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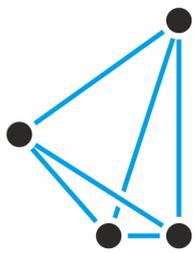
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Visegrad in the Western Balkans: Losing ground?

Jana Juzová





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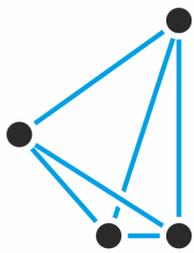
Introduction

The Visegrad countries have since their own accession to the EU been one of the most active European actors advocating for further EU enlargement towards South-Eastern Europe. On the joint Visegrad-level as well as in their own foreign policies, the Western Balkans have a special position; the V4 countries provided them support on their path of European integration with transfer of know-how based on the V4's own successful experience with economic and political transformation, regional cooperation and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, the Visegrad approach towards the Western Balkans is now being undermined and is losing its legitimacy due to several factors outlined in this paper. In spite of the positive impact of the Visegrad policy towards Western Balkans¹, recent trends, such as worsening state of democracy in Hungary, Hungarian PM Orbán's connections to autocratic leaders in the region (recently granting the asylum to former Macedonian PM Gruevski who escaped to Hungary from a jail sentence at home) are weakening not only Visegrad's legitimacy as advocate for transformation of the region and its integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, but also the normative power of the EU. Other V4 countries' indifference towards this trend coupled with Poland's new involvement in the Berlin Process framework, another EU member states' initiative focused on the Western Balkans, only contribute to raising doubts about the commitment and legitimacy of Visegrad's Western Balkan policy.

Berlin Process: complementarity or competition with V4?

All these contradictions in Visegrad's common policy towards the Western Balkans are occurring in the context of the Berlin Process becoming the most visible initiative and driver behind the region's economic development, strengthening regional cooperation, which is a mandatory aspect of the EU accession process in the context of the Western Balkans, and connecting the region to the EU. However, the Visegrad countries have something that the Berlin Process countries lack and which helped the V4 position themselves as credible advocates and "mentors" for the Western Balkans – their own experience with Euro-Atlantic integration and painful political, societal and economic transformation after the fall of the communist and socialist regimes. This experience of "returning to Europe", after breaking free from the Soviet Union and searching for a new geopolitical orientation, gives the V4 countries a better understanding of the challenges the Western Balkans face in their EU accession aspirations. This conception of Visegrad as a success story and a role model for the

¹ E.g. contribution to conclusion of the Croatia's accession talks in 2011, establishment of the Western Balkans Fund, constant advocating for the importance of the region's integration into EU etc.



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Western Balkan countries has been the source of legitimacy for V4's engagement in the region and advocacy for Western Balkans' integration into the EU at the European level. The South-Eastern and Eastern vector² of EU's external policies has even become a priority area for the V4's foreign and European Policy.

On the other hand, the Berlin Process, launched by Germany at the first Summit in Berlin in 2014, brings together the Western Balkans (WB6)³ leaders together with the leaders of some of the most powerful EU member states – Germany, France, Italy and Austria – and states from the region, Croatia and Slovenia. The involvement of former Yugoslav states who are currently EU members also brings to the Berlin Process the necessary connection to the regional context. While the focus and ways of operating of both frameworks are quite different, to some extent, the Visegrad policies and the Berlin Process overlap. They are both drawing attention to the region inside the EU institutions, creating connections between the region and the EU and supporting regional cooperation. However, the impact of connecting the Western Balkans with EU member states and offering them support for successful integration process, which was one of the main goals of the Visegrad Group in its joint efforts after their accession to the EU⁴, is probably better secured now by the Berlin Process involving the biggest players inside the EU than by a group of new member states, mostly not very significant in size who are additionally finding themselves labelled as the troublemakers and outsiders of the EU integration project.

As regards the practical results of these two frameworks, both have achieved some significant and tangible results. For the Visegrad framework, the arguably greatest accomplishment was the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund⁵. The Fund was created according to the International Visegrad Fund model and with support from IVF experts and financial support by the Visegrad governments. The aim of the WBF is to strengthen regional cooperation by providing funding for projects focused on mobility, civil society organizations cooperation, research and education, cross-border cooperation and other important areas. The V4, however, still supports regional cooperation and development in the Western Balkans and connecting the region with Visegrad also through the IVF, namely the Visegrad+ grant program.

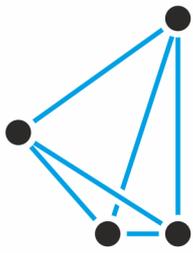
The Berlin Process does not have any sort of fund at its disposal and rather suggests best use for financial means from Western Balkans national resources and European Commission's financial instruments dedicated to the Western Balkans towards implementation of the goals established at the political level. The Berlin Process thus focuses mainly on interconnectivity, digital agenda or creation of joint

² Namely the region of Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. In both regions the V4 is traditionally very active and they are among V4's foreign and European policy priorities.

³ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia

⁴ "Kromeriz declaration" - 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, 12 May 2004, online at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/declaration-of-prime>

⁵ Western Balkans Fund, *Agreement on the Establishment of Western Balkans Fund Signed*, Prague, 13 November 2015, <http://westernbalkansfund.org/2015/11/13/agreement-on-the-establishment-of-western-balkans-fund-signed/>



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regional economic area - general strengthening of regional cooperation with the aim of boosting Western Balkans' economic growth and preparing it for integration into the EU.

Another important aspect of the Berlin Process is its practical and technical nature. While its pragmatic orientation is very important in addressing the prevailing challenges in the region, there is a lack of any dimension of the Process dealing with the rule of law, which is a core issue in the integration process. However, in the best-case scenario, this could be changed with a possible revision of the Berlin Process after the upcoming Poznan Summit in 2019, which will review its achievements and shortcomings during the five years of its existence. Some changes of the nature of the Berlin Process are already under way, for example with the London Summit in 2018 opening the discussion with Western Balkan leaders up to civil society organizations or inclusion of the topic of “cultural values of the region and the countries of the Visegrad Group” in Poznan next year.⁶

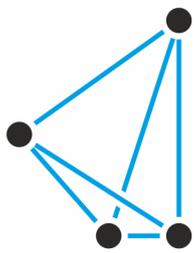
In this regard, the Visegrad Group's activities, compared to the Berlin Process, had an added value as they also included advising and mentoring the Western Balkan countries on various aspects of political transformation and reforms leading to higher democracy standards and securing rule of law, in line with the EU accession conditions (for example the establishment of the V4 – Western Balkans Expert Network on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights under the Polish V4 Presidency in 2012-2013). The IVF in this regard plays a special role as well, as democracy, rule of law, freedom of media and strengthening of civil society are included among priorities and objectives under the Visegrad+ grant program. On the other hand, with the current shift of the Visegrad countries towards illiberalism and disrespect to democratic standards (with the deteriorating state of democracy in Hungary⁷ and Poland's controversial judiciary reforms) it can seem rather hypocritical at best, not credible at worst, that the V4 would support objective as “professionalization of transparency of justice” or “Providing a safer environment and capacity-building for whistleblowers, fact-checkers, investigative journalists and other watchdogs” through the IVF.⁸

The unity of the V4 and its approach towards the region is further undermined also by Poland joining the Berlin Process as the country hosting the next annual summit and by the fact that no attempts to intertwine the two frameworks or coordinate their activities have been made. The choice of Poland as the location of the next Berlin Process summit comes as a surprise for several reasons. Involvement of one of the Visegrad countries in the Process could be a reasonable step if it was with the intention of interconnecting the two formats. However, this logic is countered by the fact that no

⁶ Analysis of the Berlin Process: The path to the EU leads through the Balkans, *European Western Balkans*, 19 December 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/12/19/analysis-berlin-process-path-eu-leads-balkans/>

⁷ Ranking almost as bad as Serbia and Montenegro and worse than Bulgaria and Romania - Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2018>

⁸ Visegrad Fund, Visegrad+ Grant objectives, <https://www.visegradfund.org/apply/grants/visegrad-grants/?c=objectives>



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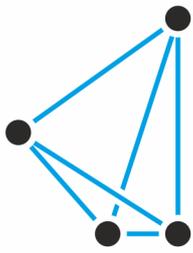
such attempt was made, neither by the Berlin Process leading countries nor by Poland, which could be expected to try to draw the rest of Visegrad in, at least in a form of consultations on the priority topics of the Summit. Furthermore, Poland is a rather odd choice when judging by its foreign policy priorities. In comparison to all the other Visegrad countries, Poland is the one least oriented towards Western Balkans as it traditionally puts much higher strategic priority on its Eastern neighbourhood, especially Ukraine, and even in the framework of joint Visegrad external policies leads this vector. Another factor why the choice of Poland seems ill-conceived is the country's own issues with the rule of law, area of crucial importance for Western Balkans European future, due to which it is currently facing the Article 7 procedure from the EU.

Hungary: hijacking V4's Western Balkans policy?

While the V4 has traditionally been the main European grouping advocating for faster accession of the Western Balkan countries into the EU and supporting the reform processes in the countries, the current situation and actions of some V4 countries suggest the support to the democratization of the Western Balkans might not be as strong nor genuine as the desire to strengthen their position and influence in the region, thus hindering the progress of the required reforms.

