Before the 2017 local elections in North Macedonia, Orbán expressed his support for the former Prime Minister and party leader Nikola Gruevski at an election rally in Ohrid. Gruevski, supported by the Hungarian government, ignored opinions from the European Commission and the European Parliament critical of the direction of democratic development of North Macedonia²³⁵.

²²⁹ Miniszterelnök. "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had talks with Albanian head of state." June 20, 2018, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orban-had-talks-with-albanian-head-of-state>.

²³⁰ Koçollari Loren, Renáta Ryok Drávucz. "Albania-Hungary: where do they stand now?" *Tirana Observatory*, July 26, 2022, <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2022/07/26/albania-hungary-where-do-they-stand-now>.

²³¹ Ibidem.

²³² Żornaczuk and Józwiak, op. cit.

²³³ *Vox News*. "Viktor Orbán letter to Berisha: To defend the common Christian-conservative values." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.voxnews.al/english/politike/viktor-orban-leter-berishes-te-mbrojme-vlerat-e-perbashketa-kristiano-k-i11549>.

²³⁴ Żornaczuk and Józwiak, op. cit.

²³⁵ Ibidem.

In May 2018, Gruevski was sentenced to two years in prison for abusing power in a corruption-related manner²³⁶. On 10 November he did not appear for the start of his two-year sentence. On 13 November, Gruevski announced that he had fled to Hungary, where he applied for political asylum. Later, Albanian police confirmed that Gruevski had passed through Albania, Montenegro and Serbia before arriving in Hungary with the aid of the Hungarian government, which escorted him using Hungarian diplomatic vehicles²³⁷. On 20 November 2018, just one week after applying, Gruevski was granted political asylum by the Hungarian authorities, despite an international arrest warrant previously issued by Interpol. The grounds for asylum have not been made public, and the legality of the whole procedure of granting asylum is in question²³⁸. By granting asylum to Gruevski, Hungary formed a precedent, as the EU Member States have never granted asylum to a politician convicted in a country aspiring to membership before²³⁹. As a result, Hungary harbours the convicted fugitive politician without any sanction or substantive response from the EU. This situation confirms that Hungary, contrary to Orbán's declarations, does not positively contribute to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, a long-term strategic goal of Hungarian foreign policy for almost three decades²⁴⁰.

In June 2018, in a video recording addressed to supporters of VMRO-DPMNE, Orbán called for blocking the compromise with Greece in the dispute over the name of the state, reached by the social democratic Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. The implementation of this compromise agreement was a condition for resuming North Macedonia's EU and NATO integration process. Orbán's appeal to block this long-awaited compromise was, in fact, a call for delaying the integration of North Macedonia into the EU and NATO. In this way, Hungary also hampers the Visegrad Group policy towards the Western Balkans. In June 2018, the V4 issued a joint declaration praising North Macedonia for its agreement with Greece. Meanwhile, Hungary, by calling to block the compromise, undermined the value of such declarations and put a strain on the Visegrad Group's engagement in the region²⁴¹.

The Hungarian government's policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina can also be described as divisive and threatening. The public change of attitude and the involvement in the internal politics of Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the most striking developments of the Hungarian

²³⁶ Żornaczuk, Tomasz. "Political Effects of Hungary Granting Asylum to the Former Prime Minister of Macedonia." *Bulletin*, December 10, 2018.

²³⁷ Erebara, Gjergj. "Macedonia's Gruevski Fled via Albania and Montenegro, Police Confirm." *Balkan Insight*, November 15, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/15/macedonia-s-gruevski-fled-via-albania-and-montenegro-police-confirm-11-15-2018>.

²³⁸ Żornaczuk, op. cit.

²³⁹ Ibidem.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Western Balkan policy. Orbán's closest ally in Bosnia and Herzegovina is Milorad Dodik, a Serb Member of the Bosnian Presidency, former long-term President and Prime Minister of Republika Srpska and a long-term leader of SNSD, the most influential Serb party in the country. Dodik has spent years championing a secession of the Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hungary's open sponsorship of Dodik's secessionist regime directly assists his attacks on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Orbán's policy jeopardises the common security efforts of the EU, NATO, and the UN in the country, which puts the whole architecture of security in the Western Balkans at risk and can cause further adverse consequences for the security in the whole of Europe.

Dodik has been threatened with sanctions by EU officials for his escalating threats of secession. However, Orbán has already foreclosed the possibility of EU-level sanctions. Echoing previous comments on the matter from Foreign Minister Szijjártó, Orbán explicitly stated that Hungary will veto any such initiative²⁴². Orbán described Serbia and Republika Srpska as "key to the stability of the Western Balkans" and urged the new German government to integrate the region into the EU rather than punish it, which "could lead to even bigger problems"²⁴³. Instead, the Hungarian government provided Republika Srpska with 100 million euros in financial assistance. According to Orbán, the finances are provided as part of Hungary's Responsible Neighbourhood policy to enhance stability in the region²⁴⁴. The implication of such actions is the financial sponsoring of the attempted break-up of Bosnia and Herzegovina. From the perspective of Orbán's interests, such actions can be understood as blackmailing of EU institutions and the Member States. The logic behind it is following: either Bosnia and Herzegovina is granted the path into the EU as a dysfunctional illiberal state with the potential to help Orbán threaten the unity of the bloc, or Bosnia and Herzegovina is ascending into secession chaos which endangers the security in the Western Balkans.

In November 2021, Orbán paid a surprise visit to Banja Luka, a de-facto administrative centre of Republika Srpska, in the middle of a political crisis caused by Dodik's threats to form their own army, judiciary, and tax authority in the entity, severely diminishing the state power of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Hungarian Prime Minister's meeting with the Bosnian Serb political leader has triggered speculation about possible private business deals or secret

²⁴² Inotai Edit. "Orban: Hungary Gives €100 Million Support to Bosnian Serbs." *Balkan Insight*, December 21, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/21/orban-hungary-gives-e100-million-support-to-bosnian-serbs>.

²⁴³ Ibidem.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

negotiations about the fate of Bosnia and Herzegovina²⁴⁵. On 12 December 2021, the Bosnian investigative outlet Istraga published leaked documents that appeared to show a remarkable degree of coordination between Olivér Várhelyi, the EU's Enlargement Commissioner, and the secessionist authorities in Banja Luka²⁴⁶. The documents suggested that Várhelyi was aware of Dodik's planned secession-related activities weeks ahead of the Bosnian media, public, or even key government officials²⁴⁷. The same day, Orbán, during a briefing, made comments on the security situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, presenting Bosnian Muslims as a security threat and a challenge to the European integration of the country²⁴⁸. He stated, "I am doing my best to convince Europe's great leaders that the Balkans may be further away from them than from Hungary, but how we manage the security of a state in which 2 million Muslims live is a key issue for their security too"²⁴⁹. Such divisive rhetoric can hardly be considered helpful to the peace and stabilisation efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkan region. On 13 October 2022, Dodik met Orbán and Várhelyi again in Budapest.

The role of the Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi is also a point of concern about the Hungarian influence on the EU enlargement policy. European commissioners have to be impartial to any EU Member State's interest. In his rhetoric, Várhelyi is loyal to the European Commission, yet the Commissioner's actions demonstrate only a slightly hidden promotion of Orbán's agenda in the Western Balkans. In his relations with the Western Balkan countries, Várhelyi approaches the same leaders Orbán relies on in his foreign policy towards the region. Most noticeably, Várhelyi has reportedly stated that the acceleration of Serbia's accession is his key priority, and has continuously played down the rule of law concerns while assessing Serbia's progress²⁵⁰. Várhelyi's partiality is confirmed by the abovementioned engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal politics and close contacts with Bosnian Serb leader Dodik. It can be thus stated that Várhelyi's actions undermine the credibility of the European Commission and the EU conditionality in the eyes of EU Member States and aspirant countries.

²⁴⁵ Inotai Edit, and Srećko Latal. "Viktor Orbán's Visit to Bosnian Serb Strongman Puzzles Observers." *Balkan Insight*, November 9, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/09/viktor-orbans-visit-to-bosnian-serb-strongman-puzzles-observers>.

²⁴⁶ Mujanović, Jasmin. "Hungary's Orbán: Investing in the Destruction of Bosnia." *Balkan Insight*, January 5, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/05/hungarys-orban-investing-in-the-destruction-of-bosnia>.

²⁴⁷ Avdić, Avdo. "Sattlerova zabilješka otkriva sve: Dodik sa Varhelyem dogovorio datum održavanja Posebne sjednice NSRS i dinamiku provođenja zaključaka, a Inzka proglasili krivcem za krizu." Istraga, December 21, 2021, <https://istraga.ba/sattlerova-zabiljeska-otkriva-sve-dodik-sa-varhelyem-dogovorio-datum-odrzavanja-posebne-sjednice-nrsr-i-dinamiku-provodenja-zakljucaka-a-inzka-proglasili-krivcem-za-krizu>.

²⁴⁸ Mujanović, op. cit.

²⁴⁹ Cohadzic, Amer. "Hungary's PM denounced in Bosnia for anti-Muslim rhetoric." *AP News*, December 23, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/business-religion-europe-sarajevo-viktor-orban-431e51735fbbb9761d2007d9083f8aee>.

²⁵⁰ Wanat, Zosia, and Lili Bayer. "Olivér Várhelyi: Europe's Under-Fire Gatekeeper." *Politico*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/oliver-varhelyi-eu-commissioner-enlargement-western-balkans-serbia-human-rights-democracy-rule-of-law>.

Nevertheless, it is the Hungarian who holds the portfolio of the Enlargement Commissioner, thus providing Hungary and personally Orbán with a crucial say in the EU enlargement policy.

Another striking development of Orbán's policy towards the Western Balkans is the rapid expansion of influence on media in the region. Since 2017 there has been a rush of investments in Western Balkan media by Hungarian businesses closely associated with Hungary's ruling Fidesz party. The evidence suggests that these investments are part of a broad political strategy of influencing media and supporting Orbán's ideological allies²⁵¹. Particularly, this trend is noticeable in North Macedonia, where Hungarian companies have bought several key outlets close to the authoritarian former prime minister Nikola Gruevski and his conservative VMRO DPMNE party²⁵². Since 2017, Hungarian interests have taken over the news websites Kurir.mk, Deneshen.mk, and Vistina.mk, as well as the news portals Lider.mk, Republika.mk, and Netpress.com.mk²⁵³. These acquisitions were done by Péter Schatz and Ágnes Adamik, who according to findings by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), both previously worked for the Hungarian state broadcasting company MTVA, which was formed in 2011 after Orbán came to power²⁵⁴. Since then, the mentioned media outlets have engaged in increased influencing of North Macedonian public opinion by undisguisedly supporting VMRO DPMNE, spreading conservative nationalist narratives opposing the EU and liberal democracy, and promoting negative attitudes toward migrants.

Significant amounts were invested in Hungarian-language media in Serbia's Vojvodina. VMSZ, the most influential Hungarian minority political party supported by Fidesz, is increasingly powerful in the Hungarian National Council (MNT). In 2010, the MNT decided to set up a newspaper council to oversee the editorial policy of *Magyar Szó* (Hungarian Voice), the most important daily published in Hungarian in the country²⁵⁵. In 2011, *Magyar Szó*'s editor-in-chief Csaba Pressburger was dismissed, which symbolised MNT's power grab over the editorial office of *Magyar Szó* and opened the possibility to similar takeovers at the TV and radio broadcasters of *Pannon RTV* and the weekly *Hét Nap* (Seven Days)²⁵⁶. These three outlets were founded as public media by MNT, and are thus indirectly controlled by VMSZ through its majority in the council²⁵⁷.

²⁵¹ International Press Institute, op. cit.

²⁵² Ibidem.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

In 2021, Hungary's 4iG PLC, owned by Gellért Jászai, a Hungarian billionaire with close links to Orbán, acquired ONE Telecommunications, Albania's second-largest mobile phone operator, and 80 per cent of the shares of ALBtelecom, Albania's leading fixed-line internet and TV operator²⁵⁸. 4iG is also involved in the Hungarian expansion in Montenegro by buying 100 per cent of the country's largest mobile phone operator, Telenor Montenegro, in December 2021²⁵⁹. In addition, also in December 2021, it also struck a deal to purchase 70 per cent of TeleGroup Banka Luka, an IT company in Bosnia-Herzegovina²⁶⁰.

Traditionally, Hungary is the Visegrad country most actively promoting the Western Balkans' European integration. Various factors are motivating this support, ranging from pragmatic factors such as geographical proximity, national security, economic ties, and the Hungarian minority interests, as well as value-based factors such as historical ties to the region. Yet currently, the Hungarian support for the Western Balkans' enlargement is largely motivated by the government's priorities and ideological approach towards European integration and European values.

Orbán government's actions in the Western Balkans have demonstrated the dramatic turnaround from the long-term Hungarian policy towards the region. Not only does Orbán's involvement delay the process of the European integration of the Western Balkan countries but it also threatens the region's security. In this aspect, Hungarian policy in the Western Balkans has turned out to be convergent with the Russian approach, which aims to disrupt the European integration process by maintaining disputes in the EU's immediate neighbourhood and within the EU. Such attitude is at odds with the Visegrad Group's policy, consisting of constant support for bringing the perspective of EU membership closer to the Western Balkan countries. Intentionally or not, the Orbán government's actions serve Russian interests. Similar elements in Hungarian foreign policy can be observed outside the Western Balkans as well. They are visible, for example, in the Hungarian approach to Ukraine both before and during the full-scale Russian invasion.

Hungary still has the deepest relations with the Western Balkan countries and is the most active in its engagement with the region among the Visegrad Group members. However, despite declarations of support for the Western Balkans enlargement and the historical importance of the region to Hungary explained by multiple factors, the current government's policy contradicts the long-term Hungarian foreign policy, the V4 policy and the EU enlargement

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

policy towards the region, and is harmful to the Western Balkan states' progress in the process of European integration. The current Hungarian government's approach to the region promotes anti-democratic ideology, damages the rule of law-based conditionality, and enhances state capture in the Western Balkans. Orbán's Hungary is on the path to becoming a rogue state for the EU. It is already seen as an undemocratic state. If Hungary's democratic backsliding is not addressed with proper measures, there is a high chance Orbán will be able to enhance his divisive efforts.

