

Regional Dynamics of Two European Clusters: Cooperative Financial Tools and Collective Support as Part of V4 Presidencies' Foreign Approach Towards WB6 Partners

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Abstract: *Based on current paradigmatic, programmatic and operational changes, which oversee how global systems were transformed through inter-actor dynamics and systemic rifts, we can underline the necessity for an in-depth comprehension of the political and economic interactions between regional actors, especially within CEE and the EU's Neighbouring areas. Thus, as the present paper seeks to address this knowledge hiatus found in the field, there is an extrapolation and interpretation of the Visegrád Group's (V4) collaborative and cooperative patterns during the last full presidential cycle (Slovak Republic – 2018 to Slovak Republic – 2023). As such, this analysis is aimed at deciphering some of the ways used by the V4 to employ economic measures, as part of collective or individual foreign policy approaches, to further enhance Western Balkan partners' European trajectories and regional integratory processes, alongside their respective geostrategic and geoeconomic interests. When it comes to the methods utilised in this study, the primary and secondary questions are answered through an extensive collection, selection, and inspection of data produced throughout the V4 presidencies, including: official statements and papers (V4 memorandums, meeting minutes, declarations during the Balkan Forum, official statistics, etc.), specialist literature (academic articles and books, policy analysis, etc.) or related sources (expert groups, op-eds, think-tank reports, etc.). Based on these procedures and forthcoming findings, we can highlight a noticeable increase in the constant economic flows both between the V4 - WB6 (Western Balkans 6) corridor per se and amongst their members, although collective efforts remain highly volatile due to variations in chairmanship. Moreover, the presidencies' core priorities towards the WB6 seem to follow the general continental pivot regarding the area, with several larger initiatives being spearheaded to optimise interconnectedness between both regions, especially in complementarity with other EU and pan-European projects (e.g., EUSDR, EaP, 3SI, B9). Assuming that the socio-cultural and economic contexts amongst V4 countries are historically close, it is possible to underline that their political environment allows for shared foreign policies to be created, particularly when it comes to enhancing well-founded neighbourhood relations, expanding towards other*

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spheres of interest or assisting non-EU partners in their transition period (driven by their own development processes and good practices).

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Introduction

Since 2008, the *International Visegrád Fund* has been responsible for conceptualising, developing or implementing projects that facilitate civil society organisations' transfer of know-how, both within the Visegrád Group and, lately, in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, as of 2014, the *International Visegrád Fund* launched the *Civil Servants Mobility Program* which offers support for the official visits of Western Balkans' civil servants to the V4 countries, with a focus on sharing experiences and best practices concerning the implementation of sectorial reforms and the harmonisation of national legislations with the European norms. The financing for these amounts to more than 3 million EUR, as the *International Visegrád Fund* aims to contribute to the democratisation and transformation of the region (Andor, 2020).

Furthermore, the group was created as a comprehensive and complementary project to the EU integration efforts, trying, initially, to fill in the regional gaps through alternative or related initiatives across a range of strategic areas, rather than endeavouring to compete with existing structures (*Brdo Declaration*, 2021; *Western Balkan Summit*, 2022). In this regard, one of the key areas that remained unchanged and still maintains its status as a primordial agenda-setting element is the group's involvement in the construction of a stronger European security architecture, based on the consolidation of continental and transatlantic formats. The last decade has witnessed a growth that revolved around the exchange of knowledge, good practices and values in the fields of information transfers, climate change, defence and security, transportation, energy, justice, innovation, tourism, education, cultural heritage and arts (*International Visegrád Fund*, 2022).

As such, it is clear that the Visegrád Group is considered to be a key factor in gradually supporting the initiatives launched under the aegis of the Western Balkans Fund, including through high-level meetings, like the 2018 reunion hosted by the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Pristina. On that occasion, the heads of the Visegrád missions encountered the Regional Affairs Director and the Director of the Europe and European Affairs Department of the Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as they sought to "further integrate the Republic of Kosovo into the activities of the Western Balkans Fund" (Embassy of the Czech Republic in Pristina, 2018).

In the Western Balkans, if we look at the evolutionary trajectory of the civil society organisations and grassroot movements, in general, we can observe that they are still in their incipient stages, especially if compared with those of the Visegrád Group or of other European countries (*Think for Europe*, 2018). The area of economic and social aid has not been exhaustively explored by the Visegrád Group. The joint statement that marked Visegrád's 30th anniversary emphasized the need to support the growth of the civil sector, as part of a larger plan to revitalize the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Western Balkans area, pledging even higher budget allocations to the *International Visegrád Fund* (Janebová et al., 2021).

