

Western Balkans in the loop: Reshaping regional cooperation in times of uncertainty

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Introduction

Over the past years, EU enlargement policy has gone through a process of nationalization and intricate accession negotiation technicalities,² which have raised perplexities regarding the Union's genuine interest in the Western Balkans and weakened its credibility. The declaration of Juncker in 2014, stating that there would not be any further enlargement during his mandate as President of the Commission was only the first of a series of mixed signals sent by the EU to the region. As such, 2018 was marked by deep divisions between EU Member States, and particularly with regards to the process of opening and/or advancement of the accession negotiations with the Western Balkan countries.³ For instance, France (backed by the Netherlands) showed a firm determination to postpone this process after the European Parliament elections due to fears of stoking anti-immigrant sentiments at the domestic level.⁴

Given the Union's general reluctance towards further enlargement *per se*, the return of geopolitics in the old continent and emergence of transnational security threats, the region has entered into an uncertain phase, characterized by a general resistance to democratic reform

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² Christophe Hillion, "*The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU Enlargement Policy*", Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, report no. 6, 2010, available at: <https://goo.gl/ZQ9SmV>

³ Erwan Fouéré, "*The EU's re-engagement with the Western Balkans: A new chapter long overdue*", Center for European Policy Studies, policy brief, no 2019/01, 10 January 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/2RLdMcA>

⁴ Gabriela Baczyńska & Robin Emmott, "*EU puts off Balkan membership talks as France demands reforms*", Reuters, 26 June 2018, available at: <https://reut.rs/2VDpKEm>

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processes, lack of trust and flirting with third countries (namely Turkey, Russia, China and the Gulf Countries). The Union's general climate does not allow to push forward the enlargement process, and, to a certain extent, this is also due to the resurgence of populist movements and nationalism and their respective influence as new game-changers in town. Even though the Western Balkans in principle are not yet ready to become Member States, the need to keep them 'anchored' to the EU goes beyond particular political parties or member states' interests and is firmly linked to the overall security and stability of the European continent.

So far, the accession process remains the only instrument and alternative available for irreversible reform and state-consolidation processes in the Western Balkans. Moreover, the accession process is backed by the (on average) young population of the region, which still portrays EU membership as the 'lighthouse' of hope for better life conditions and economic prosperity, after having 'sailed' for almost a quarter of century in troubled waters.

In light of these gloomy premises, the German Chancellor Merkel initiated the so-called Berlin Process back in August 2014, with the aim *"to make additional real progress in the reform process"* and to achieve *"reconciliation within and between the societies in the region"*⁵. This new impetus highlighted the need to concretely materialize regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and strengthen local ownership, in view of these countries' European perspective, as well as keep these countries engaged in the implementation of the respective EU reform agendas. In front of the on-hold enlargement process, the push on furthering regional cooperation turned to be more successful than initially expected. The positive momentum created by Berlin Process was followed up by the Commission's strategy of February 2018 for a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement in the Western Balkans⁶, and particularly by the launching of six flagship initiatives aimed at supporting the transformation process⁷.

Although in principle these common efforts have converged towards the concretization of regional cooperation in three specific fields – namely *enhanced high level meetings, connectivity agenda* and *people-to-people contacts* – there is still a need to reflect upon, create synergies and ensure

⁵ Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, 28 August 2014, available at: <https://goo.gl/DvYdhZ>

⁶ European Commission, *"A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans"*, COM(2018) 65 final, Strasbourg, 6 February 2018, available at: <https://goo.gl/eDf5Qx>

⁷ European Commission, *"Six new flagship initiatives to support the transformation of the Western Balkans"*, 6 February 2018, available at: <https://goo.gl/V3uE1c>

convergence and resilience between existing parallel initiatives promoted by groups of EU member states in the Western Balkans. In fact, the Berlin Process is not the first attempt undertaken by external actors to stimulate regional cooperation among these countries, whose polarized inter-states' relations date back to '50s. Another example of promotion of regional cooperation in this area is the Visegrad group (V4), whose ongoing support to the region has materialized in the shape of experience-sharing and education and cultural initiatives, beyond the establishment of the regionally-owned Western Balkans Fund in 2015.

