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The present paper is a part of the series published in the framework of the Visegrad Policy Briefs: Converging Regional Position project, organized jointly by the CD International, Slovak Atlantic Commission and the Central European Policy Institute, in cooperation with the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Jagello 2000 and International Centre for Democratic Transition, and with the financial support of the International Visegrad Fund. The project initiative envisages the elaboration of four policy briefs on selected topics from the Visegrad point of view. These contain well-reasoned policy recommendations that present an expert input of the regional non-governmental community to the debate on issues relevant to the region.

ORGANIZERS

The series is put together by the CD International and the Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), a new regional think-tank established by the Slovak Atlantic Commission. It links top research institutions and experts from across Central Europe in order to come up and promote innovative regionally based solutions. By setting the fundamentals for the convergence of national positions and by applying a regional approach, the Institute seeks to strengthen the region's identity and voice.

THE VISEGRAD GROUP: EXPLORING NEW AGENDA FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

MILAN NIČ | ISTVÁN GYARMATI
JAN VLKOVSKÝ | TOMASZ ŻORNACZUK

Following a series of wars after the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Western Balkans became the centre of attention and policy coordination for both Europe and United States. It was the first testing ground of the new "liberal intervention" policy in the 1990s. This era in the Western Balkans is now over. As the core of international politics shifted away from the old continent, the Europeans became—or at least claimed to become—more engaged and gained more instruments to manage developments in their periphery, while the United States is now focused on Asia and on other global challenges. We believe this is not a tragedy—as long as the US remains engaged in post-conflict regions, and as long as the EU is ready and able to fill the vacuum, including in cooperation with Turkey. Otherwise it will be filled by other competitors such as Russia and China.

In the midst of the sovereign debt crisis, Europe is unable to meet its strategic responsibilities not only around the globe but it is also struggling to do so even on its doorsteps. With Croatia set to become the 28th member state in July 2013, we are reminded how crucial the role of the EU membership prospects was in the transformation of individual Balkan states and societies. It has helped them to become more stable, better governed and on track to adopting EU practices, including in the critical areas of border management, the rule of law and the fight against

organised crime. But without continuous EU involvement, the Western Balkans will remain what they are now — undeveloped, fragmented, and still a potential trouble spot.

Against the backdrop of the EU internal crisis, several Balkan countries have slowed down their own transformation process as their leaders have become more reluctant to implement the EU integration agenda (with its emphasis on transparency, fights against corruption and organised crime) at the expense of the powerful domestic interest involved. As other analyst recently pointed out, "there is a silent pact between the enlargement-fatigued and crisis-hit EU member states and rent-seeking Balkan elites who do not mind slowing the pace of reform, with a 'fire-brigade' approach to periodic crises and outbursts of violence in Kosovo and elsewhere".¹

In a few years' time, Europe might look and function differently than today. Recent geopolitical challenges, which include the dramatic debt crisis in Greece, the Arab Spring movements, the emergence of new energy routes and the rising power of Turkey, suggest that **in the long run greater attention will be paid to the south-eastern part of the continent**, whose countries and governments are more interested in rapprochement with the EU than our eastern neighbours.²



It is high time for them to become more ambitious and better coordinated in shaping a continuous and consistent Balkan engagement from both clubs.

The Visegrad Group (V4) as the regional alliance of four Central European states seems to be a natural platform for this revived policy discussion and diplomatic efforts. In addition, a propitious window of opportunity has opened as three out of four Visegrad Foreign Ministers are personally interested in Balkan issues (Miroslav Lajčák of Slovakia, Karel

V4 ON THE BALKANS: GOOD FRIENDS, LITTLE SYNERGY

V4 countries have been engaged in the region on three tracks: bilaterally, regionally, and within the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Although they have done a lot individually, there is still room for more impact and relevance via better coordination on the V4 platform, which could multiply their individual policies and support.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Prague has pursued multi faceted engagement with the region—intensive bilateral relations, development and transformation aid, cultural and educational exchange (including university scholarships), broadening of bilateral agreement framework, economic investment (energy, transportation infrastructure, waste management), and twinning projects. The EU and NATO enlargements to the Western Balkans are among the foreign policy priorities of the Czech Republic. Long-term historical, cultural, political and economic ties play a role, in addition to Czech security and economic interests. Czech troops took part in international missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia, and the Czech Embassy in Belgrade served as NATO Contact Point Embassy in Serbia in 2009-2012. In development assistance, the Czech Republic in 2011 allocated nearly €8 million for projects in three Balkan countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a long-term priority country, with Serbia and Kosovo as project countries. Prague has provided Bosnian citizens with some of the highest numbers of university scholarships and study trips among all EU countries and in 2010, there were almost 100 Bosnian students enrolled in Czech universities with either government scholarships or from other sources.