Few studies have explored the role that the Visegrád Group plays in encouraging democratisation, good governance, the rule of law, or overall societal building in the Western Balkan countries. This is one of the issues on which the V4 structure reached a consensus, with the agenda being pushed forth by synchronised bilateral efforts, in joint or multilateral formats, and carried out through cross-institutional entities like the *International Visegrád Fund* and its peninsular counterpart. Furthermore, the cooperation between the Visegrád Group and Western Balkan countries could be of interest for both governance and civil society actors in these areas, particularly due to the reiteration of the idea of the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU presented by the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in his statements on Europe Day (EU, 2023).

1. The background for cooperation

Several actions have been taken under the auspices of the United Nations' *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), as the Visegrád Ministries of Foreign Affairs were tasked with planning and supervising the general agenda, while the task of project implementation was assigned to other ministries, diplomatic missions, non-governmental structures, or even private contractors. In this context, the Slovak Republic established the *Sharing Slovak Expertise* (SlovakAid, n.d.) programme, managed by the *Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation* (SlovakAid, n.d.). Moreover, the Czech Republic created the *Human Rights and Transition Promotion Policy* within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2015). The Republic of Poland set up the *Solidarity Fund PL* (Solidarity Fund, 2022a), with coordination headquarters established in the Republic of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. Thus, the programme sought to conduct and support actions “aimed at strengthening democracy in (mainly post-Soviet) countries covered by the Polish Development Cooperation” and which “are founded on the basic principles and values of a democratic system: equality before the law; freedom of speech, conscience, assembly, association, and electoral rights; and other civil rights and liberties”. Additionally, the aforementioned initiative resonates “with the Polish tradition of fighting for freedom and democratic values, which Poland wishes to promote and support in the neighbouring countries, both in the name of international solidarity and for its own security” (Solidarity Fund, 2022b). “By contrast, Hungary’s 2020-2025 *International Development Cooperation Strategy* focuses on addressing the root causes of migration and fostering economic development more generally” in countries across the region (Brudzinska, 2021).

Therefore, we can emphasize that the cooperation between the Visegrád Group and the Western Balkans is not limited to the political, institutional or procedural levels, but also includes a robust sectorial and economic collaboration, which constitutes a standalone feature of both clusters and yet, at the same time, a complementary measure that bridges all the other processes (Brdo Declaration, 2021; Western Balkan Summit, 2022). Furthermore, this nexus is balanced, on one hand, by the synchronised individual endeavours (as it can be inferred from their development programs, which form a rather unitary mosaic of initiatives) and, on the other hand, by the juxtaposed synergy at the level of the entire bloc. The synergistic actions generally take the form of joint projects financed by the *International Visegrád Fund* and the *Western Balkans Fund*.

Additionally, the paper explores the aid provided by the Visegrád Group to activities of the macro-region that might overlap with other continental endeavours on policies regarding cohesion, energy security, European development, migration or, more recently, relations with the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership actors. This overarching approach was conceptualised and presented during the Czech Presidency of 2011-2012, under the aegis of which special interest was given to the consolidation of Central and Eastern European think-tanks, in order to broaden the spectrum of exchanges between various schools of thought (*Think Visegrád*, 2022).

Therefore, the paper tackles the issue of the economic support offered by the Visegrád Group to the Western Balkans. It classifies the clusters of cooperative financing and collective support provided throughout the last presidential cycle. In parallel, it aims to offer an overview of the interests expressed in the strategic documents, academic inquiries and public reports, within the scope of some of the EU's cooperation frameworks, so as to further explain the rationale behind the V4's focus on the wider European neighbourhood.

2. Methods

Using a mixed methodological approach, this research sought to answer several questions, the main one being: *How did the V4 countries cooperate with the Western Balkans from an economic standpoint, during the period 2018-2023?* Consequently, the paper is centred on a comparative, synthetic, non-exhaustive analysis of primary and secondary data sources with respect to both focus groups. Hence, the interpretations were initially formulated after studying a variety of documents issued by both the rotating Presidencies of the Visegrád Group (by the V4 members and adjacent structures, respectively) and by the Western Balkan partners and their collective agencies, enabling thus a juxtaposed understanding of the exchanges and programmes that connected these two regions during the given timeframe. Furthermore, we linked these data with a review of the specialist literature, in order to present a wide range of initiatives as a way to provide a comprehensive overview of the above-mentioned processes, and a model that can be utilized both in academic and non-academic prospective endeavours.