Given that both the countries participating in the Berlin Process and the Visegrad group engage in the Western Balkans in the frame of the latter's democratic transformation and successful integration into the EU, it makes clear the necessity to avoid potential overlaps of initiatives on the EU countries' side, as well as to ensure coordination and avoid potential burdens on the side of the beneficiary countries. In this regard, this paper seeks to investigate the general behaviour of the EU member states that participate in the Berlin Process and V4 states, in order to identify common patterns and to suggest how these two informal processes may mutually reinforce each other towards a sustainable regional cooperation process in the Western Balkans. Initially, the paper aims to provide a general overview of regional cooperation in the past four years (2014-2018) - which lines up also with the coming into existence of the Berlin Process. Then, the focus will shift to the Visegrad group's engagement in the region and on the extent to which Poland can serve as a bridge builder between these two diplomatic processes, as this country hosting of the annual Western Balkans Summit in Poznan in July 2019. Particular attention will be paid also to the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund, which seeks to enhance civil society relations in the region. Finally, the paper will draw some conclusions regarding ways to further enhance regional cooperation and ownership in the Western Balkans.

In view of the forthcoming European Parliament's elections and instalment of the new European Commission in autumn 2019, the analysis on the interrelation between these two regional cooperation formats may serve as a reflection point for the upcoming design of the second term of Berlin Process, in function of what is already in place and well-performing in the region. Overall, it should be ensured higher coordination and coherence among the EU member states' interventions in the field of promotion of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

From a methodological perspective, the paper is based on existing literature, official documents, six semi-structured interviews with representatives of public administration, diplomatic

corps, international organizations and think tanks located in the Visegrad countries, as well as two group interviews respectively in Czech Republic and Albania, conducted between July and October 2018.

1. *The new approach to regional cooperation*

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has recently entered a new stage of development, after the initial externally (EU) driven phase. Originally, this cooperation was conceived as rather distinct and of secondary importance with respect to other EU priority areas for the region i.e. rule of law, security, etc. and the countries of the region were mostly expected to “work on, jointly [...] rather than collectively”.⁸ As such, the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements between the EU and every Western Balkan country sanctioned the obligation for each of them to cooperate with the other countries of the region, in respect of the principle of good neighbourly relations. However, fulfilling this obligation was mostly of a one-to-one kind of relation with the EU, rather than a well-defined collective duty.

To a certain extent, this first phase resulted mostly in the establishment of a myriad of regional cooperation initiatives. In an exploratory research work performed in 2017, the number of regional initiatives identified in the Western Balkans amounted to more than 72,⁹ which frequently overlapped in terms of priority areas and were not always followed up with concrete outcomes¹⁰. The Commission supported the creation of these regionally-owned initiatives, as in turn they were expected to contribute to mutually reinforcing relations, greater local ownership and overall regional stability. However, in this first phase the Union did not manage to fully succeed in triggering a functional regional cooperation process. The reason of this under-achievement may be linked to the lack of a continuum between the Union’s stabilisation and pre-accession strategies.¹¹

Following the widely shared feeling of ‘enlargement fatigue’ of the Juncker’s Commission and the outburst of the migration crisis and related Balkan route, the general perception was that of a rising sense of insecurity and overall EU disengagement in the region. Counteracting uncertainty before instability and third countries could take over the Western

⁸ Florent Marciacq, “*The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process. Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty*”, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Sarajevo, 2017, p.10, available at: <https://goo.gl/AdSsxT>

⁹ Gentiola Madhi & Krisela Hackaj, “*Mapping Regional Cooperation Initiatives in the Western Balkans*”, Cooperation and Development Institute, Working Paper “Berlin Process Series”, Berlin Process / 3 / 2017, Tirana.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Isabelle Ioannides, “*Peace and Security in 2018: An evaluation of EU peacebuilding in the Western Balkans*”, European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2018, p. 1, available at: <https://goo.gl/Ku4pFd>

Balkans became a leitmotiv of the political elite as well as media discourse.¹² Under the leadership of the German Chancellor Merkel, the Berlin Process was launched in August 2014, which focused on the revitalization of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in specific policy areas such as transport and energy. This strategic approach would then enhance the backbone of economic growth and competitiveness in the Western Balkans. This process resulted in a pivotal and timely initiative, which provided for an innovative framework that set “a new vision for the region”¹³, along with stimulating the interest of the countries’ political leaders, who joined this process under the new format of Western Balkan Six (WB6).