While all the Visegrad countries claim they support their Western Balkans partners on their path towards political and economic transformation and fulfilment of the EU accession criteria, the reality can sometimes look different. The most problematic is Hungary's stance towards Western Balkans as it appears that Hungary (i.e. PM Orbán) is using the region as an arena for forwarding its own foreign policy vision and idea of desired future European order based on illiberal democracies and nation states. It seems that Hungary, previously the main advocate for enlargement and bringing Western Balkan countries closer to the EU, even among the V4 countries, is recently projecting this vision also to the region. Orbán's close ties with autocratic Serbian President Vučić, support to Montenegrin Milo Đukanović, who holds a firm grip on the whole country already for three decades, or support to pro-Russian former Macedonian PM Gruevski during the political crisis dividing Macedonia, including granting him asylum in Hungary after his escape from two-year jail sentence for corruption in Macedonia; all suggests an interest on Orbán's part in supporting Western Balkan autocratic leaders, who inhibits their countries' ability to achieve real progress towards democracy and rule of law. Given that the remaining V4 countries and leaders have failed to express disapproval at Orbán's support of Western Balkan reform-resistant autocrats, it is becoming more and more difficult to justify Visegrad's position as a supporter and mentor on the region's reformative path.

This apathy of other Visegrad partners when faced with Hungary's obvious agenda in the region allows Orbán to not only use the V4 platform for his own goals, but also to influence the region in a way which only strays it further from the path towards EU



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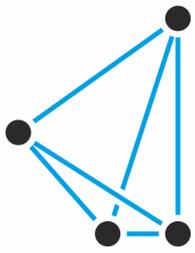
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integration. Currently, the Visegrad countries do not serve as a model of successful break-away from the past and transformation into a democratic state based on the rule of law, but rather as an example for the autocratic rulers in the Western Balkan countries of how much can one get away with inside the EU and how little the values the European community is built upon actually matter and can be enforced. Instead of supporting and encouraging political elites and civil society interested in reforms, it rather encourages the corrupt political elites to maintain a strong, authoritarian grip on their respective countries' political structures and societal institutions while hindering meaningful progress on reforms upon which future EU accession is conditional. On the other side, Western European leaders can be not as open to further enlargement to the Western Balkans due to fear of having more "troublemakers" similar to Orbán or Kaczyński inside the EU.

Conclusion

With the establishment of the Berlin Process as another member states' initiative focused on the Western Balkan region and with the decreasing legitimacy of the Visegrad-model as an example of successful transformation, integration and enlargement, the Visegrad activities and enlargement advocacy in and for the region have lost credibility. As larger European powers are taking over the patronage over the progress of the region towards the EU, the importance, visibility and achievements of the Visegrad involvement has become diminished. This trend is something the Visegrad countries need to be vigilant about as its joint policy towards the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries is something the V4 takes pride in and proclaims as an example of successful common European policy. The current challenges analysed in this paper threaten to create disunity and erode legitimacy of Visegrad's activities in the Western Balkan region even further in the foreseeable future.

The responsibility for countering both this erosion and the spread of the proverbial Visegrad "toxicity" into its approach to the Western Balkans lies mainly in the hands of the V4 partners. The European Union needs to seek ways to enforce rule of law and respect for liberal democracy principles and freedoms in its member states to prevent developments similar to Hungary or Poland before these trends take root in other member states and candidates for membership. However, saving the value, meaning and reputation of Visegrad's Western Balkan policy is in the interest of the V4 countries - especially the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which still insist on the rule of law being the crucial and foremost condition that needs to be met for Western Balkans' European future. Hungary's abuse of Visegrad for its own foreign policy goals and inclusion of Poland within the Berlin Process (which can lead to decrease in its interest in involvement in the Western Balkans through Visegrad) can be combated only by proactivity of the Czech and Slovak partners through setting a strong agenda, which



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will send a clear signal, both to the Western Balkans and to Brussels, that Visegrad can still serve as a good role model for the region's integration efforts, and that rule of law and democracy standards are still the crucial conditions for accession. The current Slovak and upcoming Czech V4 presidencies present a great opportunity for these countries to raise their voice and set the new tone of Visegrad's approach to the region.

Jana Juzová

Jana graduated in International Relations at Masaryk University in Brno and continues her doctoral studies there with focus on the topic of regional cooperation in the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans. During her studies, she spent a semester at the University of Bologna and participated in a summer university at the University of Pristina. In years 2015 to 2017, she worked for the Institute of International Relations in Prague. She obtained experience also in the Agora Central Europe organization, GLOBSEC or the EULEX mission to Kosovo. Her research focuses on regionalism, Visegrad cooperation, democratization and European integration of the Western Balkan countries, and EU enlargement.



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