2.3.3. The Western Balkans in the foreign policy of Slovakia

The Western Balkans have a special place in the foreign policy of Slovakia. The engagement of Slovakia in the Western Balkans goes far beyond the regional dimension. The importance of the Western Balkan region is evidenced by its constant mention in the strategy papers of the Slovak foreign policy²⁶¹. The Western Balkans' European integration is also frequently presented as one of the main goals of the Slovak foreign policy by Slovak political leaders of the highest level. In March 2004, EU enlargement to the Western Balkans was declared as one of the Slovak post-accession priorities by the then Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda²⁶².

Historical and cultural ties play a serious role in the context of Slovak engagement in Western Balkan politics. As is defined by Milan Nič, "the Balkans are geographically, linguistically, and historically the closest post-conflict region to Slovakia. Slovaks and many Balkan nations shared centuries of being part of the same Habsburg monarchy, which competed with Turks and Russians over the position of the hegemon in the region"²⁶³. It should be mentioned that there is a considerable Slovak minority of around 50,000 people²⁶⁴ in the Serbian autonomous region of Vojvodina. The Slovak language is recognised as one of the official languages of Vojvodina, being the third in the region by the number of speakers. This is why historical and cultural factors are important to consider in the context of the Slovak interest in EU enlargement to the Western Balkans.

Historically good relations between Slovakia and the Western Balkan countries are not the only reason why Slovakia sees the region's European integration as its main specialisation at the EU level. The promotion of the Western Balkans' European integration and the advance of the

²⁶¹ Bajda, Piotr. "Małe państwo europejskie na arenie międzynarodowej. Polityka zagraniczna Republiki Słowackiej w latach 1993–2006." *Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej*, 2018.

²⁶² *Ibidem*.

²⁶³ Nič Milan. "Balkánsky podbrušok Európy: spomalená integrácia." In *Bruselenie valašiek, Naša zahraničná polityka po novemu*, eds. Valášek T., Nič M., Jarábuk B. Bátora J., Hirman K., Kobzová J. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2010.

²⁶⁴ According to the 2011 Serbian census.

process of Europeanisation in the region are systematically mentioned as top priorities of Slovakia in annual reports on Slovak foreign policy regardless of restrained position of many capitals of Western Europe²⁶⁵. Such commitment demonstrates that the Western Balkans are a strategic priority for the Slovak foreign policy, which simultaneously serves as a key element in gaining prestige and recognisability of Slovakia on the wider European and Transatlantic levels.

European integration of Eastern European countries is also fully supported by Slovakia. The incumbent Slovak government is increasingly active in and committed to providing necessary support to Ukraine in its resistance to the Russian aggression, sometimes even temporarily sacrificing its own defence capabilities, despite Slovak political leaders and society having a historically favourable stance on Russia. Slovakia has deep historical ties with Western Ukraine due to their similar historical experiences, such as being part of the Habsburg monarchy. Moreover, the Zakarpattia region of Ukraine was part of Czechoslovakia between the World Wars. This also could determine prioritisation of Eastern Europe as a strategic region for the Slovak foreign policy. However, Slovakia did not position itself as an expert in Eastern European affairs, choosing Western Balkans instead. The disproportion in the engagement of the Slovak foreign policy in Western Balkan and Eastern European affairs is visible and substantial²⁶⁶.

The specificity of small states' political behaviour in the international arena can serve as another important factor motivating the prioritisation of the Western Balkans' European integration²⁶⁷. The Western Balkan region, being a peculiar area in the foreign policy of the EU, does not attract as much attention from the bigger European states as Ukraine. This situation created a geopolitical vacuum, in which a small state, Slovakia in this case, could raise its significance and gain influence on the European level. In this way, Slovakia could offer its services to help solve Western Balkan issues on the EU scale, at the same time not getting into competition with bigger partners. Such a stance leads to a recognition of Slovakia as a regional expert on Western Balkan affairs.

The support for the Western Balkans' European integration became a key element in the Europeanisation process of the Slovak foreign policy. This process goes hand in hand with reducing the weaknesses of being a small state. The importance of the Europeanisation process to achieve the goals of Slovak foreign policy is confirmed by several high-level Slovak

²⁶⁵ Bajda, op. cit.

²⁶⁶ Ibidem.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

politicians. For example, the former Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda emphasised that a European-scale debate creates a chance to be heard and to achieve the support of the whole Union if an interesting project is presented, for example, in the area of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans²⁶⁸. The former Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan stressed that an important element of successful Europeanisation is the preparation of specialists, who can share their knowledge with the EU institutions. In this context, he mentioned that Slovaks had managed to achieve the position of the experts on Western Balkan affairs, which gives them high prestige on the European stage²⁶⁹. As a consequence of Slovakia being recognised as an expert on Western Balkan affairs, full integration of these countries is the main goal of the Europeanisation of Slovakia's foreign policy. Potential accession of the Western Balkan states to the EU should lead to the strengthening of Slovakia's position in the EU.

The Slovak support for the Western Balkan EU accession is not limited merely to political declarations. Slovak diplomats are involved both directly and indirectly in the stabilisation of the region. Their activities are closely connected to the EU and other international organisations' involvement in the region. Since Slovakia joined the EU, the country's diplomacy has managed to export a number of diplomats specialising in Western Balkan affairs to the Union level. That is concrete proof of Slovakia's interest in the region and the reason why Slovak diplomats are seen as highly competent experts possessing deep knowledge about the region²⁷⁰.

Miroslav Lajčák, the former Foreign Minister of Slovakia is particularly noticeable in this context. Lajčák has a long experience of working directly in the Western Balkans and is highly familiar with the regional context. In 2001–2005, he worked as the Ambassador of Slovakia to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (renamed the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2003), with accreditation also in Albania and North Macedonia²⁷¹.

The participation of Slovak diplomats in the process of dissolution of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro can be considered another large contribution to the stabilisation process in the Western Balkans²⁷². In 2006, Lajčák served as an envoy of the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana in Montenegro. In this capacity, he oversaw

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ At that time known as the Republic of Macedonia per the state constitution or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) per the UN-accepted designation.

²⁷² Szpała, op. cit.

the whole process of the Montenegrin independence referendum²⁷³. Another Slovak diplomat, František Lipka, was appointed the chair of the referendum commission.

In July 2007, Lajčák was appointed the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR) and EU Special Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUSR). His tenure lasted for a year and a half until March 2009. During this time, he developed a reputation as a skilled expert in Western Balkans politics. During his period in office, in June 2008, Bosnia and Herzegovina signed its SAA with the EU. As the High Representative, Lajčák pursued a more active and interventionist approach than Christian Schwarz-Schilling, his predecessor in the position of the High Representative. One of the priority issues on Lajčák's agenda was police reform. A Draft Protocol on police reform proposed by him was rejected by the political elites in both entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Lajčák attempted to use the Bonn powers²⁷⁴ to advance the reform, which triggered a boycott of the state institutions by Bosnian Serbs²⁷⁵. Although Lajčák did not back down, the then EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana instructed to diffuse the tensions²⁷⁶. A declaration that made relatively minor reforms was signed by the governing coalition of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The reforms were declared sufficient by the EU to sign SAA with this country. Lajčák aimed to revive the pull of the EU conditionality on Bosnian political elites but, in the end, had to be contented only with minor changes.

After leaving the position of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina and EU Special Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lajčák was appointed as Foreign Minister of Slovakia. During his time in the office (from January 2009 to July 2010 and from April 2012 to March 2020), he continued to be highly engaged in Western Balkans affairs, particularly with Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, in October 2019 he invited both Milorad Dodik and Dragan Čović, the Serb and the Croat members of the Presidium of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time, to Bratislava for international mediation to endorse the search for a solution to the political stalemate blocking the state institutions²⁷⁷. On 2 April 2020, the Council of the EU appointed Lajčák as the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other

²⁷³ Kubosova, Lucia. "EU wins Montenegro's support for its referendum formula." *EUobserver*, February 27, 2006, <https://euobserver.com/eu-political/21001>.

²⁷⁴ Substantial powers granted to the High Representative at the Bonn meeting of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) in December 1997, which include powers to adopt binding decisions and remove public officials violating the Dayton Agreement.

²⁷⁵ McEvoy, Joanne. *Power-Sharing Executives: Governing in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Northern Ireland*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

²⁷⁶ Petersen, Roger. *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

²⁷⁷ *Nový Čas*. "Lajčák rokoval s Dodikom a Čovićom: Prioritou je sformovanie novej Rady ministrov BaH." October 27, 2019, <https://www.cas.sk/clanok/902459/lajcak-rokoval-s-dodikom-a-covicom-prioritou-je-sformovanie-novej-rady-ministrov-bah>.

Western Balkan regional issues²⁷⁸. The initial mandate was for 12 months. From 1 April 2021, his mandate was extended until 31 August 2022, and then again until 31 August 2024²⁷⁹. Another former Slovak Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan was engaged as a special envoy of the UN Secretary-General for the Balkans in 1999–2001. In 2009, after being elected to the European Parliament, he became a rapporteur for the Western Balkans.

Slovakia's position on the recognition of Kosovo* is quite specific. It is drastically different from the positions of other Visegrad Group countries and the majority of the EU Member States. Slovakia is the only V4 country that does not recognise the independence of Kosovo* and one of the five EU Member States not to do so. As is known, the Kosovan parliament unilaterally proclaimed the independence of Kosovo* on 17 February 2008. After that, within days Kosovo* received wide international recognition. For example, such countries as the USA, the UK, France, Turkey, and Albania recognised Kosovo*'s independence the following day. Despite the growing number of countries recognising Kosovo*, Slovakia has not accepted the unilateral proclamation of independence.

The differing stance of Slovakia towards Kosovo*'s independence is just partially connected to the assessment of the security situation in the Western Balkans and historically good relations with Serbia. More important concerns are connected to the issue of breaching international law and the principle of territorial integrity of sovereign states. As the former President of Slovakia Ivan Gašparovič put it, “the unilateral revision of borders has no basis in the international law and cannot be seen as a stabilising factor”²⁸⁰. In the Slovak opinion, achieving the stabilisation of borders was crucial before engaging in any closer union creation attempts²⁸¹.

The appeals to the principles of international law in the context of Kosovo* have an internal aspect. Slovakia did not conceal the fact that the example of Kosovo* can be contagious not only in the context of the status of Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia but also in other territories of dense settlement of ethnic minorities, particularly the Hungarian minority of Slovakia. Slovak experts were particularly concerned with the perspective of delimitation of

²⁷⁸ European Council. “Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: EU appoints a new Special Representative.” Press release. April 3, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/03/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-appoints-a-new-special-representative>.

²⁷⁹ Council of the European Union. “Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/1240 of 18 July 2022 amending Decision (CFSP) 2020/489 appointing the European Union Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues.” *Official Journal of the European Union*, July 19, 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022D1240&qid=1662320314309>.

²⁸⁰ Bútorá et al. “Zahraničná politika – hlavné trendy, dvojstranné vzťahy a regionálna spolupráca.” Chapter. In *Slovensko 2008. Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, edited by Martin Bútorá, Miroslav Kollár, Grigorij Mesežnikov. IVO, 2009, 297–367.

²⁸¹ Bajda, op. cit.

borders according to ethnic boundaries²⁸². These opinions revealed the fear of Slovaks that in the worst-case scenario the spreading of this principle can lead to the escalation of demands of the Hungarian minority which constitutes a majority in the south of Slovakia. These fears resembled the Romanian position on Kosovo*'s independence. Romania had similar reasons not to recognise Kosovo*, as it could see how the Hungarian minority managed to seek more powers using different international organisations to achieve the goal of increasing their autonomy²⁸³.

Most of Slovakia's political leaders followed their state's political position on the independence of Kosovo*. For example, Robert Fico, the Slovak Prime Minister at the time of Kosovo*'s proclamation of independence, expressed strong opposition to it. Following the Cabinet session on 20 February 2008, Fico stated that the unilateral declaration of independence was a mistake because it would create unwanted tension²⁸⁴. He insisted that a solution to the situation lies with the UN Security Council and the EU. In the next days, in a television debate, Fico said that "the declaration of independence violates the basic principles of international law, and by that, I mean the right of peoples to self-determination and the inviolability of borders"²⁸⁵. He likened the developments in the status of Kosovo to the 1938 Munich Agreements and said that the EU "is not the place where decisions about the fate of other nations can be taken"²⁸⁶. On the other hand, Andrej Kiska, the former President of Slovakia (2014–2019) was supportive of Kosovo*'s independence. He was the only candidate in the Slovak presidential elections of 2014 in favour of Slovakia recognising Kosovo* as an independent state, as he believed it would contribute to stability in the region of Western Balkans²⁸⁷. Nevertheless, the Slovak government and the head of state are bound by the resolution of the Slovak Parliament not to recognise Kosovo* as long as Serbia is against it²⁸⁸.

Despite the specific stance on the question of the independence of Kosovo*, Slovak relations with it are on a higher level than, for example, Polish relations with Kosovo*. Although recognising Kosovo* as an independent state, Poland does not have diplomatic relations with

²⁸² Nič, op. cit.

²⁸³ Pieńkowski K. "Polityka etniczna Rumunii." Chapter. In *Polityka etniczna współczesnych państw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, edited by Henryk Chałupczak, Radosław Zenderowski, Walenty Baluk. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2015.

²⁸⁴ *SME*. "PM calls Kosovo independence a 'major mistake'." February 20, 2008, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20028412/pm-calls-kosovo-independence-a-major-mistake.html>.

²⁸⁵ *B92*. "Slovakia: Declaration violates basic international law." February 25, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20121203083103/http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2008&mm=02&dd=25&nav_id=47966.

²⁸⁶ *Ibidem*

²⁸⁷ *B92*. "Milioner na čelu Slovačke." March 30, 2014, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?dd=30&mm=03&nav_category=78&nav_id=830326&yyyy=2014.

²⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

it and does not have state representation there, while Slovakia has an official representation office in Pristina. Kosovo* is also a recipient of the Slovak Official Development Aid. At the same time, in line with the policy of the unrecognition of Kosovo* as an independent country, Slovakia does not support Kosovo*'s membership in international organisations. For example, in November 2015 Slovakia voted against Kosovo's membership in UNESCO. The then Foreign Minister Lajčák commented on this decision by saying, “our interest is to strengthen the dialogue. One of the reasons why we took a negative attitude is that the issue was not the subject of the dialogue and we are afraid it could worsen it”²⁸⁹. He said that Slovakia was not hostile to Kosovo*, explaining its stance by emphasising the importance of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, and advised “to submit such proposals on the basis of mutual agreement and consent, as Czechia and Slovakia once did”²⁹⁰. In November 2018, Lajčák criticised the idea of a possible land swap between Serbia and Kosovo*. He said that a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo* along ethnic lines goes against “the spirit of democracy” and the very foundations of the EU²⁹¹.

The aspect of security seems to play a less important role for Slovakia as a factor motivating the support of Western Balkan EU integration in comparison to neighbouring Poland. This fact can be connected to a historically different way of perceiving Russia, the main threat to the security of Central and Southeastern Europe. This can be noted by the favourable stances of a considerable part of the Slovak political elite, which does not perceive Russia as a threat to Slovakia's security. For example, the former Prime Minister Robert Fico denounced the EU sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, calling them “senseless” and a “threat to the Slovak economy”²⁹². The friendly sentiment towards Russia is shared by a considerable part of Slovak society. It can therefore be assumed that a considerable part of Slovak politicians has mixed opinions about the Russian engagement in the Western Balkan security issues.

In the area of security, Slovakia supports the EUFOR Althea in its mandate and objectives, the main being capability building of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Slovak citizens serve in the Mission. Slovak personnel hold positions in key HQ roles, such as Chief of the

²⁸⁹ B92. “Slovak FM explains his country's vote against Pristina's bid.” November 10, 2015, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2015&mm=11&dd=10&nav_id=95997.

²⁹⁰ Ibidem.

²⁹¹ Battaglia, Antonia. “Slovakia's Lajčák: Serbia-Kosovo Land Swap ‘Anti-Democratic’.” *Balkan Insight*, November 22, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/22/slovakia-s-lajcak-serbia-kosovo-land-swap-anti-democratic-11-20-2018>.

²⁹² Balogová, Beata. “Fico still critical of sanctions.” *The Slovak Spectator*, August 25, 2014, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20051773/fico-still-critical-of-sanctions.html>.

Liaison and Observation Team (LOT), Coordination Centre (LCC) in Camp Butimir and through three Slovakian LOT Houses based in Višegrad, Novo Sarajevo, and Foča²⁹³.

The Western Balkan countries have been recipients of the Slovak Official Development Assistance (ODA) since its establishment in 2003. The largest recipient of the Slovak ODA is Serbia. Other instruments aimed at developing cooperation with the Western Balkans include the Centre for Experience Transfer in Integration and Reforms (CETIR). It focuses primarily on the training of civil servants and twinning projects aimed at the transfer of know-how and experience in sectoral cooperation²⁹⁴. The economic performance of Slovakia in the entire Western Balkan region remains relatively low. Slovakia has become neither a major investor nor an important trade partner for the Western Balkan countries²⁹⁵.

The cooperation in the framework of the Visegrad Group is an important instrument for Slovak cooperation with the Western Balkans and promotion of their European integration. Slovakia inspired the permanent inclusion of the meetings on different levels with the leaders of the Western Balkan countries into the V4+ format²⁹⁶. Slovakia also used its Presidency in the Council of the EU to accelerate the region's European integration. During the meeting of the foreign ministers of the V4, the Western Balkan countries and their neighbours, organised during the Slovak Presidency in November 2016, the then Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák emphasised that the Slovak Presidency in the Council of the EU was used to prepare the list of activities in the context of the Western Balkan enlargement, and proposed to share the Slovak know-how from the times of its successful transformation²⁹⁷.

Slovakia is a committed supporter of European integration of the Western Balkans, considering it one of the priorities of its engagement on the European level. The specificity of Slovak foreign policy makes the Western Balkans EU enlargement an important policy for the country. Slovakia contributes to shaping the Western Balkans' enlargement policy by engaging in European values and norms promotion, which raises its influence at the EU level. Historical ties to the Western Balkans and affinity to some of the region's countries play a significant role in this respect. In comparison to Slovakia's Visegrad partners, pragmatic utility-based factors, such as security, economy and geostrategic considerations, seem to play a less important role among Slovakia's priorities in its support for the Western Balkans' enlargement. Nevertheless,

²⁹³ European Union Force in BiH. "Chief of Defense – Slovak Republic, General Milan Maxim visits EUFOR." December 14, 2015, <https://euforbih.org/index.php/latest-news/1904-chief-of-defense-slovak-republic-general-milan-maxim-visits-eufor>.

²⁹⁴ Szpała, op. cit.

²⁹⁵ Ibidem.

²⁹⁶ Bajda, op. cit.

²⁹⁷ Ibidem.

Slovakia is engaged in stabilisation efforts in the region. In comparison to other Visegrad countries, Slovakia also differs in its specific stance on Kosovo*'s independence. However, the country promotes the EU-led normalisation process in the framework of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, stressing on cruciality of the democratic settlement. Overall, Slovakia, being a responsible EU Member State, positively contributes to the perception of the Western Balkans at the EU level.

2.3.4. The Western Balkans in the foreign policy of Czechia

The Western Balkan region also belongs to long-standing foreign policy priorities of Czechia²⁹⁸. Czechia is a staunch advocate for the Western Balkans' integration into the EU as a way to ensure stability, democratic rule of law, and prosperity in Southeastern Europe²⁹⁹. The Western Balkans are designated as one of the three main priority areas in the Concept of the Czech Foreign Policy, alongside Central Europe and Eastern Europe. Czechia supports the European integration of all the countries of the Western Balkans and has good relations with them. The importance of the region is regularly expressed by the highest-level politicians of Czechia. Czech diplomacy has been supportive of the European aspirations of the Western Balkan states both bilaterally and through multilateral channels, including the Visegrad Group.

Czechia's interest in the region comes from several sources. Historically, the Czech policy discourse on Southeastern and Eastern Europe refers to two main issues: the promotion of human rights and democracy, and economic influence³⁰⁰. Value-based motivations play a crucial role in Czechia's support for the Western Balkans' enlargement. Mutual relations with the Western Balkans are built on historically close ties and linguistic affinity with some countries in the region. Similarly to its Visegrad partners, Czechia shared centuries of being part of the same Habsburg monarchy and has close linguistic and cultural ties with many Balkan nations. Czechia sees the Western Balkans as a rightfully European region, which has to reconnect with its European neighbours to serve historical justice. This replicates the idea of the 'return to Europe' promoted by the Visegrad countries at the times of their accession process.

²⁹⁸ Janebová Pavlína, Vít Dostál, and Pavel Havlíček. "Agenda For Czech Foreign Policy 2021." Association For International Affairs (AMO), 2021.

²⁹⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰⁰ Tulmets, Elsa. "Preparing the EU Presidency: the Czech Contribution to the Project of 'Eastern Partnership'." *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 4, 2008, 79–98.

In its engagement with the Western Balkan states, Czechia prioritises assistance in democratic transformation and is committed to sharing its experience of the accession process. Czech political declarations reveal a real interest in the support of the democratisation process, especially in Europe and its neighbourhood. Strengthening liberal democracy, rule of law and European values is one of the main objectives of the 2022 Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU³⁰¹. Czechia has old traditions of democracy promotion and the defence of people's liberties and human rights. Democracy promotion as part of the Czech foreign policy identity does not begin with the Velvet Revolution and the fall of the communist regime, but has its roots in the much older Czechoslovak foreign policy discourse at the beginning of the 20th century³⁰². Due to its similar experience in recent history, Czechia is in a position to offer added value in terms of transfer of know-how from its own democratic transition and accession to Euro-Atlantic structures, as well as in terms of understanding the specific challenges that the Western Balkans face.

Utility-based motivations also largely determine the Czech interest in the Western Balkans and their European integration. Geographically, the Western Balkan region is close to Czechia. This proximity makes the region attractive to Czech investments and serves as an encouraging factor to develop interconnectedness with it. Bilateral relations with the countries of the region are shaped mainly through economic diplomacy, which is also manifested in the areas of development and cultural cooperation³⁰³.

The economic interests of Czechia in the Western Balkans are relatively great, in comparison to other V4 countries³⁰⁴. The largest trading partner of Czechia among the Western Balkan states is Serbia. In 2021, the volume of trade between them amounted to 1.4 million euros³⁰⁵. Czech involvement in economic cooperation with the Western Balkan states is especially noticeable in the energy sector. The Czech expansion to the market began in 2005. Since then, Czechia has invested in various projects focused on green energy, such as solar energy and water resource management, and provided support in the modernisation of thermal power plants. However, not all energy investment initiatives end up with success, as seen in the examples of Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. A project on the modernisation and expansion of coal-fired power plants in Republika Srpska ended up in

³⁰¹ Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. "Programme of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union". 2022, <https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/media/ddjjq0zh/programme-cz-pres-english.pdf>.

³⁰² Tulmets, op. cit.

³⁰³ Janebová et al., *Agenda For Czech Foreign Policy 2021*, op. cit.

³⁰⁴ Szpała, op. cit.

³⁰⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia. *Czech Republic*. Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/bilateral-cooperation/czechia>.

international arbitration, while investment in electricity distribution in Albania turned into a bilateral dispute³⁰⁶. These setbacks made the Czech business community associate Western Balkan markets with high risks. Despite this, Czech business is active in the region, and investment programmes are correlated with Czech economic interests. Besides the energy sector, the priority sectors for the Czech companies in the business cooperation are infrastructure, agriculture, forestry, and the food and drinks industry. Czechia has been engaged in several projects aimed at improving and modernising the infrastructure in the Western Balkan countries.

Development aid has a prominent place in the Czech approach to the Western Balkans. It is in Czechia's interest to make the best possible use of its foreign policy tools, including development cooperation, as well as to support reforms and social and economic development of the region on the path of European integration. Several Western Balkan partners are subjects to Czech Development Cooperation Programme. Bosnia and Herzegovina is designated as one of six priority countries, while Serbia and Kosovo* are designated as phase-out countries³⁰⁷. This means that Bosnia and Herzegovina is an active subject of the Czech development aid, while Serbia and Kosovo* have already finished multiple development projects in various spheres. Czechia's priorities in its development cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina are the acceleration of its integration into the EU and the promotion of democratic, economic and social reforms in the country. To deliver on its priorities, Czechia intends to promote sustainable economic growth, sustainable management of natural resources, good democratic governance, and agricultural and rural development³⁰⁸. Financial support for the political transformation and democratisation of the region is provided via the Transition Promotion Program of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs³⁰⁹.

Cooperation in the security sphere is also important for Czechia. The stability of the Western Balkans is seen as having a direct impact on the security of Czechia. Yet, the Czech participation in EU and NATO missions in the region is rather modest. Currently, Czech participation is significant only in EULEX in Kosovo* with 32 officers. Participation in EUFOR-Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina and KFOR in Kosovo* is rather symbolic – two and seven officers respectively. The importance of the security field was strengthened by the

³⁰⁶ Szpała, op. cit.

³⁰⁷ Czech Development Agency. "Where we work." Accessed November 12, 2022, <http://www.czechaid.cz/en/our-work/where-we-work>.

³⁰⁸ Czech Development Agency. "Bilateral Development Cooperation Programme of the Czech Republic. Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018–2023." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2018, http://www.czechaid.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Programme_BaH_CzechAid_2018_EN.pdf.

³⁰⁹ Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. "Transition Promotion Program." October 5, 2015, https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/human_rights/transition_promotion_program/index_1.html.

European migration crisis, which made a big influence on Czech public opinion and internal politics. Police cooperation, which is focused on the fight against organised crime, plays an important role in the Czech approach to the region³¹⁰.

Despite the constant inclusion of the Western Balkans in its list of foreign policy priorities, Czech policymakers have been largely reluctant to take clear positions over the problematic issues of the region³¹¹. None of the governments has achieved a significant impact on the European integration process of the Western Balkan states. The regional developments mostly remain on the margins of the Czech political agenda. The Czech foreign policy has been dominated by more crucial issues related to the country's geopolitical orientation within the Euro-Atlantic space and its relations with Russia³¹².

The Czech policy towards the EU enlargement, similarly to its policy on the EU level, is heavily dependent on its internal political scene. At times, all of the most important decision-makers in Czech foreign policy can have different political and ideological positions and attitudes. The dynamics of Czech internal politics create the perception of Czechia as a weak player at the EU level. The former Czech government of Andrej Babiš pursued an active bilateral policy in the Western Balkans mainly driven by economic diplomacy. It was specifically focused on Serbia. In 2021, there was a spike in mutual visits of the highest-level politicians, when the then Czech Prime Minister Babiš visited Belgrade in February, and when Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić came to Prague in May. A special regional focus on Serbia suited the pro-Serbian agenda of Czech President Miloš Zeman well³¹³. During Vučić's visit, Zeman apologised for the Czech participation in the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, describing it as a "mistake and worse than a crime", despite the fact that Zeman, serving as Prime Minister at that time, approved the campaign himself³¹⁴.

Miloš Zeman is frequently accused of Euroscepticism and pro-Russian leanings. As for relations with the Western Balkan states, Zeman is renowned for his assertive pro-Serbian position over the Kosovo issue. Zeman, elected in 2013, has an extremely critical approach to Kosovo's independence. He maintains the position that there should not be a Czech embassy in Prishtina. As a candidate, he stood for the Czech revocation of recognition of independence

³¹⁰ Szpała, op. cit.

³¹¹ Čermák, Petr. "Can the Czech EU Presidency Bring Western Balkans Accession Any Closer?" *Balkan Insight*, February 28, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/28/can-the-czech-eu-presidency-bring-western-balkans-accession-any-closer>.