WB6 came into existence in late 2013 and was a regional initiative actively promoted by Montenegro, with the support of the European Commission. It is said that WB6 was inspired by the successful example of Visegrad group,¹⁴ although the latter did not take part either in the set up or take any credit for it.¹⁵ Overall, WB6 aimed at bringing a “new dynamism to regional cooperation”¹⁶ as well as to provide an enabling environment for the six candidate and potential candidate countries of the Western Balkans to bring forward joint initiatives. In these terms, regional cooperation was reframed as a useful tool to EU integration rather than an aim in itself.

A primary feature of the Berlin Process was the single country/leader-driven feature, which constituted a break from the previous approach to the region. Germany was considered as the engine of the Union’s economy at the time and the Chancellor as the leader par excellence that could help the Western Balkans in their common endeavour to joining the EU. Initially, the process was conceived as a four-year framework, and with a limited number of self-elected EU countries (Germany as a *primus inter pares*, Austria, France, Italy, Slovenia and Croatia), so as to better allow coordination and ensure greater effectiveness in the achievement of the set goals.¹⁷ The participating EU member states were going to accompany the WB6 countries in this endeavour of materialization of regional cooperation through concrete strategic projects, which would be realized thanks to EU funding. While Germany, Austria and Italy are well-known key players with a specific interest in the region and drivers of the enlargement policy, the inclusion of France was rather appropriate and convenient,

¹² Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans. A map of geopolitical players*, Berlin, 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/2spggll>

¹³ Johannes Hahn, “Hahn: Regional cooperation crucial for Western Balkans’ EU path”, *European Western Balkans*, 10 July 2018, available at: <https://goo.gl/sU5r7V>

¹⁴ Marciacq, “*The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process*”, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ Interview with Official 3 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic, 19 October 2018.

¹⁶ European Commission, Mobility and Transport, “*Western Balkans*”, available at: <https://goo.gl/MYM77t>

¹⁷ Interview with Official 1 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic, 19 July 2018.

considering its current reluctance towards a possible deepening before the internal reforming of the Union itself.¹⁸

The Berlin Process agenda has been quite flexible, as no prior prearrangements were generally made. This approach created room for direct contribution/proposals by the WB6 on those policy areas that have a great potential and that simultaneously can stimulate intra-regional cooperation. In the initial stage of the Berlin Process the Commission was not even consulted for the agenda setting.¹⁹

In a short span of time, the Berlin Process turned out to be an effective mechanism of engagement of the political leaders of the region, and led to the establishment of the Connectivity Agenda, followed afterwards by the joint-initiative to establish a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans. Beyond the economic development aspects, particular attention was paid also to the resolution of open bilateral questions by means of peaceful settlement of disputes, and an annual country reporting mechanism was agreed at regional level.²⁰ Moreover, the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) – on the basis of the Franco-German youth cooperation model – resulted in the first tangible achievement and the single institutional structure created in the framework of the Berlin Process. Headquartered in Tirana, RYCO is a regionally-owned organization entirely dedicated to youth cooperation and aiming to fight prejudices, bring together and educate the younger generations of the Western Balkans on the benefits of reconciliation and EU values.

The Berlin Process was not expected to become such a permanent structure, which succeeded in blending different existing regional initiatives under a single umbrella, allowing for better coordination of their interventions on the ground. The architecture of the process became more complex throughout the annual summits – both in terms of involved stakeholders and policy areas - and the number of ambitious commitments taken by the Western Balkans Six grew larger.

In strategic terms, the Berlin Process served to preserve the leading role of EU in the region, considering the fact that the Western Balkans are a doorstep for the intervention of third countries in the European continent. Moreover, it also attracted the interest of different EU member states such as Romania, Greece, Hungary and Poland.²¹ Although no clear criteria were applied to the inclusion of new participating countries, the invitation to join this

¹⁸ Hannes Swoboda & Maria Eleni Koppa, “A new approach for Western Balkans enlargement”, European Council for Foreign Relations, 13 June 2018, available at: <https://goo.gl/UfiQVQ>

¹⁹ Marciacq, “The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process”, *op.cit.*, p.8.

²⁰ Vienna Western Balkans Summit 2015, Regional Cooperation and the Solution of Bilateral Disputes, Annex 3, 27 August 2015, p.15, available at: <https://goo.gl/WxwvR3>

²¹ Marciacq, “The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process”, *op.cit.* p.8.