3. The patterns of economic interaction between Visegrád and the Western Balkans: from aid to inter-regional programmes

After joining the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic, 2017a: 5), the Slovak Republic was urged to establish its own official development assistance (ODA) programme. Through the creation of the *Bratislava-Belgrade Fund*, the Slovak Republic sought to manage projects targeting the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003). Subsequently, in 2007, the *Bratislava-Belgrade Fund* was included into the *Official Development Assistance* provided by the Slovak Republic, and although the Republic of Serbia was the main beneficiary of the Slovak development aid, other Western Balkan countries also became important recipients of it (Marjanović Rudan et al., 2016).

Within these formats, the Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic plays an important role in the development of the external cooperation of the Slovak Republic. In addition, it is tasked with the management of mandatory or voluntary Slovak

contributions to international organizations. Its programmatic document reveals that the Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic pursues its priorities of development, by considering the current needs of potential partners, the purpose and effectiveness of the assistance provided, the degree of access to expertise, the development of its personnel's capacities, the added value of the innovative elements, etc. It is noteworthy that almost all of its projects are implemented in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic, 2021).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Slovak Republic established a partnership with the UN Development Programme/UNDP. It is one of the oldest of its type in the region and it aims at sharing advice on the development policies. In the same spirit, it offers assistance in the management of development projects, including for cross-border initiatives. We have also identified specific topics that this partnership has been addressing for a long time, i.e. the support provided for public finance management, the involvement of the private sector, innovation, or the security policies in the Western Balkans.

In this context, the UNDP and the Slovak Finance Ministry have implemented since 2009 the *Public Finance for Development* programme, which sought to contribute to “sound public finance management and good governance in partner countries”, as it focused on “providing technical assistance to and institutional capacity building in the Eastern Europe and the Western Balkan countries that were implementing public finance reforms”. This programme brought together Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of North Macedonia, alongside Ukraine (*United Nations Development Programme, 2022a*).

An ongoing project, launched in 2018 and entitled “Effective Development Cooperation Solutions for the SDGs”, focuses primarily on generating “a proper environment for enabling the Slovak private companies to contribute to Slovakia's international development cooperation and its piloting of the new ODA programme, in order to strengthen the position of Slovakia as a development cooperation provider in the security sector reforms”. Some of the components of this project are:

1. *The Slovak Challenge Fund (SCF)*, which facilitates the transfer of Slovak know-how and innovative solutions (addressing development challenges), was accessed by two partner countries, North Macedonia and the Republic of Moldova, and it contributes to the achievement of several jointly assumed SDGs. Slovak expertise from the private sector is needed to tackle specific development themes:

- Sustainable use of natural resources through improved water management, waste management, or increased energy efficiency and clean energy utilisation in residential, agricultural, and other sectors;
- Increased productivity, partnerships, access to markets, and competitiveness of the organic agriculture actors (the farmers and the producers);
- Introducing and improving e-governance and open data use in the public sector management and delivery.

2. *The South-Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) initiative*, which is related to *Strengthening of Regional Cooperation on Gender Mainstreaming in Security Sector Reform in the Western Balkans*.

Until 2020, this project provided support to the Ukraine Energy Efficiency

Secretariat and Expert Hub, implemented and managed by the UN Development Programme in Ukraine. The overall purpose of the Hub was to consolidate the capacity of the Government of Ukraine to develop and implement its energy efficiency policy during the critical time of transition of the national energy markets, in particular the gas and electricity markets (United Nations Development Programme, 2022b).

Therefore, the Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic, together with the UNDP Bratislava Regional Centre, designed and implemented the programme *Public Finance for Development: Strengthening Public Finance Capacities in the Western Balkans and Commonwealth of Independent States*. This five-year initiative, which started in June 2009, was funded by the ministry (under the development cooperation programme of the Slovak Republic) and had a budget amounting to almost 2 million EUR, its aim being to actively contribute to public finance reforms and to increase their long-term efficiency and sustainability in the Western Balkans and the Eastern European countries. The project objectives included, among others: the joint development of analytical capabilities, skill building in public finance, creating the right starting point for successful reforms. On the one hand, the above-mentioned programme focused on raising awareness about the interrelation between sound public financial management and poverty reduction, human development and social inclusion, and, on the other hand, it enabled their understanding of this topic (OECD, 2018).

Since the support for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and the Eastern European partner states and, respectively, the aid provided for the sustainable development of these areas represent a long-term interest of the Slovak Republic, the country continues to consolidate and extend its relations and experience sharing with its development partners. However, this interest might slightly decrease, as the beneficiaries of the Slovak development aid make real progress and, consequently, the Slovak Republic will favour other formats of cooperation more complex in nature. Therefore, it was necessary to initiate a revision of the approaches adopted by the Slovak Republic in order to transcend current trends and aim for an increase in the processes related to the rationalization of the public administration, finances and state services, so as to generate prosperity and civic participation, or to strengthen the society's resilience to global challenges (Slovak MFA, 2019: 4).