³¹² Ibidem.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ *Danas*. "Zeman se izvinio Srbiji za NATO bombardovanje 1999. godine." May 18, 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-u-ceskoj-prva-poseta-zemanu-od-izbijanja-pandemije>.

and has called Kosovo “a terrorist regime”³¹⁵. On a state visit to Serbia in September 2019, President Zeman reiterated the position that he would like for Czechia to revoke its recognition of Kosovo* as an independent state³¹⁶. On a visit to Belgrade in 2014, he stated his opposition to the formation of an independent Kosovan army, equating it to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), citing “a whole series of terrorist actions” committed by it during the Kosovo War³¹⁷.

The recognition of Kosovo* as an independent state is a contentious issue for Czech politics. It can be illustrated not only by the current President’s stance on the issue but also by the reaction of the Czech leading politicians at the time of Kosovo*’s unilateral proclamation of independence. When the independence was proclaimed, the Czech government initially declared that it would not immediately recognise the independence of Kosovo* and would wait for the common position of the EU on the matter instead. The then Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg stated, “we have to see how many European countries recognise Kosovo*, and the way the Kosovo* government behaves”³¹⁸. The then President Václav Klaus, who, similarly to Zeman, also sympathised with the Serbian side, warned that the recognition can lead to unprecedented consequences and emphasised the traditionally friendly relations between the Czechs and the Serbs. The recognition of Kosovo*’s independence was supported by the then Minister of European Affairs Alexandr Vondra, who predicted that Czechia would eventually recognise Kosovo*³¹⁹. Both the then Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek and the then Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg eventually declared their support for recognising Kosovo*³²⁰. The opposition Czech Social Democratic Party and Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia rejected Kosovo* proclamation of independence and compared it to the 1938 Munich Agreement³²¹. After three months of debate, on 21 May 2008, Czechia officially recognised Kosovo* as an independent state. Despite stated support of Kosovo*’s European integration on the governmental level, its independence is still contested in Czechia. The debate is encouraged not only by President Zeman. The incumbent Czech Minister of Defence Jana Černochová, the head of the Parliamentary Club for Defence at the time, during a debate in 2019 said that the

³¹⁵ *The Economist*. “The New President’s First Steps.” April 8, 2013, <https://www.economist.com/eastern-approaches/2013/04/08/the-new-presidents-first-steps>.

³¹⁶ Živanović, Maja. “Czech President to Push for Kosovo Recognition Withdrawal.” *Balkan Insight*, September 11, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/09/11/czech-president-to-push-for-kosovo-recognition-withdrawal>.

³¹⁷ *B92*. “Kosovo army would be rearmed KLA – Czech president.” April 3, 2014, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=04&dd=03&nav_id=89869.

³¹⁸ Radio Prague International. “Czech Government Hesitates to Recognize Kosovo.” *Czech Radio*, February 19, 2008, <https://english.radio.cz/czech-government-hesitates-recognize-kosovo-8598999>.

³¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

³²⁰ Radio Prague International. “PM pushes for Kosovo recognition ahead of NATO summit.” *Czech Radio*, March 31, 2008, <https://english.radio.cz/pm-pushes-kosovo-recognition-ahead-nato-summit-8597613>.

³²¹ Radio Prague International, “Czech Government Hesitates to Recognize Kosovo”, *op. cit.*

recognition of Kosovo*'s independence was a huge diplomatic mistake³²². The Kosovo issue is a perfect example of varying stances among the Czech political elite on the state's foreign policy, and the approach towards the Western Balkans is not an exception.

Czechia is remarkably active in cooperating with the Western Balkan countries within the framework of the Visegrad Group. The Czech V4 Presidency in 2015-2016 was focused intensively on the development of the Western Balkans Fund. During the 2019-2020 V4 Presidency, Czechia organised several high-level events. On 12 September 2019, the first V4+WB6 Prime Ministers Summit took place in Prague. On 29 February 2020, a meeting on the level of Ministers of Foreign Affairs followed. Apart from the ministers from the V4 and WB6 countries, their counterparts from Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria as well as the representatives of the European Commission participated. At the meeting, the Memorandum of Cooperation between the International Visegrad Fund and Western Balkan Fund was signed, as well as a joint V4 Ministers' declaration supporting the Western Balkans European integration process³²³.

Czechia can also boast of exporting its diplomats for the high EU positions connected to the Western Balkans. Tomáš Szunyog is currently serving as EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Kosovo* and Head of the EU Office in Kosovo*. He was appointed on 30 July 2020, and his mandate runs from 1 September 2020 until 31 August 2023³²⁴. Previously, Szunyog served as Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic to the EU Political and Security Committee, Director of the Security Policy Department and Southeastern European Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechia and Ambassador of Czechia to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to Slovenia. His mandate as the EUSR for Kosovo* foresees playing a leading role in promoting a stable, viable, peaceful, democratic and multi-ethnic Kosovo* that is committed to the rule of law and to the protection of minorities and cultural and religious heritage through

³²² *Parlamentní listy.cz*. “Uznání Kosova byla velká diplomatická chyba. To území bylo opravdu srbské, zalitovala Černochova v Partii.” March 24, 2019, <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Uznani-Kosova-byla-velka-diplomaticka-chyba-To-uzemi-bylo-opravdu-srbske-zalitovala-Cernochova-v-Partii-575139>.

³²³ Embassy of the Czech Republic in Skopje. “Handover of the V4 Presidency 2020–2021, Czech Republic to Poland.” June 22, 2020, https://www.mzv.cz/skopje/en/economy_and_trade/handover_of_the_v4_presidency_2020_2021_1.html.

³²⁴ Council of the European Union. “Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/1194 of 19 July 2021 extending the mandate of the European Union Special Representative in Kosovo (*) and amending Decision (CFSP) 2020/1135.” *Official Journal of the European Union*, July 20, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021D1194&qid=1627692578602>.

strengthening stability in the region and contributing to regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans³²⁵.

In July 2022, Czechia took over the Presidency of the Council of the EU. The Western Balkans region's European integration was already declared to be among the top foreign policy priorities of the Czech Presidency agenda by the previous Czech government of Babiš in June 2021. Taking into account the fact that Czechia's internal political disagreements make the impression of it being a weak player at the EU level, the expectations of achieving valuable progress during the Czech Presidency were not high. Since the Presidency's priorities announcement, the domestic political context regarding the EU has substantially changed. The new Czech government led by Petr Fiala came to power in November 2021. Fiala's coalition consists of representatives of five ideologically diverse parties whose views on European politics vary significantly. Despite the differences, the new government is unburdened by the scandals of the previous administration and has a chance to improve its negotiating position at the EU level and convince European partners that Czechia is a responsible actor in European politics, including the foreign policy area³²⁶.

The new government found itself in a tricky position to lead the Presidency at the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which became the main and rather unexpected topic of the Presidency's agenda. Regarding the Western Balkans, Czechia was faced with the task to keep the region high on the EU agenda. At the same time, the events contributed to the increase of pressure on the EU to accelerate the EU enlargement, which, as a result, amplified calls to proceed with the Western Balkans accession process. This has created an opportunity for Czechia to turn the rhetoric of the strategic importance of the Western Balkans into a more proactive policy towards the region.

A historic moment for the Western Balkans' European integration occurred at the very beginning of the Czech Presidency. The EU has officially started the long-anticipated accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The launch of the talks was announced by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and North Macedonian Prime Minister Dimitar Kovačevski after a meeting in Brussels on 19 July 2022³²⁷. Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský opened the

³²⁵ Council of the European Union. "Kosovo: Tomáš Szunyog appointed as new EU Special Representative." Press release. July 30, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/07/30/kosovo-tomas-szunyog-appointed-as-new-eu-special-representative>

³²⁶ Čermák, op. cit.

³²⁷ Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. "Albania and Northern Macedonia open accession talks with the EU." July 19, 2022, <https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/albania-and-northern-macedonia-open-accession-talks-with-the-eu/>.

intergovernmental accession conference on behalf of the EU. The start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania can hardly be considered an explicitly Czech success. As already mentioned, due to the Russian aggression the geopolitical and security situation in Europe has changed and enabled a new push for the region's accession to the EU. To start negotiations with North Macedonia, a solution had to be found to Bulgaria's demands regarding the obligations of the bilateral friendship treaty between the two states. The substantive framework for the agreement was negotiated by France during its Presidency, which preceded the Czech Presidency. Under the Czech Presidency, the agreement was approved by the Parliament of North Macedonia, and all the necessary procedural steps were completed.

Commenting on the occasion, Prime Minister Fiala said, "It is in our interest that the countries of the Western Balkans integrate into the EU as quickly as possible. It is in the interest of the whole of Europe and, given what is happening around us and the security situation, we want the Balkans as a whole to be stable and to be part of a common Europe"³²⁸. Foreign Minister Lipavský praised the commitment of North Macedonia to the difficult compromise and mentioned Albania's patience with the unblocking of the talks. At the opening of the conference, he said, "I am very happy that it is the Czech Presidency that is at the beginning of the launch of accession negotiations"³²⁹.

Several events dedicated to the Western Balkans were organised by the Czech Presidency in Prague. In September, the Round Table with Civil Society from Western Balkans on Challenges of European Integration, organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was held. The purpose of the conference was to provide a discussion platform to look for ways to overcome the consequences of conflicts, raise issues of reconciliation, support functional democratic institutions and strengthen the principles of the rule of law and the fight against corruption³³⁰. In October, the Ministry of Industry and Trade organised the "Energy transition of the Western Balkans: Climate Necessity and Business Opportunity" event. The event aimed to discuss how the EU supports the energy transition in the Western Balkans within the context of the Green Agenda and to present business and investment opportunities in the region³³¹. At the beginning of November, the EU – Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial Forum was

³²⁸ Ibidem.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. "Round Table with Civil Society from Western Balkans on Challenges of European Integration." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/events/round-table-with-civil-society-from-western-balkans-on-challenges-of-european-integration>.

³³¹ Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. "Energy transition of the Western Balkans: Climate Necessity and Business Opportunity." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/events/energy-transition-of-the-western-balkans-climate-necessity-and-business-opportunity>.

organised by the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice with the purpose of deepening the integration process with Western Balkan partners focusing on JHA³³². The Western Balkans Smart Cities Economic Forum is planned for the middle of November. The event is aimed to support deepened economic cooperation between the EU and Western Balkans with a special focus on development of smart and sustainable cities³³³.

Despite some positive steps, the Czech Presidency's influence on the Western Balkans' enlargement process is rather ambiguous. The main reason for that is the issue of visa liberalisation for citizens of the Western Balkan states which has recently become an area of contention for Czechia, reflecting a mismatch between the EU enlargement policy and the migration policy³³⁴. Contrary to its recent lobbying for visa liberalisation for citizens of Kosovo*, Czechia has threatened Albania and Serbia with the suspension of their visa-free regimes. Such a rumour reflected the growing number of attempted crossings of the EU border via the Balkan route by citizens of third countries in 2022. In October 2022, Czech Presidency issued an internal memo putting a tough position towards the Western Balkan states whose territories are used by migrants as entry points³³⁵. The memo called specifically for Serbia and Albania to tighten their visa policies towards third countries from which many of the migrants originate³³⁶. As a measure of the last resort, in case the negotiations with the partners fail, the memo proposed to consider the visa suspension mechanism³³⁷. In the case of Kosovo*'s visa liberalisation process, the Czech Presidency stressed the need to proceed with the resolution. Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský travelled to Kosovo in late September to assure Kosovo* that the Czech Presidency will work at the EU level to unblock the process³³⁸. However, shortly after the meeting, the Czech Presidency announced that additional conditions for visa liberalisation were put on the table by some EU Member States³³⁹. Such a position on the issue can harm the credibility of the EU's conditionality, given that the European Commission concluded that Kosovo* had met the criteria set for lifting visas back in 2018. All in all, such

³³² Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. "EU – Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial Forum." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/events/eu-western-balkans-justice-and-home-affairs-ministerial-forum>.

³³³ Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. "Western Balkans: Smart Cities Economic Forum." Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/events/western-balkans-smart-cities-economic-forum>.

³³⁴ Čermák, Petr. "Restrictive EU Visa Policy Risks Further Western Balkan Disillusionment." *Balkan Insight*, October 31, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/31/restrictive-eu-visa-policy-risks-further-western-balkan-disillusionment>.

³³⁵ Rettman, Andrew. "Czech Presidency Floats Western Balkan Visa-Free Travel Ban Over Irregular Migration." *EUobserver*, October 13, 2022, <https://euobserver.com/world/156285>.

³³⁶ Ibidem.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Čermák, op. cit.

³³⁹ Isufi Perparim. "Kosovo Frustrated by EU's New 'Conditions' for Visa-Free Travel." *Balkan Insight*, October 14, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/14/kosovo-frustrated-by-eus-new-conditions-for-visa-free-travel>.

rhetoric harms the credibility of the EU within the Western Balkans, undermines Czechia's role in the region's enlargement process, and increases frustration among the region's political leaders and societies.

Overall, Czechia is a staunch and active proponent of the European integration of the Western Balkans. The main factors influencing this support are the Czech traditional priority of democracy promotion, economic and security interests in the region, and historical ties and affinity to the Western Balkan countries. The Czech involvement in bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the Western Balkan states has already brought investments and economic development to the region and facilitated know-how transfer. Nevertheless, Czechia still lacks a coherent vision of its Western Balkans policy and has not significantly influenced the progress of the region's European integration process yet. Czechia's interest lies in taking an even more proactive position towards the region and coherently exerting its influence to foster its democratic transformation. In order to specify the direction of Czechia's involvement in the region, it is necessary to update the concept of the Czech foreign policy in the Western Balkans, which has not existed as a separate policy document since 2013³⁴⁰. As a founding member of the Western Balkans Fund, Czechia should seek to transform the Civil Society Platform established by the fund into a real force for deepening the cooperation between the Western Balkan countries³⁴¹. Working together with other V4 states will accelerate the possibility of transferring know-how and prove essential for Czechia to succeed in its goal of successfully influencing the democratic and economic transformation on the path of European integration of the Western Balkans.

³⁴⁰ Janebová et al., *Agenda For Czech Foreign Policy 2021*

³⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

3. The Western Balkans' enlargement discourses of the Visegrad Group Members of the European Parliament

3.1. Introduction to the chapter

This chapter adopts a discourse-oriented perspective to explore the Western Balkans' enlargement-related debates in the European Parliament as a way to look into the wider process of EU enlargement and European integration. The European Parliament is an important discursive platform used by political actors from EU Member States to shape the attitudes of other actors and Member States' societies about important issues of European politics. Among the issues discussed there are the EU enlargement policy and European integration of the Western Balkans.