‘exclusive club’ was initially extended to the UK – which hosted the Western Balkans Summit in London in July 2018 – and then to Poland, as the forthcoming host for 2019. Although the Berlin Process is primarily composed of EU member states that are pro-enlargement policy, it is nonetheless odd not to include neighbouring countries such as Greece, Bulgaria or Hungary, which are located in close proximity of the Western Balkans, whom in various regards have open issues with some of these countries. So far, the European Commission has played a neutral role within the process, in the general interest of the Union and its member states; however, in times of rising populism in particular member states, shifting national priorities and close to the adoption of the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, the Berlin Process would need to be reframed in its (potential) second term.

At the moment, it is unclear if and how the Berlin Process will evolve after the Summit in Poznan in 2019. However, it is not possible to assess to what extent the Western Balkan countries have managed to effectively take ownership of regional cooperation and implement the embarked-on commitments, as no public national monitoring/reporting mechanisms and/or benchmarking system has been put in place. To a certain extent, this choice was motivated by the fact that the process itself has an informal nature, which did not build upon the traditional structured-based cooperation and did not aim to add additional burden to WB6. Nevertheless, there is a need to reconceptualise and invigorate the format of this process as well as to create new synergies to avoid the risk of falling short into usual lofty declarations of high ambitions and non-committal summits, as well as to avoid the pitfalls that EU enlargement policy has been suffering from; slow reactivity and little delivery on the undertaken commitments by the countries of the region. Moreover, the Berlin Process needs to be reframed within the general EU framework for as long as it makes use of EU funds to support the implementation of the Connectivity Agenda and other related schemes.

2. *Visegrad group’s policy towards the Western Balkans*

The general image of the Visegrad group is that of a pragmatic mechanism of informal cooperation, with limited institutional structures (i.e. IVF), and where “there is nothing to be lost and a lot to be gained by exchanging and by coordinating policies when appropriate”.²² Considering the size of the four participating countries and their respective potential boundaries of acting alone, the Visegrad group constitutes a double success both in terms of cooperation durability and reinforcement of mutual exchanges at different levels of their societies. In return, this top-down political cooperation has managed throughout the years to establish a sense of commonness among its citizens, without

²² Mathieu Baudier, “*Building Europe: networks, nations, and citizens*”, Institute of European Democrats, Working Paper, June 2018, p. 4, available at: <https://goo.gl/3CZfdj>

compromising the respective national identity.²³ This informal cooperation format has given participating countries the necessary autonomy to unfold their respective country priorities in the annual programmes. For instance, the last two annual presidency programmes have been characterized to a certain extent of content variation, where Hungary (2017/2018) has pointed at being more vocal, connected and with a strong visibility; whereas, Slovakia (holding the presidency until June 2019) has put more emphasis on speed and dynamism to address EU internal challenges, also in view of its OSCE Presidency in 2019.

Focusing on its external dimension, the V4 has been constantly engaged in promoting a stable and safe neighbourhood. Regarding the Western Balkans in particular, V4 has publicly affirmed the common ambition to actively contribute in the design and promotion of Union's policies on the basis of their own accession experience. Although the Visegrad group's engagement in this region "could hardly become a policy driver",²⁴ they have managed throughout the years to ensure an overall coherent approach towards the region under the umbrella of EU enlargement policy. These countries have voiced their readiness to provide political and technical support so as to enhance the EU reform processes, as well as to encourage a common understanding of security among the countries.²⁵ In particular, the Hungarian Presidency of V4 (in 2009/2010) went further by stating that "the cooperation on issues related to the Western Balkans [...] is not only in the *interest* but also the *responsibility* of the Visegrad Group".²⁶ Per se, this moment marked a turning point of the V4 engagement in the Western Balkans, as it constituted a shift from the generally vague declarations of commitment into concrete actions. During the same presidency, the first 'Visegrad Plus (V4+)' meeting was held between the V4 Ministers of Foreign Affairs and their Western Balkans' counterparts. This informal mechanism of political cooperation turned afterwards into a regular consultative framework. In addition, the V4 group also proceeded with the development of a practical cooperation dimension, specifically targeting the civil society and people-to-people contacts in the Western Balkans. This dimension was supported by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) through the launching of the 'Visegrad+ programme', which aimed at promoting cooperation at different levels, reconciliation and confidence-building among neighbouring countries.²⁷

Over time, the Western Balkans dimension within the V4 has followed a positive and reinforcing trend, and the V4 itself has turned out to be a stable partner for the countries of the region. While initially the thematic focus was mostly on reconciliation process and EU conditionality, the array of cooperation areas has subsequently broadened towards the prospect of establishing a separate regionally-owned fund (on the basis of the IVF example), management of IPA funds, twinning projects, migration and border management, etc. Following the signature of the Memorandum of Cooperation

²³ Interview with expert 1 from think tank in Prague, 4 July 2018.