During the period 2019-2023, the development cooperation of the Slovak Republic was to be implemented across the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, the Sub-Saharan East Africa and the Middle East, with *SlovakAid's* activities being reshaped to further capitalize on already existing results and to enhance relations. In this context, the development activities are also integrated into some of the long-term activities of the Slovak NGOs and of other actors from the *SlovakAid* partner countries. *SlovakAid's* presence in Africa, as well as in the Middle East, highlights, though indirectly, the current global challenges and, especially, the need to address the causes of migration and refugee crisis in the countries of origin and transit, in an attempt to bridge cross-continental actors (Slovak MFA, 2019: 17).

If we take a look at the *Medium-Term Development Cooperation Strategy of the Slovak Republic 2019 – 2023*, one of the fundamental documents of its development cooperation, we can observe that the territorial and sectoral focus of the *SlovakAid's* activities is established in accordance with Bratislava's foreign policy approach and the

broader Visegrád Group's projections or in line with the United Nations' directions (Slovak MFA, 2022).

Since 2019, the Slovak Republic has started to apply a more regional approach to its economic, monetary, fiscal and financial policies, allowing for the implementation of a large array of development interventions, thematically linked with those of the partner regions and shaped with respect to their specificities and particularities. Despite these renewed efforts, the global challenges have recently demonstrated the need for flexibility in terms of delivering development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Many agencies of the Slovak Republic are currently evaluating the achievements and setbacks of past external programmes, to further consolidate cooperation through a rather holistic perspective on solidarity.

The Czech Republic, in its development cooperation, focuses on contributing to the reduction of global poverty and inequality, while promoting its national interests. Prague is advancing its interests by strengthening the security and economic diplomacy in order to build up stronger political, trade and investment relations. Prague's total *Official Development Assistance* (\$361.7 million) increased in 2021, accounting for 0.13% of the *Gross National Income*, a percentage which exceeds even its vaccine donation levels, that were among the highest in the V4 countries. The *Principles for Providing Foreign Aid* and the objectives contained in the *Concept of the International Development of the Czech Republic 2002-2007* illustrate the extent to which the Czech Republic considers the development cooperation as an independent policy area.

In this spirit, "the *2010 Act on Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid* provided the framework for the Czech Republic's development cooperation. The *2018-2030 Development Cooperation Strategy* has set five thematic priorities: "building stable and democratic institutions, sustainable management of natural resources, agriculture and rural development, inclusive social development and sustainable economic growth". The beneficiaries of this development cooperation are actors such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, or the Republic of Moldova. Prague places special emphasis "on the coherence and unitary degree of the actions taken". In addition, the Czech Republic seeks to "advance its national priorities particularly within the framework of the European Union, through which the bulk of its ODA is channelled". Numerous documents reveal Prague's intentions to establish "stronger linkages and coherence between development cooperation and security-building measures, the development of international trade and the prevention of forced migration." (OECD-iLibrary, 2022).

In accordance with the *Development Cooperation Strategy 2018-2030* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2017a), the Czech Republic has prioritised its development cooperation in six partner countries (with which it has negotiated six-year development cooperation programmes). In those countries whose priority status ended in 2017 (namely, in Mongolia, the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia), a transition period (2018-2020) was required to complete any ongoing projects and phase out the development cooperation with the Czech Republic.

Moreover, we can observe that in 2016, the Czech Republic's bilateral *Official Development Assistance* focused mainly on Eastern Europe (27%), the Middle East (16%), North Africa (16%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (8%). Roughly 39.4% of the bilateral *Official Development Assistance* was allocated to the first ten beneficiaries of the Czech Republic,

as follows: the Republic of Moldova, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Georgia, Ukraine, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Republic of Serbia, Mongolia and the Republic of Iraq (Jones et al., 2019: 3).

In this sense, it is worth mentioning that “a low allocation of ODA flows to LDCs [Least Developed Countries] is again related to the strategic territorial priorities of the Czech Republic and of the other V4 countries”, since Prague tends to focus “especially on the cooperation with Eastern European countries and the Western Balkans”. The Czech Republic would like to “share its own experience of the political and economic transformation [it underwent on its European path] by transforming actors in both regions”, while “Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia have got the same aspirations” (Kovářová, 2021: 92). Thus, when it comes to Prague, we can deduce that the priority partner countries, from Eastern Europe or the Western Balkans, are chosen not only according to their transformative and external financing needs (criteria which explain the urgency of providing aid), but also in terms of politics and pragmatic purposes. In this spirit, the official statements of the Czech Republic, unlike those of its Visegrád Group peers, are straightforward (Kovářová, 2021: 97).