In recent years, discourse analysis has been increasingly used in the research of EU foreign policy and European integration³⁴². Previous studies focused on the discourses used to justify the 2004 enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries, such as Sjursen's works³⁴³, and highlighted the 'rhetorical entrapment' leading the enlargement-sceptic Member States to consent to their accession, as discussed by Schimmelfennig³⁴⁴. Some scholars discussed the contested normative-based narratives, such as the post-communist Central Europe's 'return to Europe' or the EU as a 'promoter of peace'³⁴⁵. However, there has been little systematic analysis of enlargement debates concerning the Western Balkan countries. The literature in this field consists largely of case studies of individual EU Member States' national perspectives on further enlargement³⁴⁶. Particularly relevant for the present research are the works on enlargement discourses in the European Parliament and national parliaments of EU Member States by Góra³⁴⁷ and Wunsch and Olszewska³⁴⁸. Although limited to the case-study setting of the V4 states, this thesis seeks to contribute to the field of discourse analysis by going beyond the states' perspectives through exploring discourses on the Western Balkans' enlargement of the V4 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Such an analysis can help to uncover the

³⁴² Góra, op .cit.

³⁴³ Sjursen, Helene. "Why Expand? The Question of Legitimacy and Justification in the EU's Enlargement Policy." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 3 (2012): 491–513.

³⁴⁴ Schimmelfennig, Frank. "The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union." *International Organization* 55, no. 1 (2001): 47-80.

³⁴⁵ Bélanger, Marie-Eve. "Europeanization as a Foundation of the European Construction." Chapter. In *Europeanization and European Integration*, edited by Ramona Coman, Thomas Kostera, Luca Tomini, 29–49. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

³⁴⁶ Ker-Lindsay et al., op. cit.

³⁴⁷ Góra, *Legitymizacja i kontestacja polityki zagranicznej Unii Europejskiej*, op. cit.

³⁴⁸ Wunsch, Natasha, and Nicole Olszewska. "From Projection To Introspection: Enlargement Discourses Since the 'Big Bang' Accession." *Journal of European Integration* 44, no. 7 (2022): 919–939.

motivations driving the V4 countries' political actors and societies towards supporting further enlargement.

Parliamentary discourse is a specific type of discourse. Parliamentary discourse typically consists of debates between politicians from different political parties, who employ various arguments and narratives in order to influence policymaking³⁴⁹. The dynamics of parliamentary discourse consequently shape the opinions of its recipients, such as parliamentarians, political elites, institutions, and the wider public. Plenary debates in the European Parliament constitute a significant European arena for the exchange of opinions, presentation of personal viewpoints, and legitimisation and contestation of EU policies. However, parliamentary debates cannot be fully considered an example of free and unhindered information exchange, as they are bound by both formal and political institutional frameworks, the latter of which is dominated by party ideologies and strategies³⁵⁰. Nevertheless, the European Parliament holds a crucial function when it comes to articulating national and personal perspectives on the European level of policymaking, being a platform where directly elected representatives of EU Member States' societies debate important matters of European politics, including EU enlargement policy.

Over time, the European Parliament became an important and influential player in the institutional system of the EU. Although the European Parliament has limited competences in EU foreign policy, its role was increased by the Lisbon Treaty. The competences of the European Parliament are set out in Article 36 TEU, which states that the institution shall be regularly consulted on the main aspects of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and informed about how these policies evolve by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (the High Representative), who also shall ensure that the views of the European Parliament are taken into consideration³⁵¹. The European Parliament has actively worked both formally and informally to ensure that its limited competences are used in a way that maximises its influence in EU foreign policy³⁵². As an effect, in recent years, the European Parliament has become a serious player in the EU foreign policy arena, although in strictly confined competences³⁵³.

The European Parliament's competences vary in specific EU foreign policy components, such as the EU enlargement policy, which is the focus of this thesis. Among the European Parliament's general functions in EU foreign policy, four main functions can be distinguished:

³⁴⁹ Góra, *opt. cit.*

³⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

³⁵¹ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, *op. cit.*, Article 36.

³⁵² Góra, *opt. cit.*

³⁵³ Stavridis, Stelios and Daniela Irrera. *The European Parliament and Its International Relations*. Abington–New York: Routledge, 2015.

legislative, consultative, budgetary, and control functions³⁵⁴. The legislative function is the primary function concerning the EU enlargement policy. The European Parliament has significant powers regarding international agreements³⁵⁵, and its legislative competences are particularly strong in the enlargement policy, as decisions adopted in this policy area require its consent taken by an absolute majority vote³⁵⁶. This function provides the European Parliament with formal competences in the EU enlargement policy. It also gives the Parliament the power to informally influence the policy, since other actors of the EU policymaking process seek agreement with it before the accession of new members is put to the vote³⁵⁷.

The consultative function, defined by Article 36 TEU, ensures that the European Parliament is regularly informed by the High Representative. The Parliament organises plenary debates concerning EU enlargement policy, during which MEPs can present their opinions and ask questions. A significant aspect of the consultative function of the Parliament is the development of knowledge, experience, and contacts within the framework of the EU foreign policy, which strengthens the institution's position in the foreign policy-related issues³⁵⁸. In this respect, interparliamentary delegations of the European Parliament with third countries play an important role. Budgetary and control functions are also important, since the European Parliament is a key institution in the budgetary procedure in the EU, where it can influence the financial perspective of the enlargement policy, among others. The Parliament also has the authority to control other EU institutions' actions in the EU foreign policy.

Debates on EU enlargement in the European Parliament offer an insight into the broader dynamics and motivations driving the European integration process. Analysing debates in the European Parliament can offer valuable insights into how the EU enlargement policy is contested on the European level. During the debates on the EU's engagement with potential EU Member States, political actors from EU Member States express their contrasting perspectives and priorities regarding the EU's internal functioning and its engagement with its immediate neighbourhood³⁵⁹. Although the European Parliament's direct influence on the EU enlargement process remains limited, it still represents a forum for debate that integrates concerns and particularities of EU Member States' domestic public opinion on enlargement into the wider European institutional and political context. Consequently, discourses presented during debates contribute to determining the European-level policy towards the Western Balkan region.

³⁵⁴ Góra, *op. cit.*

³⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁹ Wunsch and Olszewska, *op. cit.*

This chapter offers a discourse analysis of plenary debates in the European Parliament on the Western Balkans' EU enlargement, focusing on the stances of MEPs from the Visegrad Group. The goal of this analysis is to find out what priorities motivate the V4 MEPs' support for the enlargement and dominate the narratives they use in their discourses. The underlying task is to examine the connection between the priorities expressed by the V4 MEPs from different political groups in their narratives and the findings of the previous chapter, such as the V4 states' priorities as presented in their state officials' statements and expressed in their actions. Moreover, this chapter seeks to examine how the V4 MEPs debate about the implementation of the EU enlargement policy and to explore their opinions about the recent dynamics of the Western Balkans' accession process. Therefore, the analysis of political discourse on the Western Balkans' enlargement of the V4 MEPs promises to provide wide-ranging insights into the main priorities and concerns voiced at the EU Member States level towards the prospect and the nature of further European integration.

In this chapter, the empirical analysis builds on a corpus of the V4 MEPs' speeches from plenary debates concerning the EU enlargement policy. The time frame of the plenary debates used in the presented research covers February 2018 – October 2022, which comprises debates from both the previous and the current terms of the European Parliament. The corpus includes seven plenary debates and twenty-seven speeches of the previous term and eighteen plenary debates and sixty-one speeches of the current term of the European Parliament. The starting point – the 6 February 2018 debate on the adoption of the new Western Balkans' enlargement strategy – was chosen purposely, due to its importance for the current context of the EU's engagement in the Western Balkan region. The analysed debates encompass plenary debates on the EU enlargement policy in general, the Western Balkans' enlargement, specific issues of the Western Balkans' politics, as well as debates concerning individual Western Balkan countries' progress reports of the European Commission. All translations of passages quoted from foreign languages are my own.

The Visegrad MEPs' discourses on the Western Balkans' enlargement reflect different types of justifications used to present their stances on the Western Balkans EU enlargement during the debates. Based on Helene Sjørnsen's model of division of justifications³⁶⁰, these discourses can be compared and classified into two main categories: pragmatic (utility-based) and normative (value-based and norm-based). Sjørnsen proposed a threefold division of justifications and arguments into utility-based, value-based and norm-based. The first type concerns pragmatic arguments related to profit maximisation. In the case of analysed EU enlargement policy, these

³⁶⁰ Sjørnsen, 2012, op. cit.

justifications encompass economic, political, and security benefits either on the Member State or the EU level³⁶¹. Value-based justifications are connected to arguments concerning values. This type reflects the constructivist thought about values as a core element of community-building. Norm-based justifications evoke moral arguments based upon norms concerning universal principles of justice. However, value-based and norm-based justifications are hard to distinguish in practice. Thus, value-based and norm-based arguments are combined in this thesis into a single category of normative discourses, which encompass arguments related to democratic values, norms of conditionality, and beliefs about justice. Therefore, both categories of discourses – pragmatic and normative – were used by the Visegrad MEPs, and are discussed in detail in this chapter.

3.2. The Visegrad Group MEPs' critical assessment of the European Union enlargement to the Western Balkans

By and large, the Visegrad MEPs express an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the EU enlargement policy. Notably, even MEPs from political groups traditionally opposing European integration, such as The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL) political group, represented by Czech MEPs in the previous term, did not have openly negative opinions about the enlargement policy. Dominant arguments justifying EU enlargement to the Western Balkans and criticism of the EU enlargement policy expressed by the Visegrad MEPs in their discourses during the debates reveal the importance of factors influencing national enlargement preferences, as analysed in the previous chapter.

However, the overall positive assessment of the EU enlargement policy per se does not exclude more critical stance towards the quality of the policy and its implementation towards the Western Balkans. The most common aspects of Visegrad MEPs' critique are the slow path of the enlargement and the harmful effect that a stalled enlargement process has on the EU's credibility. Yet, apart from criticising solely the execution of the enlargement policy, Hungarian and Polish MEPs from ruling parties in their respective countries further criticise certain normative and value-based aspects of European integration.

Polish and Hungarian representatives feature prominently in the debates, unlike Slovak, and, in particular, Czech MEPs, whose participation level is rather low. In the debates that took place during the period under study, Hungarian MEPs made thirty-seven speeches, Polish MEPs made twenty-five speeches, Slovak MEPs made sixteen speeches, and, finally, Czech MEPs

³⁶¹ Góra, op. cit.

made ten speeches. Fifteen of the Slovak speeches were given by two members of the European People's Party (EPP) political group, namely, Vladimír Bilčík and Eduard Kukan, serving in the current and the previous terms of the European Parliament, respectively.

The importance of EU enlargement for the V4 states is commonly reflected in the MEPs' statements. For example, Slovak MEP Vladimír Bilčík strongly emphasised the EU enlargement policy as the EU's success in bringing about European unification and strengthening European integration rather than weakening it. At the 19 October 2022 debate he stated:

Russia's war is also a war against EU enlargement. [...] Russia is at war with European democracy, values and freedoms and consequently fights on one of our most successful policies – enlargement – via continuous disruption and malign interference [...] in the Western Balkans³⁶².

MEPs from all of the V4 states strongly asserted that the Western Balkans' enlargement is in the EU's interest and made frequent calls for the EU to engage more actively with the Western Balkan countries in order to accelerate their accession. Hungarian and Polish MEPs used enlargement debates to criticise enlargement-sceptic countries, such as France. MEPs commonly stressed that slowing down the Western Balkans' accession has dire effects on the EU's credibility: it jeopardises its ability to act as the stabiliser of its neighbourhood in both pragmatic and normative terms, and brings disappointment to the region's population. The decision not to open membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania sparked the strongest response of MEPs from every V4 country at the 23 October 2019 debate. For example, Vladimír Bilčík stated, "If we want a stronger and internationally respected Union, we must try for a decisive voice and influence in our immediate neighbourhood", and Czech MEP from Renew Europe political group Dita Charanzová wrote, "The decision damages the international credibility of the EU and causes a loss of confidence among the citizens of these countries"³⁶³.

The slow pace of accession was particularly criticised by Hungarian MEPs from the Fidesz party, the ruling party in Hungary. For example, Andor Deli and Kinga Gál repeatedly called for providing a concrete accession timeline for the candidate countries, particularly Montenegro and Serbia. During the 21 October 2021 debate Deli said, "An enlargement date would not only be a handhold for the candidates, a predictable and foreseeable conclusion of the enlargement

³⁶² European Parliament. Debate. *EU-Western Balkans relations in light of the new enlargement package*. October 19, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-10-19-ITM-012_EN.html.

³⁶³ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *Opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania*. October 23, 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-10-23-ITM-021_EN.html.

agenda could also be useful for the sceptics of enlargement”³⁶⁴. One more characteristic feature of Fidesz MEPs’ narratives is overt praise of the incumbent Commissioner for Enlargement Olivier Várhelyi on multiple occasions, especially by Deli and Gál. MEP Gál defended the Commissioner from “unfounded criticism and accusations that the Enlargement Commissioner [Várhelyi] is biased towards Serbia”, calling it unacceptable³⁶⁵.

3.2.1. Pragmatic discourses

Pragmatic priorities, which involve questions of security and economy, feature most prominently among the enlargement support justifications expressed by Visegrad MEPs. It can be confidently stated that the issue of security is the most frequently mentioned priority of the Western Balkans’ EU integration policy. In this regard, Visegrad MEPs mentioned the role of European integration in the stabilisation of the Western Balkan region, the geopolitical role of the region and the negative influence of third countries.

