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IDEAS LEADERSHIP HOPE

Report

The V4 and EU Enlargement

Advocates With Limited Influence?

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Summary

The Visegrad Four (V4) countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—are among the strongest advocates inside the European Union for enlargement to Eastern and Southeastern Europe. This agenda traditionally has a strong position in their V4 cooperation, in their bilateral relations with the EU membership aspirants, and in their European policies. However, the success of the V4 countries' enlargement advocacy is at times limited, especially due to some of their democracy and rule-of-law issues as well as their conflicts with the European Commission and other member states. Despite their domestic democratic backsliding, the V4 countries support civil society, democratic institutions, and reforms necessary for EU accession in countries of Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Western Balkans. This support is channeled through bilateral technical assistance, the International Visegrad Fund, and formal and informal means of influence inside the EU.

This paper looks at the different ways in which the V4 countries support the EaP and Western Balkans countries in their path toward democracy and EU accession at the bilateral, regional, and EU levels, and it provides an assessment of their success. The paper identifies factors enhancing or limiting the V4 countries' influence on the enlargement agenda inside the EU and offers recommendations to improve their advocacy strategies and ability to support enlargement further. The ability of pro-enlargement member states to use available means to advance this agenda and to build consensus within the EU is of particular importance now in the context of the expected opening of the accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine, and before the EU's attention shifts fully to the 2024 elections to the European Parliament and the formation of the next European Commission.

The V4 countries should enhance their technical support to the EaP and Western Balkans candidate countries through bilateral and regional means in order to better share their experience with the EU accession process and the necessary reforms. The International Visegrad Fund is a very important instrument in this regard and its funding should be increased. The V4 countries also have a unique standing in the two regions, where they are seen as relatable examples of successful Euro-Atlantic integration. They should use this to openly communicate with the candidate countries about the areas of their EU accession reforms where further efforts are needed.

The V4 countries should also consider renewing the V4+ format of ministerial meetings with the Western Balkan countries as well as inviting other like-minded member states or representatives of EU institutions. Building wider alliances on the enlargement agenda, beyond the V4 and other Central and Eastern European regional formats, would be desirable for fostering consensus within the Council of the EU. The V4 countries can further influence the agenda by providing more inputs in the form of non-papers and joint statements prior to European Council meetings, either individually or as a part of a group of pro-enlargement member states.

Introduction

The Visegrad Four countries (V4)—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—have been traditionally among the most vocal advocates for enlargement of the European Union. Despite the growing divergence in their European and foreign policy objectives, and the contentious relations of Hungary and Poland to the rest of the EU in recent years, support for the political and economic transformation as well as the Euro-Atlantic integration of their Eastern European and Balkan neighbors remains something all V4 countries agree on. However, they have had limited success in advocating to other member states and in building wider alliances of like-minded countries in support of further enlargement to bring these neighbors into the EU.

The V4 countries turned their attention to Europe's east and southeast when their own goal of membership in the EU and NATO was accomplished. The joint declaration at the V4 Prime Ministers' Summit in 2004 stated that support for other countries aspiring to the same goals would be a contribution by the four to the continued process of European integration, using the experience and know-how they had gained in their post-communist political and economic transition.¹ This support has since manifested itself at the political as well as the technical level and through interregional, bilateral, and European channels of influence.

This paper looks into the ways V4 countries support the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Western Balkan countries in the process of their democratic transition and Euro-Atlantic integration. First, their political and technical support through Visegrad cooperation is analyzed. The second part of the paper provides insight into the individual V4 countries' approaches to supporting the EaP and Western Balkan countries at the bilateral level. The next part of the paper focuses on the V4 countries' advocacy for the enlargement process and support to EaP and Western Balkan countries within the EU and the different formal and informal ways they can influence this agenda. The conclusion then provides an assessment of how successful the V4 countries are in this advocacy and suggests ways how they can make it more effective.

Political and Technical Support

The V4 is the only regional platform within the EU that holds regular ministerial meetings with counterparts from the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries. In the 2000s, the external dimension of V4 cooperation was strongly focused on Ukraine, particularly after the Orange Revolution in 2004, and on supporting the country's EU prospects. The meetings of V4 ministers with their Ukrainian counterparts went hand in hand with their meetings with representatives of like-minded member states, and both aimed at establishing a more ambitious policy by the EU toward its eastern neighborhood. The most important event in this regard was the joint meeting of V4 ministers of foreign affairs with their peers from Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Sweden in November 2008. This produced a joint declaration outlining these countries' expectations of and the importance they attached to the EU's newly introduced Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy.²