²⁴ Anna Orosz, "The Western Balkans on the Visegrad Countries' Agenda", Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, KKI Policy Brief, 2017, p.3, available at: <https://goo.gl/XDyQdD>

²⁵ Visegrad Group, *Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation*, available at: <https://goo.gl/z1UCRE>

²⁶ Visegrad Group, *2009/2010 Hungarian Presidency*, available at: <https://goo.gl/R78Dgw>

²⁷ Visegrad Group, *Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group and Slovenia on the Western Balkans*, Prague, 4 November 2011, available at: <https://goo.gl/RYQTxg>

between the Visegrad countries in the field of transport cooperation,²⁸ the last Hungarian Presidency programme launched also the idea of holding consultations with the Western Balkan countries on transport and energy infrastructure development (i.e. Connectivity Agenda).²⁹ This proposal still remains a priority also for the current Slovak Presidency and common proposals are expected to be delivered in terms of TEN-T network between the V4 plus Austria, Ukraine and Western Balkans.³⁰

These recent developments show a strong interest of the V4 countries to partially align their agenda towards the Western Balkans with new thematic areas included in the Berlin Process and represent their ambition to contribute to this framework. So far, they could only go in parallel because of Germany's positioning on the possible extension of membership invitation to other countries.³¹ Moreover, France seems to have been fairly cautious in including the Visegrad group in this process.³² Standing alone, the V4 countries reflect different realities: Hungary has not been allowed to join in,³³ Slovakia has not yet recognized Kosovo's independence, the Czech Republic has never voiced officially its will to become involved (or been reluctant to do so), and Poland only recently got involved. However, by coincidence or not, the Berlin Process and Visegrad group have had the opportunity to mutually exploit some fledgling political momentum that was running among the Western Balkan countries. A visible result of this impetus is the quasi-parallel establishment of the two regionally-owned organizations, namely Western Balkans Fund and RYCO – both prioritizing the people-to-people contacts and regional reconciliation, in the spirit of EU shared values.

An interesting position in the intertwining between the two political cooperation processes is that of the Czech Republic, which can be considered as going beyond symbolism. Its officials have attended some key events of the Berlin Process, such as the presence of Stefan Fule (acting as EU Commissioner for Enlargement) at the Berlin Conference in 2014, or the participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaoralek at the Summit in Durres in March 2016³⁴ or of his Deputy at the Aspen event in May 2017 when the German Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabriel launched the idea of a 'Berlin process reloaded'. In fact, in foreign policy the Czech Republic seeks to play the role of facilitator of inter-regional dialogue, as well as to reinforce its strategic dialogue with Germany.³⁵ This was visible for instance in the joint op-ed that Minister Zaoralek publish together with his Albanian counterpart in the aftermath of the Durres Summit, where it was stated that "the continuation of the Berlin Process and the pursuit of concrete deliverables [...] [are] particularly important" for the Western Balkans, and that

²⁸ Visegrad Group, *Joint Statement of the Heads of Government of the Visegrad Group Countries*, Bratislava, 19 June 2015, available at: <https://goo.gl/NSn5gd>

²⁹ Visegrad Group, *2017–2018 Hungarian Presidency*, available at: <https://goo.gl/AJhEX4>

³⁰ Visegrad Group, *2018–2019 Slovak Presidency*, p.9, available at: <https://goo.gl/7EHb71>

³¹ Orosz, "The Western Balkans on the Visegrad Countries' Agenda", *op.cit.*, p.4.

³² Marciacq, "The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process", *op.cit.*, p.8.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The Summit of Durres (held on 30-31 March 2016) paid particular attention to the new regional connectivity projects that were expected to be endorsed by the Summit of Paris, as of 4 July 2016.