The issue of EU’s security was particularly important for Polish MEPs across ideologically different political groupings, despite the dominance of MEPs from the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, part of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) political group, in the discourse. This choice of priority is consistent with the national prioritisation of security as the most important argument for European integration. During the 6 February 2018 debate, Polish MEP Mirosław Piotrowski from the ECR said that the acceleration of the Western Balkans’ European integration is advocated by many EU countries, especially the Visegrad Group members, and the main reason for that being European security considerations³⁶⁶. Joachim Stanisław Brudziński from the ECR emphasised the role of the Western Balkans for the stability of the EU and highlighted Poland’s commitment to the region’s security during the debate on 5 July 2022, by stating:

There will not be secure, stable Europe without secure and stable Western Balkan states. Hence, Poland actively supports the European aspirations of these countries. [...] We support the activities and full implementation of the mandate of the EUFOR Althea mission³⁶⁷.

³⁶⁴ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *The outcome of the Western Balkans summit (continuation of debate)*. October 21, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-10-21-ITM-006_EN.html.

³⁶⁵ European Parliament. Debate. *2021 Report on Serbia*. July 5, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-07-05-ITM-016_EN.html.

³⁶⁶ European Parliament. Debate. *Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy - Western Balkans*. February 6, 2018, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-02-06-ITM-012_EN.html.

³⁶⁷ European Parliament. Debate. *2021 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina*. July 5, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-07-05-ITM-015_EN.html.

In the context of security, Polish MEPs consistently pointed out the destructive influence of other states as a crucial issue to be addressed urgently. An example of this is the statement by Brudziński made during the debate dedicated to the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans on 14 December 2021:

If we want that in the Western Balkans – as one Polish poet wrote – “other Satans were active”, if we want the Western Balkans to serve satrapies such as Putin, undemocratic China, and, unfortunately, Turkey as well, in order to destabilise our countries, then let us leave the Western Balkan states to themselves. [...] If we leave the Western Balkans to themselves, these “other Satans” will use this region of our continent to continue to be – as Churchill once said – “the soft underbelly of Europe”, to destabilise our countries³⁶⁸.

A similar narrative was presented by Brudziński during the 19 October 2022 debate, which simultaneously emphasised that foreign policy alignment should be among the main priorities of the enlargement policy³⁶⁹.

The question of security was featured substantially in Hungarian MEPs’ speeches, particularly in the contexts of regional and European stability and the geopolitical value of the Western Balkans for the EU. For example, when debating on the decision not to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania on 23 October 2019, Andrea Bocskor from the Fidesz party wrote, “This move jeopardises the stability of the Western Balkans, could lead to conflicts and at the same time affects the security of the European Union”, while András Gyürk called the decision “a major strategic error”, arguing that it puts the EU’s credibility and the Western Balkan region’s political stability at risk³⁷⁰. Hungarian MEP Kinga Gál stated that the stability of the Western Balkan region is in the security and geopolitical interests of the EU, and highlighted the Hungarian role in KFOR³⁷¹.

Hungarian MEPs repeatedly pointed out the necessity to combat the influence of other states, while rarely mentioning them particularly. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine accelerated this argument. Kinga Gál stated the importance of the security aspect of the Western Balkans’ integration for Hungary and the EU on multiple occasions, for example during the 18 May 2022 debate, when she said, “The Russian aggression and the subsequent security

³⁶⁸ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *Cooperation on the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans*. December 14, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-12-14-ITM-016_EN.html.

³⁶⁹ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *EU-Western Balkans relations in light of the new enlargement package*. October 19, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-10-19-ITM-014_EN.html.

³⁷⁰ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *Opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania*. October 23, 2019, op. cit.

³⁷¹ European Parliament. Debate. *The outcome of the Western Balkans summit*. October 21, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-10-21-ITM-004_EN.html.

challenges make it crucially important to integrate the Western Balkans region [...] into the EU community as soon as possible. It is also in the security interests of all of us”³⁷². It should be noted that Fidesz MEPs appeal to the question of security to present Hungary as a credible actor on the European level, while in reality, the Hungarian government is undermining common EU action within the CFSP.

The issue of security and geopolitics was also highlighted by the Hungarian opposition. For example, Katalin Cseh, representing Renew, stated the following:

We know that we are talking about a geopolitical buffer zone. And Russia and China understand the strategic importance of the Western Balkans [...]. And the palpable influence of Russia and China is felt throughout the whole region. But Beijing and Moscow’s geopolitical opportunity is our geopolitical risk. [...] if you are serious about enlargement, [...] we need to show our best face, a Europe that [...] [is] a strong alliance that is able to protect its members from existential external threats. [...] this is a question of strategic interests³⁷³.

Regarding security, Hungarian MEPs from Fidesz frequently appealed to the issue of migration, presenting it as a security threat. This fact links to the Hungarian government’s position on migration, commonly presented as a crucial priority of Hungarian national security. For example, during the 6 February 2018 debate, László Tőkés made the following statement: “It is in the common European interest to integrate the countries of this region, both in terms of protecting the EU's borders and of closing the Balkan migration route”³⁷⁴. During the same debate, Andrea Bocskor linked migration with the threat of terrorism and assured that it can only be curbed by integrating the Western Balkan countries³⁷⁵.

Serbia, the largest country in the Western Balkans, received special attention in the pragmatic discourses of Hungarian MEPs, particularly Andor Deli and Kinga Gál. When calling for Serbia’s immediate accession to the EU, Deli and Gál echoed their government’s statements about Serbia’s strategic importance and its status as the cornerstone of stability in the Western Balkans. For example, on 25 March 2021, Gál stated that Serbia “is a stabilising factor in the region and is clearly seeking a peaceful settlement”³⁷⁶. On 5 July 2022, Gál appealed to the issues of security and stability to legitimise Hungary’s actions in the region and promote

³⁷² European Parliament. Debate. *2021 Report on North Macedonia*. May 18, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-05-18-ITM-022_EN.html.

³⁷³ European Parliament. Debate. *EU-Western Balkans relations in light of the new enlargement package*. October 19, 2022, op. cit.

³⁷⁴ European Parliament. Debate. *Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy - Western Balkans*. February 6, 2018, op. cit.

³⁷⁵ Ibidem.

³⁷⁶ European Parliament. Debate. *2019-2020 Reports on Albania – 2019-2020 Reports on Kosovo – 2019-2020 Reports on North Macedonia – 2019-2020 Reports on Serbia*. March 25, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-03-25-ITM-008_EN.html.

Serbia's immediate accession. She accused the EU of holding an anti-Hungarian sentiment "at the time when the stability of the Western Balkans should be a key issue for the EU", denying "absurd" allegations that "Hungary, together with Serbia, is enabling the achievement of the geopolitical goals of Russia and China"³⁷⁷. Moreover, at the same debate, Deli proclaimed that "It is incredible that, when we see war raging in a country neighbouring the EU, some people fail to see that Serbia's early accession would consolidate the stability of the Union"³⁷⁸. MEP Deli attempted to present the accession of Serbia, the country opposing anti-Russian measures taken by the EU, as a tool to combat security threats that come from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and stated that slowing down Serbia's accession goes against the strategic interests of the EU³⁷⁹. This trend of supporting Serbia's immediate accession can be attributed to the Orbán's government's increasingly frequent portrayal of Serbia as the strongest and closest Western Balkan ally of Hungary.

Contrary to Hungarian MEPs, Polish MEPs raised concerns about the security aspect of Serbia's accession. For example, Bogdan Rzońca from the ECR called the EU to adopt a more hard-line stance towards Serbia, stating that its influence in the Western Balkans is destructive and accusing it of supporting Republika Srpska's separatism³⁸⁰. In a similar manner, on 19 October 2022, Anna Fotyga from the ECR in a similar manner urged the EU to put additional pressure on Serbia to align its foreign policy along with the collective response of the EU to the Russian invasion of Ukraine³⁸¹. During the 5 July 2022 debate, Joachim Brudziński went as far as saying that "Serbia, which will be closer to Putin, [Patriarch] Kirill, [Russian Foreign Minister] Lavrov, to the murderers from Bucha, from Mariupol, [...] should not be able to join the EU"³⁸².

Slovak and Czech MEPs also mentioned the issue of security in their infrequent speeches, although to a lesser extent than their Polish and Hungarian colleagues. During the 23 October 2019 debate on the decision not to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, security was the main argument put forward by the Slovak MEP Vladimír Bilčík and the Czech MEP Jiří Pospíšil, both from the EPP, for proceeding with the Western Balkans' enlargement³⁸³. Bilčík's position was expressed in the following statement: "Let's remember, enlargement has brought unification and an unprecedented sense of security to Europe.

³⁷⁷ European Parliament. Debate. *2021 Report on Serbia*. July 5, 2022, op. cit.

³⁷⁸ Ibidem.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *The situation in Bosnia Herzegovina*. March 8, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-03-08-ITM-012_EN.html.

³⁸¹ European Parliament. Debate. *EU-Western Balkans relations in light of the new enlargement package*. October 19, 2022, op. cit.

³⁸² European Parliament. Debate. *2021 Report on Serbia*. July 5, 2022, op. cit.

³⁸³ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *Opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania*. October 23, 2019, op. cit.

However, our security is not a given, especially when we look at Turkey's and Russia's actions in our neighbourhoods.", and Pospíšil stated that "Any other decision [than opening negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania] is wrong, because it will lead to Russia strengthening its influence in the region. [...] The European Union will weaken in this region."³⁸⁴. Additionally, Pospíšil asserted the geopolitical importance of the Western Balkans' enlargement during the 6 February 2018 debate³⁸⁵. However, Czech MEP Jaromír Kohlíček from the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, belonging to the GUE/NGL group, frequently highlighted Serbia's key role in the Western Balkans, and criticised the EU policy in the region, accusing the bloc of attempts to control the foreign policy of the WB6 and "illegal separation" of Kosovo from Serbia leading to destabilisation in the region³⁸⁶.

The economy was mentioned only sporadically and was presented as a national interest or as a priority of EU enlargement only by Hungary. The infrequent mentions of the economic importance of the region were coupled with the security argument. For example, Kinga Gál stated that "Enlargement to the Western Balkans is in Europe's common security, economic and geopolitical interest"³⁸⁷, and emphasised that stability of the Western Balkans is a key national security and economic interest for Hungary³⁸⁸. Another example is Andrea Bocskor's statement from the 6 February 2018 discussion of the new Western Balkans' enlargement strategy, which says, "I see not only political and security risks in postponing enlargement, but also economic risks. [...] the future of the region is in the EU's own political, security and economic interest"³⁸⁹. Interestingly, Polish MEPs from ideologically opposite political groups critically referred to the question of economy, albeit with different arguments. For example, opposition MEP Marek Belka from the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) political group called on the EU to be cautious about the proper use of financial assistance funds in order to be a credible economic power³⁹⁰. On the other hand, Mirosław Piotrowski from the ECR criticised the EU for seeing the Western Balkans only as an attractive market, ignoring other priorities³⁹¹.

The reason for the infrequent prioritisation of the economy could be the Western Balkan countries' limited economic potential, which cannot be used as a convincing argument for

³⁸⁴ Ibidem.

³⁸⁵ European Parliament. Debate. *Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy - Western Balkans*. February 6, 2018, op. cit.

³⁸⁶ European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on Serbia*. November 28, 2018, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-11-28-ITM-022_EN.html.

³⁸⁷ European Parliament. Debate. *2021 Report on North Macedonia*. May 18, 2022, op. cit.

³⁸⁸ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *The situation in Bosnia Herzegovina*. March 8, 2022, op. cit.

³⁸⁹ European Parliament. Debate. *Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy - Western Balkans*. February 6, 2018, op. cit.

³⁹⁰ European Parliament. Debate. *The outcome of the Western Balkans summit*. October 21, 2021, op. cit.

³⁹¹ European Parliament. Debate. *Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy - Western Balkans*. February 6, 2018, op. cit.

enlargement. This trend convincingly demonstrates the status that the economic argument has on the national level of V4 states. Poland's economic engagement is limited in the Western Balkans, despite its potential. Slovakia's economic performance in the Western Balkans is also limited. Czechia does not use its bilateral economic ties with the region's countries as a tool for enlargement promotion on the European level. The fact that Hungary mentions the economy more often stems from its national interest in the Western Balkans' EU accession due to the region's geographic proximity.

3.2.2. Normative discourses

Normative priorities involve issues highlighting the EU's role as a 'normative power' and the EU enlargement policy's transformative nature. In this respect, the issues of democratisation and adherence to European values, such as the rule of law and respect for human rights, as well as the question of reconciliation, were mentioned much less frequently than pragmatic priorities.

The difference on normative issues can be observed when comparing the stances of MEPs from the governing parties in Poland and Hungary with those of their counterparts from opposition parties in the two countries. For example, Polish MEP Marek Belka from the S&D emphasised the importance of adherence to democratic standards, simultaneously pointing out the moral obligation of the EU to proceed with the Western Balkan enlargement during the discussion of the Western Balkan summit outcomes on 21 October 2021³⁹². Belka's stance is represented in the following statement that he made:

It is both our moral duty and our strategic imperative to proceed with the integration process of our partners [...] Political commitments agreed during the summit have to be transformed into reality, in which respect for the rule of law, legal certainty, respect for human and social rights, fighting corruption, and independent public institutions are working standards, not recommendations, in our integration dialogue. We have to demand extra effort from both the candidate countries and ourselves to guarantee that the integration roadmap is being implemented, the *acquis* adopted and democratic standards are being upheld³⁹³.

Polish opposition MEP, contrary to their counterparts from the ruling PiS party, expressed concerns about Serbia's accession in normative terms rather than pragmatic ones. For example, Bogdan Andrzej Zdrojewski from the EPP commenting on the Report on Serbia on 28

³⁹² European Parliament. Debate. *The outcome of the Western Balkans summit*. October 21, 2021, op. cit.

³⁹³ *Ibidem*.

November 2018, emphasised that the progress in the rule of law is crucial for preventing Serbia from undermining the EU's legal norms after its eventual accession³⁹⁴.

Hungarian MEP Katalin Cseh from Renew highlighted the importance of the rule of law on multiple occasions. Cseh used enlargement debates to present a Hungarian stance that differs from the ideology of Fidesz. She criticised the incumbent Hungarian government, calling on the EU to apply strict criteria of the rule of law evaluation not only to candidate countries but to EU Member States as well³⁹⁵. For example, during the 19 October 2022 debate, she said the following:

[...] if you are serious about enlargement [...] we need to highlight the contrast that makes us the only viable ally in the Western Balkans region. We need to show our best face, a Europe that delivers peace, prosperity, robust rule of law and anti-corruption framework [...]³⁹⁶.