Starting in 2010, V4 foreign ministers have held regular meetings dedicated to the EaP, reflecting the aim to develop an increasingly close relationship with their countries' Eastern neighbors.³ Their counterparts from the EaP countries have been invited to join the meetings since 2012.⁴ Similarly, the V4 ministers of foreign affairs started holding annual meetings dedicated to the Western Balkan countries in 2009.⁵ Also in 2012, these became joint meetings with the participation of their Western Balkan peers,⁶ which have continued in most years. An important aspect of these two sets of meetings is the inclusion along the way of other member states and the EU institutions. The likes of the Baltic states, Finland, and Sweden have usually been represented in the case of EaP, while the Western Balkan meetings have typically involved ministers from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Slovenia. The meetings have also been attended by high-level representatives of the European Commission and of the European External Action Service (EEAS)—typically by the commissioner for enlargement and neighborhood policy and the high representative for foreign affairs and security policy.⁷

The V4 countries also support the EaP and Western Balkan countries through the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). Since the early 2000s, it has provided scholarships to connect students from these countries and the V4. In 2008, the Visegrad+ scheme was created to fund projects that contribute to democratization and transformation processes in the two regions.⁸ As the consortium for the scheme requires the involvement of organizations in the V4 countries as well as the two regions, it not only supports civil society in the Western Balkans and EaP countries but also helps to establish connections between it and similar organizations in the V4 countries, contributing to the sharing of know-how and best practices.

The support of V4 countries for the EaP and Western Balkan countries was based on their own experience with political and economic transformation and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The International Visegrad Fund has also served as the model for the establishment of a similar institution in the Western Balkan Fund (WBF). The idea of sharing the positive IVF experience was presented for the first time in 2011 during a meeting of the V4 ministers of foreign affairs with their counterpart from Slovenia, the EU commissioner for enlargement and neighborhood policy and the EEAS's managing director for Europe and Central Asia.⁹ The WBF was established by an agreement signed during the V4-Western Balkans meeting in Prague in 2015, and with fundamental organizational, technical, and financial assistance from the V4 countries and the IVF. In the first year, the V4 countries jointly contributed €80,000 to its activities while each Western Balkan country contributed €30,000. The cooperation between the IVF and the WBF continues, and they hold regular joint meetings.

The support of V4 countries for the EaP and Western Balkan countries was based on their own experience with political and economic transformation and Euro-Atlantic integration. Thus, the V4 priority areas from the beginning included strengthening the rule of law and democratic institutions, increasing the administrative capacities, and the closer integration of both regions with the EU through deeper sectoral cooperation and people-to-people contacts enhanced by easier visa regimes. For example, the V4-Western Balkans Expert Network on Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights was launched in 2012, which organized regular meetings and topical conferences.¹⁰

In the 2010s, as the EU took a more regionally focused approach to the EaP and Western Balkan countries, the V4's approach started to increasingly involve support to regional cooperation and, in the case of the latter, reconciliation. Especially in relation to the Western Balkans, the attempt to apply good practices of regional cooperation from the V4 extended to cooperation with think tanks. The well-functioning Think Visegrad platform, established in 2011 and connecting eight think tanks from the V4 countries, served as an example for the launching of the Think Balkans project in 2019. As this initiative is still gaining traction among the Western Balkan Ministries of Foreign Affairs, which are the main beneficiaries of the analyses provided by the think tanks in the scope of the project, support through the IVF funding has been vital.

Individual Approaches

Czechia

For Czechia, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans are the most important regions after Central Europe. Their stability, prosperity, and democratic and pro-European development are important for the country for historical, economic, and strategic reasons.¹¹ Shared history, strong cultural ties, and extensive people-to-people contacts shape how the two regions are perceived in Czechia, and they contribute to a consensus across the political spectrum on support to their democratic transition and Euro-Atlantic integration. Some EaP and Western Balkan countries are among the main recipients of Czech development assistance.¹² According to the Development Cooperation Strategy for 2018-2030, the countries from the EaP and the Western Balkans due to receive assistance are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Moldova. Assistance projects in Kosovo and Serbia were concluded by 2020 and both countries are no longer on the list. Ukraine was included in the strategy in the "specific countries" category, making it eligible for resources outside of the general development cooperation budget. Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine are among the priority countries of the Czech Transition Promotion Program, which focuses on supporting projects in democratization and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities, and fundamental freedoms.¹³

Czechia enjoys a positive image in the EaP and Western Balkan countries as a result of some Czech diplomats and politicians having been actively engaged there through European channels or during their career in national politics, when they travelled regularly to those countries and built close ties with partners.¹⁴ There also are very developed ties between their civil societies. Furthermore, Czechia has contributed to international military and civilian missions in the regions, and the embassy in Belgrade served as the NATO contact point in Serbia in 2009–2012.¹⁵

The long-term priority that support for the integration of both regions into the EU and NATO is given in Czechia and the political consensus among all relevant political parties was visible during the country's Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2022, which oversaw some considerable progress in this agenda (see further below).