³⁵ Interview with Official 2 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic, 20 July 2018.

the Czech Republic and the V4 countries will stand ready to support in this regional endeavour.³⁶ In response, the former Minister Gabriel affirmed the genuine reconciliation and closed political and societal relations achieved between his country and Czech Republic, which could serve as an inspiration for the Western Balkans.³⁷

The Berlin Process is now ending its first four-year cycle and it certainly needs to go through a reflection and evaluation process on the achievements (and local ownership), along with addressing the criticism raised on its limited inclusiveness (in terms of number of involved EU member states) and need to adapt respectively. Considering that the Berlin process' investment projects are funded through IPA funds, it is a legitimate request of non-involved EU member states to be part of this process.

Considering that the Visegrad cooperation per se has now entered a maturity stage and its experience – in the frame of EU accession process - can illustrate “the advantages at a more streamlined sub-regional format”.³⁸ This experience can certainly be adapted to the Western Balkans' context, as a mean to enhance multilateral cooperation in specific policy areas, like infrastructure connectivity.

At this point in time, it can be stated that these two parallel processes – Berlin Process and V4 - take esteem of each other up to a certain extent with regards to the Western Balkans, and certainly in a future perspective they can reinforce each other within the EU enlargement framework. What the V4 experience can provide to the Berlin Process framework is an embedded cooperation practice between the civil society organizations in the Western Balkans, as well as their experience on reconciliation and regional identity. What the Western Balkans can definitively learn from V4 experience is precisely the creation of a pragmatic and systematic structured dialogue within the Western Balkans Six platform to help tackle issues of regional interest and progressively contribute in the raising of mutual trust.

3. *Western Balkans Fund*

The Western Balkans Fund (WBF) is the first regionally-owned organization, established in November 2015 and officially launched on 5 September 2017. It is funded by Western Balkans' governments and seeks to strengthen intra-regional and cross-border regional ties by means of promoting cultural cooperation, scientific exchanges, youth mobility and sustainable development.³⁹ The fund is considered a remarkable political initiative,

³⁶ Ditmir Bushati & Lubomir Zaoralek, “Enhanced cooperation needed between Visegrad Group & Western Balkans”, Euractiv, 12 April 2016, available at: <https://goo.gl/hrTdor>

³⁷ Federal Foreign Office, Speech by Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel at the eighth Aspen Southeast Europe Foreign Ministers' Conference, Berlin, 31 May 2017, available at: <https://goo.gl/9iLV3F>

³⁸ Oleg Levitin & Peter Sanfey, “Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans”, EBRD, February 2018, p.4, available at: <https://goo.gl/1Dkgxf>

³⁹ Western Balkans Fund, available at: <https://goo.gl/GMRQEL>

backed by a shared political will, which will enhance people-to-people contacts in the region.⁴⁰ It is shaped upon the International Visegrad Fund model and is considered as an encouraging instrument to enhance regional cooperation and cohesion in the Western Balkans. For the achievement of its goals, WBF supports small scale projects, which bring together at least two civil society organizations (CSOs) located in different Western Balkan countries. It builds upon an existing cooperation experience between CSOs in the WB6, facilitated by IVF's 'Visegrad+ programme', as well as other foreign donors operating in the region.

The idea to establish the fund was a bottom-up initiative of two civil society organizations in the Visegrad countries back in 2010, which was followed up the next year by a feasibility study on the applicability of the IVF model in the Western Balkans. The proposal was officially made to the Western Balkans' Ministers of Foreign Affairs during the Czech Presidency of V4 in November 2011, and it took four years to see the founding agreement symbolically signed in Prague in 2015. The overall process took a considerable time, from the conception of the idea to the full operability of the fund. The first challenge to the fund's establishment was the finding of a common position within the Western Balkans Six. Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania were the immediate frontrunners in affirming their intention to cover the payment of the basic contributions for the fund's operability from 2013, whereas Montenegro and Serbia joined soon after.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Bosnia and Hercegovina was the last due to complex internal procedures. The second challenge was linked to the change of political leadership in WB6 during this timeframe, which also demanded further efforts to finding a consensus. Only in October 2014, it was finally agreed the present arrangement of the fund and that its headquarters would be in Tirana. An important role in this common endeavour has been played by the political leadership of Czech Republic, followed by the strong advocacy of Slovakia. The overall process of WBF establishment was concluded only in August 2018 with the entry into force of the Host Country Agreement, which constitutes the last formal step to the WBF Secretariat being fully recognized as an international organization in Tirana.⁴²