Schwarzenberg of the Czech Republic, János Martonyi of Hungary), and the fourth one—Radostaw Sikorski of Poland—aims to be seen as a responsible leader of the Visegrad/Central European countries. In this paper, after summing up the four Visegrad countries' individual approaches towards the Western Balkans, we submit policy recommendations as to how the Visegrad Group could become more relevant and effective force multipliers of the EU and NATO enlargements in the region.

HUNGARY

Situated in Hungary's immediate neighbourhood, the Western Balkans have always been an important economic partner closely linked also through hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hungarians living there. Assumed 'patronage' over the region—either as a staging area for US troops in the 1990s, or in the promotion of Euro-Atlantic integration—was a chance for Hungary to increase its role and influence within the EU and NATO. Also, Hungarian development assistance and contributions for peace-keeping operations have been primarily concentrated on the Western Balkans. During the country's EU Presidency in the first half of 2011, accession talks with Croatia were successfully concluded. Hungarian diplomacy also pushed for granting candidate status to Serbia, and continues to support the early integration of Montenegro. Another area of Hungary's vital interest and attention has been energy security. Budapest has pushed for the building of the North-South connectors as a complement to new pipelines to reduce dependence on Russia.

POLAND

Poland has, among the Visegrad countries, pursued the least active policy towards the Western Balkans, which—unlike the Eastern Partnership countries—are not in the immediate vicinity of Poland. Also, historical and economic ties with the Balkans are weaker than in the case of other Visegrad countries, so that Poland's bilateral relations with the region are naturally less dynamic. Polish development assistance to the region is marginal. On the other hand, Poland has contributed to post-conflict stabilisation of the Western Balkans through active participation in virtually all international missions in the region, with the on-going presence of its military, police and civilian experts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Poland declares support for the Euro-Atlantic ambitions of the region, and it has pursued its Balkan policy mainly through the EU, NATO,

and the V4. Meanwhile, Polish think-tanks call for a more ambitious "bilateral agenda" towards the Balkans, and point to high public support for EU enlargement, and to the fact that Poland is viewed in the Balkans as a success story of EU integration and economic transition. At the same time, there is an issue of Central European solidarity as Polish passivity towards the Western Balkans is perceived by V4 partners as limiting the potential of Central Europe to shape the EU's and NATO's engagements in the region. The current Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group represents a good opportunity to take more ambitious steps on this agenda.

SLOVAKIA

For Slovakia, the Western Balkans are at the core of its foreign policy agenda. The main drivers of Slovakia's assertive approach to the Western Balkans have been its diplomats and active NGOs on the ground, as well as the country's own example as an attractive transition and integration model for the individual Balkan countries. Linguistic and cultural proximity,

SIX IDEAS FOR A V4 AGENDA FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

Poland's presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2012 – June 2013) enables Warsaw to lead the debate over the actions and initiatives that this regional forum undertakes at the EU level. As declared in its V4 Presidency programme, Poland focuses more on Visegrad initiatives towards Eastern Partnership countries. Nevertheless, there is at least one high-level meeting on Warsaw's agenda dedicated to the Western Balkans, for which Poland will need to come up with some ideas.

On 25 October, Warsaw will host the annual meeting of the V4 and the Western Balkans Foreign Ministers, this time joined by their counterparts from Bulgaria and Romania. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle and a representative of the Cyprus Presidency of the EU Council are also invited. The ministerial meeting in Warsaw will be the main forum to declare joint V4 statements regarding the EU and NATO aspirations of the Western Balkans countries. Poland should take advantage of convening this meeting, which is scheduled a few weeks before the EU Council conclusions on the EU enlargement agenda in early December 2012. Across the Atlantic, Washington will get a new team at the helm of the State Department

historical ties, and the Slovak minority in Serbia have also been important connecting points. Slovak leaders and diplomats played key roles in the opening of the EU accession talks with Croatia (2005) and Montenegro's referendum on independence from Serbia (2006), and also continued to support their early integration to the EU. Miroslav Lajčák served as the international High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2007-2009). Until recently, Serbia has been the priority country of Slovak development assistance with an aggregated budget over €10 million in smaller grants and projects over five years, mostly in community development, civil society and infrastructure. While not recognizing Kosovo as an independent state, Slovakia has opened a representation office in Pristina and its troops participated in KFOR until 2010. Slovak soldiers are still serving in EUFOR mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2011, the Slovak Foreign Ministry started a new platform for transfer of best practices in EU integration, offering thematic study trips for government experts from the Western Balkan.