Hungary

Hungary has consistently been the V4 country most engaged in the Western Balkans, due to immediate geographical proximity and its experience with the impact of any instability in the region, developed economic ties, and the presence of an ethnic Hungarian minority in some of the countries. Hungary's interest in security and stability in the region was demonstrated already during its NATO accession process in the 1990s when it actively contributed to peacekeeping missions in the region. During the NATO bombing campaign in Serbia in 1999, it provided the staging area for US troops.¹⁶

In Hungary's development aid program, nearly all countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership are included and have a prominent place, and the regions are foreseen to continue being prioritized due to the geographical proximity, traditional relationships, and regional, security and nation policy interests of Hungary.¹⁷ Contributing to security and stability in the Western Balkans and the region's Euro-Atlantic integration enjoys cross-party support in Hungary. The country still contributes significantly to peacekeeping in the region as part of the EU's Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and NATO's KFOR mission in Kosovo. Among the EaP and Western Balkan countries, Serbia is Hungary's closest partner through economic ties, Hungarian investments, and political cooperation. It appears to be Budapest's favorite among the candidates for EU membership, partly because of the close relationship between Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Hungary also engages in the Western Balkans by delegating advisors on EU matters in the state administration of all countries of the region, a practice unique among the V4 countries. Furthermore, in the current European Commission, Hungary succeeded in obtaining the sought-after position of commissioner for neighborhood and enlargement, held by Olivér Várhelyi, which Orbán called "the greatest diplomatic success in a decade".¹⁸ This portfolio was important for Hungary not only because of its traditional ties and long-term interest in its southeast neighbors and in EU enlargement, but also due to importance of the regions for EU's energy security and management of migration flows.

Hungary's bilateral relations with the EaP countries are significantly underdeveloped compared to those with Western Balkans, although it is engaged in Eastern Europe through wider regional formats.¹⁹ This is to a large extent due to limited financial and human resources and to the Western Balkans being deemed more important due to their historical and cultural closeness. Hungary's relations with EaP countries are dominated by energy and security interests, and in the case of Ukraine also by the presence of ethnic Hungarians there. Ukraine's language law adopted in 2017 became a particularly sensitive point for Hungary in their relations.²⁰ Budapest retaliated by blocking ministerial meetings between Ukraine and NATO.²¹

Poland

Compared to other V4 countries, Poland's foreign policy has been oriented more to the Eastern Partnership countries as a result of geography, history, and economic interests. The country has weak connections to the Western Balkans. Support for Ukraine especially has been a strategic priority for Poland due to their similar historical experiences with Russian imperialism and consequent threat perception related to Russia. Poland was with Sweden the main initiator of the creation of EaP. Over the years, it has continued advocating for closer EU

cooperation with the EaP countries and for the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine. The two countries have highly developed political, economic, scientific, and cultural ties. Poland is Ukraine's second-largest trading partner after China.²² It views the EaP countries as crucial for its security, and they have a prominent place in its foreign policy.²³ Polish development aid is also focused primarily on EaP countries, especially Moldova and Ukraine.²⁴ Poland also has strong ties at the level of civil society, especially with Belarus and Ukraine. Despite its eastern focus, Poland has been a significant contributor to the EU and international missions deployed in both regions, contributing to EU operation EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EULEX rule of law mission to Kosovo, or supporting the EU Advisory Mission in Ukraine. Furthermore, Polish diplomats have been leading the EU monitoring mission in Georgia and the EU border assistance mission to Moldova and Ukraine.²⁵

In recent years, Poland's engagement in the Western Balkans increased at the bilateral and multilateral levels beyond military and civilian missions. Since 2015, it organizes the Enlargement Academy, a training program for representatives from the Western Balkan countries to help them prepare for aligning with the EU acquis.²⁶ In 2019, it joined the Berlin Process between EU members and the region's countries, hosting its summit in Poznań. Compared to the previous decade, it increasingly supports development projects in the Western Balkans.²⁷

Support for the EU integration of the EaP and Western Balkan countries was among the priorities of Poland's 2011 Presidency of the Council of the EU. While the association and trade agreements with EaP countries and the organization of the EaP Summit dominated its presidency in this regard, progress for the Western Balkans was also on the agenda (see further below).

Slovakia

The Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries are among Slovakia's main foreign policy priorities due to geographical and cultural proximity. The country engages in both regions in deployed international missions; through development assistance, diplomatic engagement, and political support to their Euro-Atlantic integration; and through expert support and transfer of technical knowledge. Civil society connections are also very developed, and Slovakia's organizations shared their experience in bringing down of the regime of Prime Minister Vladimir Mečiar in the 1990s to support the civil movements leading up to the Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia in 2000 or the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004.²⁸

Several Slovak politicians have held important EU or international positions related especially to the Western Balkans. For example, former minister of foreign affairs Miroslav Lajčák previously served as the EU high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina and is currently the EU special representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and other Western Balkan issues. Another example was the late Eduard Kukan who served as the UN secretary general's special envoy for the Balkans in 1991–2001.