Hungarian opposition MEPs on many occasions warned of the negative influence of Orbán's policies on the Western Balkan countries. For instance, Csaba Molnár from the S&D warned that "if we want the south-east of the continent to develop peacefully and successfully, we cannot let the Western Balkans go the way of Viktor Orbán"³⁹⁷. He denounced Orbán for sheltering Gruevski and other actions weakening the rule of law in Hungary³⁹⁸, and criticised his interference with the freedom of media in other countries³⁹⁹. Tibor Szanyi from the S&D also denounced Orbán's assistance to Gruevski, emphasising that it damages European interests. Polish MEP Bogusław Sonik from the EPP, political group Fidesz used to belong to before March 2021, seconded this assessment⁴⁰⁰.

When promoting the acceleration of enlargement, Fidesz MEPs completely avoided mentioning normative value-based priorities, whether democratisation or the rule of law, concentrating on the geopolitical aspects instead. Such a choice of priorities shows consistency with Prime Minister Orbán's narratives, promoting immediate accession of the Western Balkan countries regardless of their state of the rule of law and democracy. Despite their genuine interest in the

³⁹⁴ European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on Serbia*. November 28, 2018, op. cit.

³⁹⁵ European Parliament. Debate. *Assessment of the revised enlargement methodology proposal of the Commission*. February 10, 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-02-10-ITM-011_EN.html.

³⁹⁶ European Parliament. Debate. *EU-Western Balkans relations in light of the new enlargement package*. October 19, 2022, op. cit.

³⁹⁷ European Parliament. Debate. *Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III)*. March 26, 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2019-03-26-ITM-020_EN.html.

³⁹⁸ European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*. November 28, 2018, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-11-28-ITM-025_EN.html.

³⁹⁹ European Parliament. Debate. *Hungarian interference in the media in Slovenia and North Macedonia*. November 25, 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-11-25-ITM-011_EN.html.

⁴⁰⁰ European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*. November 28, 2018, op. cit.

accession of the Western Balkan countries, Fidesz MEPs' vision of enlargement contradicts fundamental European values.

Moreover, Fidesz MEPs used enlargement debates to criticise not only the insufficient enlargement effort but also normative aspects of the EU and European integration. For example, during the 28 November 2018 debate Andor Deli even denounced “technocratic and bureaucratic criteria, benchmarks and checklists”, stating further that “Hoping that legal harmonisation and reaching European standards will automatically solve the issues on the [Western] Balkans is illusory and naïve”, and called to speed up the accession instead⁴⁰¹. Whether such an argument can accelerate the accession of the Western Balkans is highly questionable. László Tőkés claimed the report on North Macedonia was “[used] by the Socialists and Greens to launch an ideological attack on Hungary in connection with the [...] Gruevski affair. The background to the (...) conviction of [...] Gruevski is certainly the migration issue and the Soros lobby”, at the same time stating that “the judiciary must not become an instrument of politics”⁴⁰². This statement, however, is rather incongruous considering Fidesz's intervention in the Hungarian judiciary⁴⁰³. On 23 October 2019, Deli echoed Orbán's anti-deepening position saying that the EU be preoccupied with reforming the EU's institutions before another enlargement⁴⁰⁴. Regarding the Hungarian interference in the media in North Macedonia, Balázs Hidvéghi said that Hungarian companies' investments are private business matters and accused the EU of “one-sided criticism which is always directed at countries with conservative governments”⁴⁰⁵. On 25 March 2021, Fidesz MEPs criticised the discussed enlargement reports, when Deli called them “a tool to take down political opponents”, and Kinga Gál accused them of being “much more lenient regarding the left-wing-led North Macedonia, Albania or Kosovo*” than “Serbia, which has a right-wing conservative government”⁴⁰⁶.

Polish MEPs from the ruling PiS party, similarly to their Hungarian colleagues from Fidesz, criticised certain normative aspects of European integration during the enlargement debates. Zdzisław Krasnodębski and Joachim Brudziński, despite voicing commitment to common

⁴⁰¹ European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on Serbia*. November 28, 2018, op. cit.

⁴⁰² European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*. November 28, 2018, op. cit.

⁴⁰³ Garamvolgyi, Flora, and Jennifer Rankin. “Viktor Orbán's Grip On Hungary's Courts Threatens Rule Of Law, Warns Judge.” *The Guardian*, August 14, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/14/viktor-orban-grip-on-hungary-courts-threatens-rule-of-law-warns-judge>.

⁴⁰⁴ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *Opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania*. October 23, 2019, op. cit.

⁴⁰⁵ European Parliament. Debate. *Hungarian interference in the media in Slovenia and North Macedonia*. November 25, 2020, op. cit.

⁴⁰⁶ European Parliament. Debate. *2019-2020 Reports on Albania – 2019-2020 Reports on Kosovo – 2019-2020 Reports on North Macedonia – 2019-2020 Reports on Serbia*. March 25, 2021, op. cit.

European security and condemning Serbia's stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, frequently criticised the EU for its apparent coercion of the candidate countries to accept certain values. Commenting on the Report on Serbia on 5 July 2022, Krasnodębski said that "sometimes the interference in Serbia's internal affairs goes too far that our concern turns in this case too – as in many others – into moralistic interventionism, not to say moralistic imperialism". His statement implied that the EU has no moral right to "teach" Serbia, as it was not strict to some EU Member States who defied the EU's embargo on weapon trade with Russia after 2014⁴⁰⁷. During the same debate, a similar claim was voiced by Brudziński, singling out France and Germany as those Member States⁴⁰⁸. On 18 May 2021, commenting on the Report on Montenegro, Krasnodębski stated that even though Montenegro is a democratic country committed to shared values, the EU sometimes "sets the bar too high", thus "it is necessary to separate the assessment of Montenegro's implementation of those most basic democracy and the rule of law criteria from the ideological demands of the liberal-left concerning mainly worldview issues"⁴⁰⁹. On 28 November 2018, Mirosław Piotrowski accused the EU in promoting the "gender ideology" in the reports⁴¹⁰. These statements indicate the Polish government's interest in lowering the bar in the rule of law standards of the EU and in the clear domination of conservatism-driven ideological convictions defining Polish ECR MEPs' attitude to European integration.

For Slovak MEPs, contrary to the majority of Polish and Hungarian MEPs, democratic values and compliance with the rule of law principle played a more noticeable and important role than pragmatic priorities concerning security and geopolitical aspects. Vladimír Bilčík and Eduard Kukan were particularly active in emphasising the importance of democratic values in their narratives. At the 23 November 2021 discussion about Bosnia and Herzegovina Vladimír Bilčík stressed that "The European Union has a political duty to work relentlessly on pulling the countries of Western Balkans towards our values".⁴¹¹ During the 19 October 2022 debate, Bilčík made the following statement:

Clear alignment on common foreign and security policy is clear alignment to our values. [...] Coupled with progress on the rule of law and fundamentals and resolution of past conflicts through dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, foreign

⁴⁰⁷ European Parliament. Debate. *2021 Report on Serbia*. July 5, 2022, op. cit..

⁴⁰⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁰⁹ European Parliament. Debate. *2019-2020 Reports on Montenegro*. May 18, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-05-18-ITM-012_EN.html.

⁴¹⁰ European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on Montenegro*. 2018, November 28, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-11-28-ITM-027_EN.html.

⁴¹¹ European Parliament. Debate. *Situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. November 23, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-11-23-ITM-015_EN.html.

policy alignment demonstrates that the Western Balkans want to be a part of our community of values⁴¹².

Bilčík also mentioned several times that Serbia is a key country for Slovakia, expressing a wish for Serbia to adhere to European values. This is consistent with historically good relations between the two countries, as is seen from Slovakia's loyal support of Serbia, including in the Kosovo dispute.

Eduard Kukan, a former Foreign Minister of Slovakia and a former MEP from the EPP placed particular emphasis on the promotion of European values as the main priority of enlargement to the Western Balkans. On 28 November 2018, he stated that the accession process is “a chance to reform, not only in terms of technical requirements, but also to adjust to the values and principles of the EU”⁴¹³. At the 26 March 2019 discussion about the IPA, Kukan stated:

The EU needs to be focused on investing in programmes and projects related to the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression and of the media. [...]. We should expect that the countries will make serious commitments to reforms and to upholding the fundamental values⁴¹⁴.

The only exception to the strong prioritisation of democratic values by Slovak MEPs was the speech by far-right non-attached MEP Miroslav Radačovský, who used the 29 October 2019 enlargement debate to share his nationalistic grievances. He said that the reason for not opening negotiations with North Macedonia was “the disapproval of the so-called big players in the EU, who want to decide everything and for everyone”, and accused the EU of not willing to “accept less than two million Slavic Christian people into Europe. Quite simply, [the EU is] treating Slavic and Christian peoples as second-class people”⁴¹⁵. This statement recalls the Czech communist MEP's ideas about the EU's apparent interventionism and disregard of the Western Balkan countries. This fact may reveal similarities between far-right and far-left movements in the V4 in their simultaneously negative stance on European integration but supportive stance on the Western Balkans' EU accession.

Similarly to Slovak MEPs, Czech MEPs prioritised democracy and the rule of law issues. For example, when discussing Albania on 25 March 2021, Czech MEP Michal Šimečka from Renew stressed the importance of democratic governance and asserted that the rule of law

⁴¹² European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *EU-Western Balkans relations in light of the new enlargement package*. October 19, 2022, op. cit.

⁴¹³ European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on Serbia*. November 28, 2018, op. cit.

⁴¹⁴ European Parliament. Debate. *Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III)*. March 26, 2019, op. cit.

⁴¹⁵ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *Opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania*. October 23, 2019, op. cit.

requirement to the Western Balkan countries should be stringent⁴¹⁶. During the 19 October 2022 debate, Stanislav Polčák from the EPP identified freedom of expression, protection of minorities, and freedom of the press as crucial priority areas the Western Balkan states have to improve in order to proceed with their EU accession. He further emphasised that a peaceful settlement in the region is not possible without these countries' permanent EU membership⁴¹⁷.

The issue of reconciliation and peaceful relations between the Western Balkan states was raised only on rare occasions. Slovak MEPs were the most active in this regard. Eduard Kukan stressed that bilateral issues should be resolved before the countries' accession to the EU and called on the EU to find resolution mechanisms⁴¹⁸, while Vladimír Bilčík emphasised the need to “support a European spirit in reconciliation and bilateral issues”⁴¹⁹.

In previous terms of the European Parliament, Hungarian MEPs traditionally used to stress the need to ensure comprehensive minority rights protection for ethnic Hungarians⁴²⁰. Contrary to this traditional national priority, the issue of ethnic minorities' rights protection was barely mentioned by Fidesz MEPs at the debates held during the analysed period, despite the issue still being relevant in 2018. For example, Fidesz MEP Csaba Sógor expressed the opinion that the EU must “come to terms with the idea that the ethnic conflicts in the region will thus become problems within the EU, and it is utopian to think that after accession these nations will forget all their historical grievances”, and proposed developing an EU minority protection system⁴²¹. Zoltán Balczó, a non-aligned far-right MEP, emphasised the importance of ethnic minority rights protection, calling on Serbia to increase the protection of Vojvodina Hungarians⁴²². The speeches of Fidesz MEPs of the current parliamentary term marked the shift in rhetoric, as the issue of ethnic minority rights was not mentioned. This can be explained by the Hungarian government's positive representation of their relations with Serbia in the issue of Vojvodina Hungarians' minority rights. MEP Andor Deli is a Vojvodina Hungarian himself and, as already mentioned, has continuously championed Serbia's immediate accession.

⁴¹⁶ European Parliament. Debate. *2019-2020 Reports on Albania – 2019-2020 Reports on Kosovo – 2019-2020 Reports on North Macedonia – 2019-2020 Reports on Serbia*. March 25, 2021, op. cit.

⁴¹⁷ European Parliament. Continuation of debate. *EU-Western Balkans relations in light of the new enlargement package*. October 19, 2022, op. cit.

⁴¹⁸ European Parliament. Debate. *Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy - Western Balkans*. February 6, 2018, op. cit.

⁴¹⁹ European Parliament. Debate. *The outcome of the Western Balkans summit*. October 21, 2021, op. cit.

⁴²⁰ Wunsch and Olszewska, op. cit.

⁴²¹ European Parliament. Debate. *Decision adopted on the EU Enlargement Strategy - Western Balkans*. February 6, 2018, op. cit.

⁴²² European Parliament. Debate. *2018 Report on Serbia*. November 28, 2018, op. cit.

3.3. Conclusions to the chapter

The discourse analysis of February 2018 – October 2022 speeches of MEPs from the Visegrad Group countries found that pragmatic priorities dominate their enlargement discourses. The crucial role of the Western Balkans for European security was particularly emphasised by Polish MEPs across all political groups of the European Parliament. Polish MEPs pointed out the geopolitically strategic role of the Western Balkans and were especially vocal about the destabilising actions of other international actors in the region. Hungarian MEPs across all political groups also frequently mentioned security as their most important priority in the region's enlargement and emphasised that stability in the Western Balkans is crucial for Hungarian national security. The MEPs from Fidesz tried to present Hungary as a serious player in terms of enlargement by asserting its role in the stabilisation efforts in the Western Balkans. The question of stability was utilised by the Fidesz MEPs as the main to stress the urgency of need for the Western Balkans' rapid accession to the EU. The Fidesz MEPs also repeatedly stated that illegal migration is a security issue for Hungary, which the Western Balkans' enlargement could solve. Serbia received increased attention in the pragmatic discourse of Fidesz MEPs, as it was presented as the key country for Hungary and the region's security. Slovak and Czech MEPs also discussed the question of security as their fundamental concern, although did it less frequently than their Polish and Hungarian colleagues. The economy was rarely defined as a priority by Visegrad MEPs, with Hungary being the only country emphasising the economic importance of the Western Balkans.