whoever is elected president in November this year. The V4 countries could join their efforts to convince the new American top diplomats that continuous United States' engagement in Europe as well as in the Balkan trouble spots is still important and in Washington's own interest.

The joint objective of the V4 is to sustain momentum in both EU and NATO enlargements to be able to reward (and thus consolidate) those Balkan countries that are the most qualified, transformed and moving closer to our standards and practices.

As its own contribution, the V4 under the Polish Presidency should consider the following six initiatives:

Engage the new Serbian leadership

Serbia remains the key country in the region due to its size, influence on several neighbouring states and central location in the region. At the end of 2012, Belgrade hopes to get a date for opening EU accession negotiations, but some conditions have not been met, especially in the context of political dialogue with Kosovo. Unexpected changes to the presidency and government of Serbia after the elections in May 2012 triggered some desperate reactions and fears of a return to nationalistic, pro-Russian policies of the past that would destabilise the region, slow down EU integration and further complicate the settlement of the Kosovo issue.

However, the initial actions of President Nikolić and of the new Serbian government so far have not substantiated these fears. The EU institutions and member states should therefore continue not only to engage Serbia in intensive dialogue about strategic choices that Belgrade faces in the near future, but also to encourage Serbian leaders to make more progress in the political dialogue with Kosovo (implementation of the agreements reached so far, and steps towards normalisation of relations). If there are positive results until December 2012, the V4 should demand a repeat of the same scenario which was used last year in the case of Montenegro: strong language in the EU Council conclusions pointing to the opening of accession talks with Serbia on the basis of a new report by the Commission in the first half of 2013. In addition, conservative parties of the Visegrad countries could work within the European People's Party (EPP) to invite the Serbian Progressive Party to join. This would create one more channel of European influence and peer pressure on the current Serbian government, and help the EPP to find a more credible partner in Serbia (instead of the discredited and marginalised DSS party of former Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, which has embarked on an openly pro-Russian and anti-European course).

Support Montenegro's steady progress

The initiation of EU accession talks in June 2012 makes Montenegro a new success story of the region and keeps the EU and NATO enlargements on track. In this case, both integration processes could complement and reinforce each other. On the other hand, the EU accession negotiations will not be easy as Montenegro will become the test case of the new approach by the European Commission to the accession process with more emphasis on the rule of law, judicial reforms, and the fight against corruption and organised crime (chapters 23 and 24). Here, a window of opportunity opens for the Visegrad countries to share their know-how and best practices with Podgorica. In the run-up to the NATO summit in 2014, it will be important to keep Montenegro's bid for NATO membership on the political radar screen.³ The V4 diplomacies should be actively involved in the North Atlantic Council, and provide practical support or contribute personnel to the US initiatives such as the planned opening of the NATO Advisory Office in Podgorica.

Help revive Macedonia's integration bid

The unresolved dispute with Greece about the official name of Macedonia is a bilateral issue, which should not impede the start of EU accession negotiations.

Although the European Commission has repeatedly recommended opening accession talks with Skopje, the Council has kept postponing a decision and even an open debate on this matter. Macedonia's integration with the EU will be even less discussed during the current Cypriot Presidency of the EU Council due to its close relations with Greece. Keeping Macedonia's EU and NATO accession blocked indefinitely brings more fuel to its domestic interethnic tensions, and pushes this fragile country closer to the abyss. One should not forget that the EU integration path has been part of the formula which saved Macedonia from the brink of the civil war. Possible escalation of ethnic unrest in Macedonia—as unveiled by the violent events in the first half of 2012—could have negative consequences also for Central Europe (increased migration, instability, organised crime).