Slovakia has developed relations with all the EaP and Western Balkans countries. Even though it is one of the five EU members that do not recognize the independence of Kosovo, because of its own difficult relations with the ethnic Hungarian minority in the southern part of the country, it has good and advanced relations with both governmental and nongovernmental actors there and supports its European future. Slovakia's development aid

focuses primarily on the two regions. Development partner countries include all six Western Balkan countries while in EaP aid is aimed at Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.²⁹

Supporting Enlargement at the EU Level

Alongside their support to Euro-Atlantic integration of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries, the V4 countries have been among the most prominent advocates for enlargement within the EU. They regularly call upon other member states to deliver on the promises made in relation to the European perspective of countries in both regions. The enlargement agenda was always a high priority when any one of them held the Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia emphasize the importance of the process being merit-based and rooted in strong but predictable conditionality that would help the countries to adopt necessary reforms and reward progress. The commitment of the V4 to supporting candidate countries and to adhering to a just and predictable conditionality was demonstrated in December 2020 when Czechia and Slovakia blocked in the European Council the inclusion of Bulgaria's demands toward North Macedonia related to national identity and interpretation of history in the country's negotiating framework.³⁰

But, while the V4 countries have been active in putting enlargement on the EU's agenda, their success in terms of achieving concrete goals has been usually limited as their ability to mobilize support among skeptical member states has been low.

Presidency of Council of the EU

The V4 countries have most significantly exercised their influence over the enlargement agenda when they have held the Presidency of the Council of the EU. The role of the presiding country became less important, especially in foreign affairs, after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force in 2009, with the establishment of the European Council as a formal institution with its president and of the post of high representative for foreign affairs and security policy. Nonetheless, the impact of the presidency on the European Council's agenda remains significant.³¹ In this regard, 2011 was an important year as Hungary and Poland took up that role in succession. By contrast, when Slovakia held the presidency in 2016, its influence on the enlargement agenda was limited, due to a combination of countering factors. Czechia's presidency in 2022, coincided with an important window of opportunity opened by Russia's full invasion of Ukraine and the resulting renewed sense of the importance of enlargement among member states.

In 2011, the enlargement debate was dominated by Croatia's pending membership. Hungary set the conclusion of the country's accession negotiations as the goal of its presidency in the first half of that year, while focusing also on the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia (at the time the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).³² Close attention was paid by Hungary and other member states to Croatia's progress with the goal of

completing the negotiations by June 2011, which proved to be impactful. The country made significant efforts to meet that target date, incentivized also by an interim report on its progress by the European Commission in March 2011.³³ This close monitoring of Croatia provided additional guidance to the candidate to fulfill the conditions before the deadline and also reassured member states that were not satisfied with the rule-of-law situation in the country. In June, the European Council announced its decision to conclude the negotiations with Croatia, paving the way to the signing of the accession treaty by the end of the year.³⁴ The guidance provided to Croatia by the Council of the EU headed by Hungary, including the requests for more frequent interim reports on fulfillment of the criteria, offered the needed motivation for the country to progress on its reforms and significantly contributed to the successful conclusion of the negotiations.

As regards the other candidate countries, no progress was achieved on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia during Hungary's presidency, due to Greece's veto over its dispute over the country's name, but Montenegro and Serbia were next on the EU's agenda after Croatia with the view of starting their negotiations.³⁵ Serbia took two important steps: the authorities arrested and transferred to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) the war criminal Ratko Mladić and the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue toward normalization of relations with Kosovo was initiated jointly by the EU, Kosovo and Serbia. Both developments were positively received by the European Council.

As for the EaP, the summit that was due to take place during Hungary's presidency was postponed till later in the year as a result of the Arab Spring events, particularly the conflict in Libya.³⁶ Otherwise, it does not appear that the EaP was high on the agenda during Hungary's presidency.

In the context of Poland's traditional foreign policy priorities, its presidency in the second half of 2011 was more focused on the EaP countries than the Western Balkans, seeking deeper sectoral cooperation and their integration with the EU.³⁷ However, the developments in the Middle East and North Africa meant its presidency had to be much more oriented to the EU's southern neighborhood.

Poland's presidency built on the processes initiated during Hungary's one in relation to the Western Balkans. It oversaw the follow-up on the signing of the accession treaty with Croatia and the possibility of opening accession negotiations with Montenegro and granting candidate status to Serbia in 2012. In December 2011, the European Council confirmed June 2012 as the tentative date for the start of negotiations with Montenegro, along with clear conditions relating to the rule of law and fundamental rights, especially the fight against corruption and organized crime. Serbia received a positive assessment of its progress, in particular in cooperation with the ICTY and its participation in the dialog with Pristina, which led to granting it candidate status in 2012.³⁸

Since Croatia's joining of the EU in July 2013, the enlargement process has been marked by stagnation and growing "enlargement fatigue" on the side of the candidates as well as the EU, and the latter dealing with several crises (most notably the migration crisis) and face the threat of its own disintegration with the Brexit referendum in 2016.

The urgent need to stabilize the EU internally strongly influenced Slovakia's presidency in the second half of 2016. Instead of being able to inject its priorities into the agenda, the country was preoccupied with building consensus among member states on countering growing nationalist and disintegration tendencies, as well as on dealing with the migration crisis and the EU's internal and external security.