The current national annual contributions amount to €30.000, and the governments have agreed in principle to double their contributions in 2019.⁴³ On their side, the Visegrad group allocated a grant of €80.000 through the IVF for technical assistance and capacity-building activities of the WBF staff. This partnership between IVF and WBF was sealed through a Memorandum of Understanding in 2017. To this date, the fund has concluded its first round of calls for project proposals, in which more than 350 applications were received and only 18

⁴⁰ Statements by Mr. Ditmir Bushati and by Mr. Ivica Dacic, Conference of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs/Western Balkans Fund, Bled, 5 September 2017, available at: <https://goo.gl/rZ7gC8>

⁴¹ Visegrad Group, Report on the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group July 2011 – June 2012, p. 4, available at: <https://goo.gl/pdGD6j>

⁴² Republic of Albania, Law no. 44, dated 19.07.2018, "On the ratification of host country agreement between the Republic of Albania and Western Balkans Fund", Official Gazette, no. 111, 30 July 2018, available at: <https://goo.gl/Pos5Je>

⁴³ Western Balkans Fund, Newsletter, no. 001, Tirana, March 2018, available at: <https://goo.gl/ZwzqWP>

projects (involving 84 partner organizations) were selected.⁴⁴ These projects are expected to be concluded by the end of 2018, and in the meantime, the second round of calls for application is being prepared.

The main obstacle to the fund's well-functioning is linked to the limited availability of funds. The cap of 12.000 euro per regional project is quite low, making it hard to achieve an impact at the local level. Moreover, the present budget puts WBF in a much weaker position with respect to IVF or RYCO. Differently from IVF, which was established from a top-down political cooperation, WBF is an idea coming from outside of governments and thus always susceptible to political influence. Furthermore, other external circumstances that could have an influence are linked to the development and profiling of RYCO – as both organizations are sitting in Tirana, have an intersecting focus on youth mobility and receive different amounts of funding from the Western Balkans governments. Even though these two organizations cannot be considered competitors, one's disproportional expansion (in terms of budget) can overshadow the work/efforts of the other. A crucial role in the WBF's progress pace depends on the leadership of the executive director, and independence from the daily political dynamics in the region. In order to mitigate the potential risks as well as to ensure sustainability of the fund in the long run, strong incentives should be established in order to ensure an effective increase of the national contributions by the governments from the region and possibly the securing of funds from external donors.

4. *Summit of Poznan 2019*

Poland will host the next Western Balkans Summit in the city of Poznan in July 2019. Poland joining the Berlin Process raised some perplexities among experts and think tankers, in view of the fact that the country is recognized as a pro-enlargement country; nevertheless, it has had a rather uneven approach to the Western Balkans so far. As declared by Minister of Foreign Affairs Czaputowicz during an official visit in Tirana in May 2018, "the relations between Poland and Albania can be defined as irregular but long-lasting."⁴⁵ More or less the same can be stated also for the other Western Balkan countries. However, the reasons of this invitation to Poland may lean mostly on the bilateral relations with Germany, such as the seeking for a positive agenda between the two countries, in view of the past historical relations and tensions between the European Commission and Poland.⁴⁶ In 2019, the Visegrad group will mark 15 years of membership to the European Union and, with respect to the other

⁴⁴ Western Balkans Fund, "Western Balkans Fund Secretariat – First Anniversary", available at: <https://goo.gl/aBRGii>

⁴⁵ Author's personal notes.

⁴⁶ Interview with Official 2 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic, 19 July 2018.

2004 enlargement countries, Poland stands out in terms of its considerable size, both in terms of population and economic development. The symbolic celebration of this 15th anniversary in Poland serves to show that democratic transformation is possible and that the European perspective of WB6 is still on the table. Moreover, in foreign policy Poland has made a big leap with the appointment of the former Prime Minister Tusk as the president of the European Council, which contributes to the positive image of the country in the region.