It is therefore in the common interest of Central Europeans and like-minded EU countries to push for a new approach in the frozen integration bid of Macedonia. If Skopje now shows more flexibility on the name issue, and if the European Commission adopts a positive Annual Progress Report on Macedonia (10 October), the V4 should call on the Cyprus Presidency to put the opening of the accession talks on the General Affairs Council's agenda in December 2012. The V4 countries should also declare their support for the inclusion of Macedonia in NATO—since technical conditions have been fulfilled, and such a step would significantly increase regional security.

Keep Bosnia and Herzegovina focused on tangible results

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the most complicated case in the region. This is often an easy excuse for its leaders to avoid tough compromises or stir another crisis which suits their tactical calculations. Current political intrigues before local elections in early October prove this yet again. Also, Bosnia and Herzegovina has always been locked into wider regional developments, and it is not yet clear what impact the recent change of power in Belgrade will have on Banja Luka.

Bosnian leaders of all three ethnic groups received in June 2012 a Road Map from Commissioner Füle for submitting a credible application for EU membership by the end of the year. The road map consists of targets and dates agreed by Bosnian leaders—including a sensitive amendment to the Bosnian Constitution to make it compliant with the European Convention of Human Rights—but some deadlines have just been missed. Bosnia's divided leaders should

be reminded in Warsaw to keep their own commitments on the EU track, and to implement their recent political agreement on immovable defence property, which would unlock Bosnia's participation in NATO's MAP programme. V4 Foreign Ministers plus Romania and Bulgaria might also jointly voice their support for a stronger and leading role for the EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the context of preparing the reconfiguration of their international presence there.

Engage Kosovo in regional cooperation

While there is no unity among the V4 states regarding the status of Kosovo, all of them are interested in promoting progress towards a solution by—among other things—supporting regional cooperation among the countries of the region, including between Serbia and Kosovo. Visegrad capitals could use some of their own resources to promote this cooperation, specifically by offering the countries of the region the positive experience gained by all of us inside the Visegrad framework.

Shift from development to technical assistance

Although economic challenges remain, Balkan countries have steadily progressed in their economic and social development in the last decade. They are no longer considered typical candidates for receiving traditional development assistance. As their governments try to qualify for the EU and NATO, they will have to think at some point about becoming

donors themselves. Central Europeans are uniquely positioned to help. Having traversed a similar path now faced by their Balkan counterparts, Visegrad countries can provide first-rate expertise and best practices in the integration and transformation agenda. Such assistance is less tangible and “measurable” than development assistance, but recipient Balkan countries view it as even more significant.

Priorities should include enhancing the capacity of state administration, transferring of knowledge on economic and social transformation, reinforcing the rule of law and supporting efforts to create a functional and stable civil society. Also, under the formula of “Visegrad Plus” a space is opened up for broader co-operation with other regional countries with more recent integration experience—Romania, Bulgaria, and especially Croatia.

Another form of support would be to promote an initiative already endorsed by the V4 Foreign Ministers last year—the idea of establishing a Western Balkan Fund modelled on the International Visegrad Fund. We offer the countries of the region the Feasibility Study prepared by the International Centre for Democratic Transition to make use of it in the process of establishing this new instrument.

One way to increase incentives behind this initiative would be a pledge by the Visegrad Foreign Ministers at the Warsaw meeting in October 2012 that they will match the initial amounts that the Western Balkans are ready to put into the new Fund.

¹Dimitar Bechev, “The periphery of the periphery: the Western Balkans and the euro crisis”, The European Council on Foreign Relations, 30 August 2012

²Dariusz Kačan, “Towards a New North-South Axis: Poland’s Cooperation with Czech Republic and Slovakia”, PISM Bulletin no.79 (412), August 2012, <http://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-79-412>

³Milan Nič and Daniel Bartha, “NATO holds the door Open for Montenegro”, published by the Slovak Atlantic Commission in July 2012, <http://www.ata-sac.org/subory/file/TPB1%20Montenegro%20CEPI-SAC.pdf>

Milan Nič is Senior Fellow at the Central European Policy Institute, established and run by the Slovak Atlantic Commission, Slovakia

Amb. István Gyarmati is President of the Centre for Democracy Public Foundation, Hungary

Jan Vlkovský is Western Balkans expert at the Jagello 2000 Association, Czech Republic

Tomasz Żornaczuk is analyst on the Western Balkans at the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Poland

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