In line with its traditional support for enlargement and the membership aspirations of the Western Balkan countries, Slovakia stated that this agenda should be featured in the European Council's conclusions in December.³⁹ While it wanted to explicitly name the membership aspirants who were making tangible progress, the conclusions eventually did not mention enlargement and the Western Balkans were mentioned only in relation to managing migration flows and to the Economic Resilience Initiative launched by the European Investment Bank.⁴⁰

With regard to the EaP countries, the lagging ratification of the Association Agreement with Ukraine was among the topics discussed at the December European Council meeting. Following the referendum in The Netherlands that rejected approving the agreement earlier in the year, the EU leaders accompanied their decision to endorse the agreement with another one addressing the concerns about Ukraine's approximation with the EU. It stipulated that it did "not confer on Ukraine the status of a candidate country for accession to the Union, nor does it constitute a commitment to confer such status to Ukraine in the future" and emphasized the centrality of the rule of law and democratic reforms.⁴¹ This additional agreement eventually led to The Netherlands approving and ratifying the Association Agreement in 2017.

Czechia took over the Presidency of the Council of the EU in July 2022 in the context of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine and of the related energy and economic crises. It inherited from France's presidency significant progress on enlargement with regard to the EaP countries but not to the Western Balkans. The last European Council meeting under France's presidency granted candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, and offered a European perspective to Georgia, but it also brought significant disappointment for the Western Balkan countries. The start of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia was still blocked by Bulgaria due to disputes with the latter over history and identity issues, despite pressure from some member states, Bosnia and Herzegovina was not granted candidate status, and Kosovo did not receive a long-awaited decision on visa liberalization.

With regard to enlargement, Czechia's presidency was thus defined by balancing its eastern and southeastern dimensions. It focused on bringing progress for the Western Balkan countries that were frustrated by the swift progress of Moldova and Ukraine while the former had been in the EU's "waiting room" for nearly two decades. The geopolitical situation helped Czechia mobilize support and build consensus among member states on the issue as the war in Ukraine revealed the vulnerability of both neighboring regions to other powers' imperialistic ambitions and the necessity to foster their ever-closer relation with the EU. Simultaneously, Czechia's EU presidency was the object of a lot of hope in the Western Balkans due to the country's track record in supporting the region's transformation and Euro-Atlantic integration as well as in acting as its advocate within the EU.

Czechia's presidency led to several concrete results in the enlargement process, particularly toward the Western Balkans, and to a revitalization of the discussion at the EU level through the concept of accelerated integration of candidate countries. Thanks to a deal between Bulgaria and North Macedonia facilitated by France, Czechia

was able to organize the first intergovernmental conferences with Albania and North Macedonia at the beginning of its presidency, technically launching their accession negotiations process. Czechia's presidency also oversaw the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina following the recommendation by the European Commission in its annual progress report in October⁴² and a very belated agreement on visa liberalization for Kosovo. The Czech presidency also oversaw the submission of Kosovo's application for EU membership.

Czechia has been among the most active proponents of the concept of accelerated or gradual integration of candidate countries into the EU. In principle, this aims to reform the enlargement process by introducing intermediary stages of integration and allowing candidate countries to access certain EU programs, policies, and funds already in the pre-accession phase, depending on their fulfillment of conditions. While in 2020 the European Commission had introduced the provision for some kind of "phasing in" in enlargement in its revised methodology,⁴³ the application of this concept remained a topic of expert discussions rather than an element of the EU's agenda until 2022. In the aftermath of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine and the latter being given candidate status, the European Council in June 2022 invited the European Commission and Council of the EU "to further advance the gradual integration between the European Union and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner".⁴⁴ During Czechia's presidency, some concrete steps were initiated in the spirit of connecting the countries aspiring to membership with the EU institutionally and sectorally. It also invited the Western Balkan countries to informal EU ministerial meetings, including them in discussions on issues of shared interest and high importance (such as energy, foreign policy, and migration).⁴⁵ Czechia's presidency not only brought tangible results in the enlargement process for the Western Balkans but also facilitated a constructive discussion among member states about this agenda and acted as an honest broker between their differing views and priorities.

The case of Czechia also underscores how the V4's ability to use the Presidency of the Council of the EU broker progress on enlargement is affected by the stance and image of the individual countries' government at the time.