Given that the Western Balkans have recently become a priority for Poland, bilateral exchanges with and official visits to the region have increased in the past months. Beyond the annual holding of the Enlargement Academy for representatives of Western Balkans' public administrations - which Poland has initiated in the frame of its V4 Presidencies – a new formats of bilateral cooperation have been established. 2017 saw the launch of the Belgrade Conference, followed this year also by Tirana and Skopje Conferences, which consist in bilateral thematic consultation and experience exchange forums of civil servants, in view of EU accession process. Additionally, a joint Polish-German seminar on reconciliation and memory has been organized in the past two years with the purpose of contributing to the reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans.

In fact, the successful transformation process constitutes a flagship initiative of Poland's foreign policy, meaning this topic will definitely be part of the agenda of the forthcoming summit. Although there is no official roadmap yet from the government of Poland, the circulating draft agenda seems rather ambitious. A primary focus will be on the continuation of the Berlin Process agenda, where importance is paid to connectivity agenda and progress of Regional Economic Area. In this regard, in the margins of the summit, will also be organized the EU-Western Balkans Business Forum in order to enhance mutual cooperation of business communities in these countries. In addition, three new policy areas are expected to be introduced, namely: (i) the transfer of Polish experience in the process of adjusting to EU requirements and absorption of EU funds; (ii) the forum of cities and regions, which shall reflect the regional, local and cross-border dimension of cooperation; and, (iii) cultural cooperation as a mean to address reconciliation and enhance regional identity. Finally, thematic events will be organized in order to address youth challenges and civil society cooperation in the region.⁴⁷ Additionally a scholarship programme for Western Balkans' students is expected to be launched for the academic year 2019-2020.

Since Poland is the only V4 country that has joined the Berlin Process, the organization of the Summit in Poznan is subject of the agenda of the meetings between the V4 partners.

⁴⁷ Interviews with a representative of the Polish Government, 21 September 2018 and with expert 3 from a think tank in Poland, 24 October 2018.

The onus is currently on Poland to decide whether or not to inform or consult the V4 countries on potential field areas where these countries have a comparative advantage. In particular, the Visegrad countries can indirectly contribute in the field of information exchange, border management and security cooperation, where the ongoing challenges cross the national boundaries and constitute a threat for the whole European continent. This approach would ensure a complementarity between these two regional cooperation frameworks, considering that the overall goal is the timely preparation of the Western Balkans for their EU membership, and not regional cooperation per se.

5. *Concluding remarks*

In the light of Union's internal developments and constant transnational security threats, the stability of the Western Balkans has become an important topic in the EU agenda. Through a revitalized regional cooperation instrument, some EU member states, jointly with the European Commission, are keeping these countries engaged in the reform processes. While the Berlin Process has tried to bring together the Western Balkan countries and accompany them in a process of accomplishment of a series of actions in limited policy areas, an equally important and incomparable presence in the region is that of the Visegrad group. The V4, as a sub-regional cooperation format, has led by example in their approach towards the Western Balkans by providing their experience on regional cooperation and support to the transformative processes towards EU membership.

Despite the continuous engagement of the EU partners, the Western Balkan countries have not yet given credible proof of regional ownership and stable progress to the transformation processes. Both Berlin Process and the Visegrad presence in the region have been a valuable lesson for the WB6 leaders to conceptualize the respective domestic economic growth from an interdependency perspective, beyond their national borders. Therefore, regional cooperation should facilitate a learning process in these countries on how to think through a European lens, rather than becoming an additional burden to the integration process.

In order to ensure sustainability in the longer run, the Western Balkan countries should continue onto two distinct parallel processes, namely: (i) on the one hand, they need to deepen cooperation in fields like education, culture, youth mobility, etc. by means of independent and accountable mechanisms like RYCO and WBF. This would ensure a stable and continuous reconciliation of the civil societies, along with creating/reinforcing the sense of regional identity; (ii) on the other hand, WB6 leaders should engage in a regular

consultation meetings on how to resolve the bilateral disputes and bring forward the existing seeds of collaboration in pragmatic policy areas, like energy and transport. These two processes need to be monitored by independent actors, such as the European Commission, etc. Finally, joint regional policy processes should be initiated, with equal participation of political representatives and civil society stakeholders, in order to strengthen accountability and ownership, along with building mutual trust.

From a long-term perspective, Berlin Process should continue for another four-year term and its new configuration should take into account the work done by the V4 countries in the WB6 countries. In case the Berlin Process does not intend to extend the participation membership to V4 countries, it should pursue some coordination of initiatives in the overlapping areas, such as civil society cooperation, culture, education and reconciliation.

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