Normative value-based priorities were mentioned much less frequently in the Visegrad MEPs' enlargement discourses in comparison to pragmatic priorities, such as security. In this regard, Slovak and Czech MEPs were especially noteworthy. In their speeches, Slovak and Czech MEPs prioritised issues of democracy and the rule of law, and constantly emphasised that it is essential for the Western Balkan countries to adhere to European values. Prioritisation of values by Slovak and Czech MEPs goes in line with the officially stated priority of democracy promotion in their two states. Polish and Hungarian opposition MEPs gave significant attention to value-based priorities as well. On the contrary, Polish and Hungarian MEPs from the respective governing parties exploited the EU enlargement debates to contest normative aspects of European integration.

Overall, Visegrad MEPs were supportive of the Western Balkans' enlargement policy. However, MEPs severely criticised the quality of the policy and urged the EU for more active engagement in the region. The present analysis has demonstrated that MEPs reasons to criticise the Western Balkans' enlargement policy were heavily conditioned upon their country of origin

and political affiliation. Thus, the narratives of Hungarian MEPs from the Fidesz party were fully consistent with positions expressed by Hungarian high-standing officials, such as Prime Minister Orbán and Foreign Minister Szijjártó. The prioritisation of pragmatic arguments, the promotion of rapid accession independent from the conditionality upon the rule of law and democratic values, the special attention to Serbia, the critique of normative aspects of European integration, and the abandonment of the traditional value-based priority of ethnic minority rights protection are the examples of ideologically-driven narratives used by Fidesz MEPs. Polish MEPs from the PiS party were similar in this regard, as they staunchly promoted the security priority, while criticising normative aspects of European integration. At the same time, Polish and Hungarian MEPs tried to present a different stance on the EU enlargement and European integration, sometimes directly opposing their respective countries' official policies and actions in the Western Balkan region. Slovak and Czech MEPs introduced their respective countries' official positions prioritising democratisation, thus presenting them as responsible players on the European level and as skilled experts on the Western Balkans' enlargement.

To sum up, a growing juxtaposition can be seen between the preferences expressed by the majority of Polish and Hungarian MEPs and those stated by Slovak and Czech MEPs. Polish and Hungarian MEPs favour widening over deepening, putting the projection of European values of democracy and the rule of law into the background. Pragmatic narratives prioritising security were chosen to stress the urgency of enlargement in the current security environment heavily influenced by the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the risks it poses for the security of the EU and the stability in the Western Balkans. The evaluation of Hungarian officials' actions in the region and their comparison to the discourses presented by Hungarian MEPs has shown that the incumbent Hungarian government wants rapid accession of the Western Balkan countries. This policy aims to gain allied anti-democratic voices in order to destabilise the EU and stop further deepening rather than to genuinely promote the stabilisation of the Western Balkans. However, Slovak and Czech MEPs see widening and deepening as parallel processes complementing each other. MEPs from the two states emphasised the role of the EU enlargement as a success of European integration and promoted strict conditionality upon European values as the basis for the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans.

Conclusion

The thesis has provided a deeper insight into the Visegrad Group countries' approaches to the Western Balkans' EU enlargement. The central objectives of the research were to identify the factors motivating Visegrad countries' support of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans, to assess how the V4 countries' priorities influence their approaches towards the region and its European integration, and to examine the impact that the Visegrad Group's policy has on the state of the Western Balkans' EU enlargement. The objectives were addressed by employing the case study method to analyse the Visegrad Group's collective policy and the V4 countries' state-level policies towards the Western Balkans. Additionally, an empirical discourse analysis of the Visegrad MEPs' speeches during parliamentary debates was made.

The research has confirmed that the Visegrad Group countries genuinely consider EU enlargement as their foreign policy preference and are active supporters of the Western Balkans' European integration. The Visegrad Group countries have consistently located the Western Balkans' region and its European integration among their top foreign policy priorities. The European integration of the Western Balkans is supported by the alliance's societies and policymakers. The V4 countries' support for the EU enlargement to the region is expressed in various ways, such as political statements, the inclusion of the Western Balkans in their foreign policy strategies, bilateral cooperation, engagement in multilateral initiatives, concrete actions supporting democratic and economic transformation and regional cooperation, and promotion of the Western Balkans' EU accession on the European level.

The Visegrad Group's motivations to support European integration of the Western Balkans invoke pragmatic (utility-based) and normative (value-based and norm-based) arguments, both of which are shaped by a variety of factors. The pragmatic arguments concern specific national interests connected to the issues of national security and the economy. Firstly, the security implications of the situation in the Western Balkans are crucial for the national security of the V4 states and necessitate adopting measures for stabilising the region. Secondly, the benefits of expanding markets to the Western Balkans motivate the V4's assistance in the economic transformation of the region. In the area of value- and norm-based arguments, the V4 countries emphasise their foreign policy priority of democracy promotion. The perception of the Western Balkans as a legitimate member of united Europe which should enjoy the benefits of EU membership is also significant, and this idea resembles the narrative of 'return to Europe' used during the EU accession process of the four Central European states. These arguments are determined by not only geographical, but also cultural and linguistic proximity, and, most importantly, comparable historical experiences, nuanced interethnic relations, and closeness of

political and economic contexts of both regions, such as the experience of the post-communist transition to democracy and a free-market economy.

The Visegrad Group serves as an example of successful regional cooperation and democratic and economic transformation particularly important for the Western Balkans due to the relatedness of both regions' contexts. The V4 are actively involved in providing assistance to the Western Balkans on their European path by offering their experiences of political and economic transformation and the EU accession processes, particularly membership negotiations. The V4 is the only regional alliance in the EU that maintains a regular dialogue with the Western Balkan countries, cooperating in the V4+WB6 format. The Visegrad Group boasts of successful examples of know-how transfers to the Western Balkans, the most efficient examples being the WBF, modelled after the IVF, and CEFTA, as a tool for promoting free trade between the WB6. However, the research has demonstrated that the V4 states are not always unanimous in their approach towards the region. The analysis of individual V4 countries shows that their goals in cooperating with the Western Balkans, as well as their perceptions of the enlargement policy and European integration, often differ significantly. Moreover, the priority factors motivating the particular Visegrad states' support for the Western Balkans' enlargement and their approach to cooperation with the WB6 also vary. Therefore, considering the individual Visegrad Group countries' foreign policies has proved to be necessary.

Among the Visegrad Group countries, Poland is the least involved in cooperation with the Western Balkans. Poland is located furthest from the region, which naturally makes the country lean towards prioritising the East-West axis of its foreign policy. In its enlargement policy, Poland is concentrated mainly on promoting EU enlargement to Eastern Europe, particularly Ukraine. Consequently, the Western Balkans' EU enlargement is not among the main priorities of Polish foreign policy. However, the region and its European integration are still important for the country and its national interests. National and European security interests are decisively the most important factor for Poland determining the country's support for the Western Balkans' European integration. Poland agrees that EU enlargement would stabilise the Western Balkans, which would in turn increase the security not only in the region itself, but also in Poland and the UE in general. The increased security and stability in the Western Balkans would facilitate Poland's engagement in Eastern Europe as its main foreign policy priority. The same situation is visible in Poland's cooperation with the Western Balkan states. The security and defence policy constitutes the main area of Polish engagement in the region. Being a committed player in European security, Poland is involved in multiple military and civil missions in the region. By contrast, economic and cultural factors do not influence Poland's approach towards

the Western Balkans to a considerable extent. As a result, Polish economic performance in the region, regarding trade, investment, and development aid, is limited. Poland is involved in the process of democratic and economic transformation of the Western Balkans mainly within the framework of the Visegrad Group by supporting joint initiatives and collective statements. In recent years, Poland has increased its involvement through participation in other multilateral initiatives, such as the Berlin Process and the Three Seas Initiative. Nevertheless, Poland's influence in the region is limited. Therefore, Poland's contribution to the EU enlargement process of the Western Balkans was not particularly significant.

Hungary is the most active V4 country in terms of cooperation with the Western Balkan countries and is the main promoter of their European integration. The Western Balkan region is the main priority of Hungary's enlargement policy. Hungary has close bilateral and multilateral relations with the countries of the region, which makes them important for the wider Hungarian foreign policy. A wide range of factors motivates Hungary to support EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: geographic proximity, strong economic ties, close historical ties, a large Hungarian minority in Serbia, the issue of migration, and energy security. Hungary is active in economic cooperation with the WB6, contributing substantially in terms of development aid and infrastructural projects. Regarding security, Hungary also plays an active role in the region, holding major positions in the EU and NATO missions. Hungary has steadily opposed the enlargement fatigue and sought to encourage the EU to proceed with the Western Balkans' EU enlargement. By being actively engaged in cooperation with the Western Balkans, Hungary wants to increase its influence within the region and on the EU level, presenting itself as a responsible and influential player in EU enlargement policy.

What is even more characteristic of Hungary's approach towards the Western Balkans is the prevalence of specific ideological interests of the incumbent Hungarian government led by Prime Minister Orbán towards further European integration. Orbán's Hungary has taken an illiberal turn in recent years and has voiced opposition to deeper European integration, the fundamental European values, and the alleged cultural and political dominance of the Western EU Member States. Orbán perceives the EU enlargement policy not as a tool for democratic transformation, but rather as an instrument for bringing anti-democratic countries into the EU with the goal of creating a group of like-minded illiberal members to further weaken the EU foundations as a bloc based on European values and exploit it for economic benefits. The incumbent Hungarian government overtly supports conservative and illiberal political elites from the Western Balkan states, thus encouraging state capture and jeopardising EU conditionality as a cornerstone of the accession process by sabotaging necessary reforms. This

stance is especially noticeable in relentless support of Serbia's immediate accession. Hungary's example of democratic backsliding makes EU Member States wary of further enlargement and does not contribute to increasing the positive perception of the Western Balkan countries. Thus, Hungary's involvement is currently rather harmful to European aspirations of the Western Balkan countries, since it presents them as potential 'troublemakers' in the case of their eventual accession to the EU. As a result, Hungary's ability to promote rapid accession to the Western Balkans has been compromised.

For Slovakia, historical and cultural ties are the key factor behind the support for the Western Balkans' European integration. Slovakia perceives EU enlargement to the Western Balkans as its expert policy area. Slovakia is increasingly active in supporting the Western Balkans' accession since by using this policy, Slovakia attempts to raise its influence in the EU as a responsible Member State and a regional expert. Slovakia has delegated competent diplomats specialising in Western Balkan affairs to the EU level, influencing the policymaking process of EU enlargement. Unlike its fellow V4 states, Slovakia maintains the policy of non-recognition of Kosovo* as an independent state in its approach to the Western Balkans. Overall, Slovakia is committed to democratisation and the promotion of European values through the EU enlargement policy, which positively influences the Western Balkans' European integration.

In the case of Czechia, cultural ties, the tradition of democracy promotion, and economic interests are the key factors motivating its support of the Western Balkans' European integration. Czechia is economically active in its cooperation with the region, especially in development aid and the energy sector. Czechia is an active member of the V4 platform, which is evidenced by its introduction and encouragement of numerous shared initiatives in the Western Balkan region. However, Czechia's influence on the process of the Western Balkans' EU enlargement is not significant due to the incoherence of its internal politics. While Czechia is committed to the democratisation of the Western Balkan region, its activity on this matter frequently amounts only to words, not deeds. Nevertheless, Czechia displays the potential for participating in the process of the Western Balkans' European integration more actively.

The analysis of the Visegrad MEPs' enlargement discourses has demonstrated how national priorities are reflected in MEPs' statements. It has helped to reveal the complexity of domestic political positions and differing priorities of MEPs from different parties and political groups in their assessment of the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans. The discourse analysis has also provided insights into MEPs' stances on further European integration.

The dominance of national ideological approaches towards the future shape of European integration is a distinctive trait of enlargement discourses of Hungarian MEPs from the ruling Fidesz party. Hungarian MEPs have repeatedly echoed statements of Prime Minister Orbán on various issues. For example, they highlighted the issue of migration as a security threat, criticised normative aspects of European integration and the EU's alleged interference in domestic policies of EU Member States and candidate countries; they downplayed the role of EU conditionality and the rule of law norms, and uncritically promoted immediate accession of Serbia to the EU. Similarly, albeit to a lesser extent, enlargement discourses of Polish MEPs from the ruling PiS party were driven by conservative ideology and downplayed the rule of law conditionality.

Pragmatic (utility-based) priorities largely dominated the MEPs' arguments overall. The security priority is especially noticeable in the case of Poland. Polish and Hungarian MEPs across all political groups mentioned the stabilisation and geopolitical importance of the Western Balkans as the main justifications for the rapid enlargement to the region. The economy was rarely mentioned in the discourses, presumably being considered an ineffective argument for justifying enlargement to the Western Balkans. Normative discourses, on the other hand, were less frequent among the Visegrad MEPs. Slovak and Czech MEPs prioritised the promotion of European values and strict adherence to the norms of EU conditionality. Similarly to their Slovak and Czech colleagues, Polish and Hungarian opposition MEPs, contrary to their counterparts from the ruling parties, demonstrated their commitment to European values and norms, and highlighted the importance of EU conditionality.

The thesis has contributed to the research on individual EU Member States' approaches towards EU enlargement. It has highlighted similarities and differences between the Visegrad Group states' approaches, examined the level of coordination of their shared policy towards the Western Balkans, and showcased the impact the V4's approach has on the process of the WB6's European integration. The analysis has discovered that the realist theory defining national interests as the main driver of EU Member States' interest in EU enlargement is more applicable to Poland's and Hungary's approaches towards the Western Balkans' EU enlargement. Poland perceives the EU enlargement policy as a tool for increasing its national security, while Hungary as an instrument to raise its political and economic influence. Slovakia's and Czechia's positions, stemming from cultural and historical ties, are somewhat different: they reflect the constructivist approaches to building the community based on shared values and norms. However, the activities of these two countries demonstrate that pragmatic priorities, national interests, and specificities of domestic policymaking still largely influence their approaches to

the Western Balkans' European integration. Overall, the Visegrad Group countries are active supporters of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans and have a certain level of coordination in their approaches. Still, specific national interests decisively dominate their individual approaches, hindering the V4's ability to become a successful and influential collective actor and positively contribute to the process of the Western Balkans' European integration.

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