The case of Czechia also underscores how the V4's ability to use the Presidency of the Council of the EU broker progress on enlargement is affected by the stance and image of the individual countries' government at the time. The new government that had been formed after the 2021 elections contrasted strongly with the previous one led by Andrej Babiš. The latter's close relationship with Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić had called into question his position as an advocate for enlargement, especially his particular preference for Serbia as the next country that should join the EU. Czechia and Slovakia are among the most vocal supporters of enlargement to the Western Balkans and closer integration for EaP countries but were for years associated with Orbán's illiberal and divisive policies through the V4. Changes in their government led to more dissociation from the V4 on their part and a stronger leaning to the EU mainstream. This change of approach, actual and perceived, to other EU members and policies including enlargement, resulted in a somewhat repaired image for both countries in Brussels and member-state capitals. The outcomes of the recent elections in Poland and Slovakia are not likely to change the general position of these countries on enlargement significantly. In the case

of Poland, continued support to the EaP countries, and Ukraine specifically, can be expected from a government led by Civic Coalition and Donald Tusk. This government is also likely to take a more constructive approach to Poland's neighbors than the Law and Justice one, which would positively impact Warsaw's role as an advocate for enlargement to the east. On the other hand, the return of the pro-Russia Robert Fico as prime minister in Slovakia could lead to a changed approach to supporting Ukraine in its war efforts and EU aspirations. However, as enlargement and support to the EaP and Western Balkan countries traditionally play an important role in Slovakia's foreign and European policy, regardless of changes in government, a general shift in this agenda is improbable.

Other Channels for Influencing the EU Agenda

Presiding the Council of the EU is not the only channel for member states to have an impact on the agenda of the union. Apart from the formal channels through which member states can do so and influence the hierarchy of priorities, there are informal ways in which they can amplify their impact on issues of particular interest or national importance.

The means of influence outside the presidency or voting in the Council of the EU voting are even more important for smaller member states, which have less bargaining power inside the EU, particularly because of the smaller weight of their vote on issues decided by qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU. Among the V4 countries, this is true for Hungary, Slovakia, and, to some extent, Czechia, which despite its greater size perceives itself as a smaller member state with limited influence. The V4 countries' position is also impacted by their standing as more recent member states. There is a correlation between the length of membership and a member's level of its activity and success in utilizing different strategies to influence the EU agenda. This is because newer members have less institutional memory and understanding of different actors' positions and cleavages on various EU policies. This limits their opportunities for finding compromises and building networks of contacts and partners.⁴⁶ However, other factors—such as general EU expertise and expertise in priority EU policies, building flexible alliances, or having more qualified staff in their national missions in Brussels—can increase the influence of smaller member states significantly.⁴⁷

Member states can influence the agenda and priorities of the EU by proposing ideas and by building coalitions and groups of like-minded countries. They can also do so by bringing expertise on specific issues; for example, in the form of government papers, joint letters, and statements on issues, positions, and strategic priorities laid out in draft EU documents.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the ability of countries to place their nationals in high-level positions in the EU institutions, including the cabinets of the European Commission and European Council presidents and of commissioners, is also a significant factor in increasing their influence over the EU agenda.⁴⁹

The V4 countries have a mixed record in using these different channels of informal influence in the EU. Given their geographical position, historical experience, cultural and linguistic closeness, and developed expertise and network of contacts, they can provide the EU with valuable expertise about the EaP and Western Balkan countries. This has been reflected, for example, in V4 diplomats being appointed to relevant high-level positions, such as Czechia's Štefan Füle who was commissioner for enlargement and neighborhood policy in 2010–2014 and, as noted above,

Slovakia's former minister of foreign affairs Miroslav Lajčák who is the EU's special representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan issues.

The V4 countries have been also successful in obtaining positions relevant for EaP and Western Balkans in the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and European Union's External Action Service (EEAS), relative to their general representation in these bodies. The two institutions' current heads of divisions for Ukraine and for other EaP countries are the Czech Petra Gombalová Kyslingerová and the Polish Dorota Dlouchy-Suliga respectively. Katharina Mathernová, a Slovak national who was previously the deputy director-general in DG NEAR has recently become the EU's ambassador to Ukraine. The Czech diplomat Tomáš Szunyog is the EU's ambassador to Kosovo and the Polish diplomat Paweł Herczyński leads the EU's delegation to Georgia.⁵⁰ These are very high-level positions in the EEAS, in contrast to the overall underrepresentation of V4 nationals in the service—except for Hungary, their representation is below what their share of the EU's population would warrant. This is true especially for Poland, which is one of the most underrepresented EU countries relative to its population.⁵¹

The V4 countries have a mixed record in using these different channels of informal influence in the EU.

In DG NEAR, apart from the Hungarian Olivér Várhelyi as the commissioner, Maciej Popowski from Poland was the acting director-general until this year. The acting director of the Ukraine Service, the head of the secretariat of the Ukraine Donor Coordination Platform, and the head of unit for Georgia, Moldova, and the Economic and Investment Plan for the EaP too are Polish. A Czech representative is currently deputy head of unit for IFIs and Investments: Blended Finance and EU Guarantees.⁵² However, the V4 countries are underrepresented in the European Commission⁵³ relative to what its Staff Regulations stipulate.⁵⁴ Their relatively high representation in posts relevant for relations with EaP and Western Balkan countries and for enlargement policy suggests that the V4 countries are generally successful in obtaining important positions in these areas where they have good expertise and that are priorities in their foreign and European policies.

As regards the V4 countries' ability to form flexible alliances with other member states on enlargement and support to EaP and Western Balkan countries, there are several platforms or initiatives they are part of. While the most advanced one is the Visegrad group itself, the enlargement agenda is a crucial shared interest also for other regional platforms such as the Austerlitz format (Austria, Czechia, and Slovakia) or within the informal Central Five grouping (Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia). In past years, before the internal V4 falling-out due to Hungary's pro-Russia stance in the context of the war against Ukraine, the V4 countries sometimes reached out to other member states on the enlargement agenda through the V4+ format of meetings, thus strengthening alliances beyond the grouping. Despite not having EU enlargement or support to candidate countries among its goals, the Three Seas Initiative, which brings together 12 countries from Central and Eastern Europe with the aim of improving infrastructure and connectivity in the region, has accepted Moldova and Ukraine as associated members in order to provide the two countries with support in their integration with the EU.⁵⁵

The V4 countries have also been part of other wider initiatives supportive of enlargement. They are active members of the informal Tallinn Group, a group of “friends of enlargement” that brings together 14 EU countries that support a continued enlargement with consistent opening of negotiating chapters and a more effective and credible process.⁵⁶ The most recent initiative—which includes Austria, Czechia, Greece, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, and Slovenia—is the Friends of Western Balkans group, which advocates for a balanced approach to enlargement between Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine on the one hand and the Western Balkans on the other, as well as for a faster and gradual integration in the pre-accession phase for the latter.⁵⁷ In recent years, due to Hungary’s growing anti-EU stance and illiberal regime, Czechia and Slovakia have been increasingly looking for other EU partners in advocating for enlargement, leading a more proactive dialog with countries such as Austria, Slovenia, Germany or France and less region-centered discussions.

With regard to the V4 countries’ inputs into the EU’s strategic priorities and decisions, there have been some positive examples in relation to the renewed discussion about enlargement. In 2019, France—backed by several other member states—blocked the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia due to an alleged failure of the process to deliver democratic reforms in these countries and then proposed a reform of the rules guiding enlargement.⁵⁸ Nine other EU member states, including Czechia and Poland, issued a counterproposal replying to what they saw as potentially problematic aspects of the French paper.⁵⁹ Poland reportedly was among the four countries in charge of drafting the proposal backed by the other member states.⁶⁰ Czechia and Slovakia also intervened in the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia at the end of 2020 when they blocked the adoption of the negotiating framework in the Council of the EU due to the inclusion of disputes between Bulgaria and North Macedonia over the interpretation of history and national identity in the document, sensitive issues not related to the conditions of EU accession.⁶¹ As an advocate for gradual integration of candidate countries, Czechia has also put forward two non-papers over the past year focused on the possibility of accelerated integration of the Western Balkans and Ukraine and Moldova already in the pre-accession phase.⁶²

Thus, in relation to the ongoing discussion about the possibilities of enhanced integration and reformed accession process, at least Czechia or Poland have been active, providing their inputs into EU strategic discussions at the right moment in the process of formulation of new or reformed policies.

Conclusion

The paper shows the high level of engagement that the V4 countries have with the EaP and Western Balkan countries and the different platforms and instruments they use to support the region’s democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration. They have various formal and informal ways through which to influence the EU’s agenda in relation to enlargement policy and support to both regions, which they use with different degrees of effectiveness.

At the level of V4 and interregional cooperation, there is a paradoxical situation in which the V4 countries are still seen by the Western Balkan and to some extent the EaP countries as role models due to their economic and democratic transformation and successful Euro-Atlantic integration at the same time as both aspects are

being increasingly challenged within the V4 countries. Through bilateral and regional development and technical assistance as well as through the International Visegrad Fund, the V4 countries exercise a positive influence on the two regions, support them at the levels of civil society, independent media, democratic institutions, regional cooperation and reconciliation, and preparedness for integration into the EU.

The relations of individual V4 countries with the two regions differ significantly for reasons of history, geography, cultural closeness, and economic and security interests. The most visible difference is between Hungary and Poland, with the former concentrating its attention and resources on the Western Balkans and the latter supporting primarily EaP countries. There is, however, still potential to do more in terms of bilateral technical support and support through the EU integration process; for example, through better use of cooperation on joint Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance projects or by deploying more experts to assist the countries with integration into the EU (following the example of Hungary). There have been also examples of bilateral relations being subjugated to the political interests of the ruling elites or domestic political situation in the V4, as the preference of Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Czechia's Andrej Babiš for Serbia in enlargement or the tensions around the recent ban on the import of Ukrainian grain by Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, escalated in the case of Poland ahead of its elections.

At the EU level, some V4 countries are more proactive and constructive than others, and this is influenced by the internal V4 dynamics as some governments are seen as more reliable and trustworthy partners than others.

At the EU level, some V4 countries are more proactive and constructive than others, and this is influenced by the internal V4 dynamics as some governments are seen as more reliable and trustworthy partners than others. The Presidencies of the Council of the EU by V4 countries were generally successful in terms of prioritizing enlargement and support to the EaP and Western Balkan countries, although they were also largely shaped by circumstances. This had negative consequences in the case of the security situation in the EU's neighborhoods during Poland's presidency or of the EU's internal crises during Slovakia's presidency. On the other hand, the impact of Czechia's presidency was enhanced by Russia's war against Ukraine and the resulting renewed interest in enlargement among EU member states.

In terms of informal ways for the V4 countries to influence the EU's agenda and priorities and to advocate for enlargement, the most important ones are the formation of various alliances involving countries across the union; providing inputs, statements, and non-papers before crucial decisions at the EU level; and the ability to have nationals in high-level positions related to the EaP, the Western Balkans and enlargement policy, such as in the European Commission's DG NEAR or the EEAS.

There have been several examples of alliance building by the V4, either through involving other member states in joint meetings in the V4+ format or through initiatives such as the Tallinn Group, the Friends of Western Balkans initiative, or the non-paper released prior to the formulation of the new enlargement methodology. However, in order to break out from the prevailing division between newer and older member states, or between Europe's east

and west, which is still generally visible in the existing initiatives, the V4 countries should proactively seek partners beyond their region. The toxicity of Orbán's Hungary within the EU has pushed the other V4 countries to look for alternative formats without it, such as the Austerlitz format or the Friends of Western Balkans. However, this falling out within the four countries also hampers the V4-Western Balkans or V4-EaP meetings as well as the V4+ meetings with other EU members on topics of shared interest such as enlargement.

As regards the ability of the V4 countries to obtain relevant high-level posts in EU institutions and bodies, they are rather well represented in areas related to enlargement, Eastern Europe, and the Western Balkans, considering their general underrepresentation, especially in senior management positions. This suggests that they utilize relatively well the expertise they have on these regions and that they prioritize this agenda. However, they should aim for more such posts and even higher ones.

In terms of inputs into EU strategic documents and decisions, especially with the renewed discussion about enlargement and reforming the process, some of the V4 countries have been active individually and through wider alliances with other member states, providing their inputs in a constructive and timely manner, which has proved to be a successful strategy.

Recommendations

The V4 countries should continue providing support to the EaP and Western Balkan countries in the context of the renewed EU discussion about enlargement, and they should search for ways to reinvigorate the process toward faster progress and better results in terms of fundamental reforms.

The V4 countries can do more when it comes to sharing with these countries their experience and know-how from their own EU accession process. They should send their experts on specific policy areas to the candidate countries, following Hungary's example and they can also increase their participation in different Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance projects implemented for both groups of countries.

The V4 countries should also make greater use of their generally positive standing in the candidate countries and the fact that they are seen there as more relatable examples of successful Euro-Atlantic integration than older member states. This puts them in a position that they should use to be communicate frankly with the leaders of the EaP and Western Balkan countries when it comes to the problematic reform areas in these countries' EU accession process, where more efforts are needed, and who is responsible for their implementation.

The V4 countries' technical support through International Visegrad Fund should be continued and increased. The fund is a well-established and important instrument for connecting the civil societies of the V4, EaP, and Western Balkan countries as well as for advancing the democratic standards and preparedness of the candidates for EU accession.

The renewal of the V4+ format of ministerial meetings with Western Balkan countries, should be considered (and extending it to the EaP countries too potentially), as well as inviting like-minded member states such as Austria or Slovenia, representatives of the presiding country in the Council of the EU and the commissioner for enlargement and neighborhood policy to these meetings.

The V4 countries could also renew the V4-Western Balkans Expert Network on Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights and broaden it to include experts from the Associated Trio of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

At the EU level, the V4 countries should strive to build wider alliances of like-minded countries beyond Central and Eastern Europe when it comes to enlargement issues. They should also utilize the existing regional platforms, such as the Austerlitz format and the Three Seas Initiative, for offering support to the EaP and Western Balkan countries.

The presidencies of the Council of the EU by Hungary in 2024 and Poland in 2025 should prioritize the enlargement agenda, and this should be also reflected in the presidency trio programs. The V4 countries should advocate for the organization of the EU-Western Balkans summits, which are supposed to be held annually, and should consider calling for similar summits with the Associated Trio. The EU-EaP summit should also be organized annually, despite the different issues affecting the EaP policy framework at the moment.

The upcoming presidencies by Hungary and Poland should continue the good practice of inviting representatives of the EaP and Western Balkan candidates to meetings of shared interest of the Council of the EU. This should become a regular practice rather than something depending on the willingness of the presiding country—the Hungarian or Polish presidency could make this commitment part of a final EU summit declaration.

The V4 countries should take a more active part in the discussion about reforming the enlargement process and steps toward accelerated and gradual integration. They should provide regularly their inputs in the form of non-papers and statements prior to European Council meetings—individually or together with other pro-enlargement countries—to try to shape the discussion.

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