Furthermore, the *Development Cooperation Strategy 2018–2030* sets the following thematic priorities, which are closely linked to the United Nations SDGs: good democratic governance, sustainable management of natural resources, economic transformation and growth, agriculture and rural development, inclusive social development, etc. More specific thematic areas are listed in the bilateral *Official Development Assistance* (ODA) programmes (Jones et al., 2019: 3). Consequently, just like in the neighbouring Slovak Republic, in the Czech Republic the Ministry of Finance is tasked with establishing Prague’s participation in international financial organisations. As far as the multilateral ODA is concerned, the Ministry of Finance of the Czech Republic is responsible for the payments to the European Union, the *European Development Fund* and the *International Financial Institutions* (the *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, the *European Investment Bank*, the *Western Balkans 6*, etc.). It is noteworthy that other institutions of the country also play a key role in the approval process of the *Annual Official Development Assistance Plan* (Jones et al., 2019: 10).

Moreover, the Czech Republic already has a great track record of joint implementation of specific projects, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it cooperated with the *Swedish International Development Authority* and the *United States Agency for International Development* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2017b), but also in the Republic of Moldova and the Republic of Georgia, where it cooperated with the *Austrian Development Agency* and the *German Agency for International Cooperation*. Prague is interested in building up on its previous successes (Jones et al., 2019: 4).

If before the pandemic the prospects of the Czech Republic’s economy were quite promising, due to stable *Gross Domestic Product* growth and relatively low public debts, unemployment and inflation rates, which attracted favourable international ratings and foreign investments, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced deeply Prague’s capacity to act, both internally and externally. That is why it was necessary to revise the *Innovation strategy 2019-2030*, which aims at an increased adoption of and adaptation to

technological advancements and implies a strong international presence. As a result, the effects of this strategy are more closely associated with the regional cascading effects and represent less a *sui generis* endeavour (BTI Transformation Index, 2022).

Nonetheless, some ideas prevailed and one can easily notice that the structure of the 15th edition of the *Agenda for Czech Foreign Policy 2021* (published by the *Association for International Affairs of the Czech Republic*), differs substantially from that of the previous years. We can observe that some chapters were dedicated to analysing Prague's interactions with the Federal Republic of Germany, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, or even the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Belarus, or the Russian Federation (Janebová et al., 2021: 7), while other chapters remained focused on the policy of the Czech Republic towards already acknowledged partner regions, such as Central Europe, the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, or the Middle East and Northern Africa. Opinions derived from the Czech Republic's approaches, or mirroring them, and even reflections on some of the Visegrád Group's more informal positions, suggest that the support offered to the Western Balkans or Eastern Partnership areas should be adapted and the formats remodelled in a more flexible way, to further include a wider range of actors.

Furthermore, we can note that Warsaw supports the EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans because it regards them, through strategic and pragmatic lenses, as a vector of security and stability for the entire European continent. Probably, the Polish approach to this region is also influenced by the fact that the Republic of Poland has been a member of the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD) since 1996, and, as a member of the OECD, it took positions on this topic over the years (Statistics Poland, 2022). Nevertheless, current fluctuations within the Eastern and Southern vicinities require member states and unionist structures to work together to address common challenges, aspects that drive the Republic of Poland's commitment to development programmes.

Hence, Warsaw's involvement in the region is constantly growing, as demonstrated by its powerful stances and, especially, by its increased budgeting in the framework of the *Berlin Process* and within the Visegrád Group, or the 2019 Western Balkans Summit in Poznań. Thereby, "over 100 initiatives have been taken in Poland and in the region", since Warsaw "also donated over 1.5 million euros for regional infrastructure development projects" and pledged to allocate over "2.7 million euros to help rebuild Albania following a tragic earthquake which struck the country [in 2019]" (Website of the Republic of Poland, 2020a). It is in this context that the Republic of Poland supports local communities in the Western Balkans by offering foreign aid through development assistance projects, that help the beneficiaries expand in several strategic areas (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2022b).

In several documents, the Polish state delineates its priority partners as being, primarily, actors within the Eastern Partnership. Meanwhile, Warsaw stresses the importance of interacting with the southern part of the continent too, mainly through "joint financial pools", with a focus on "civil society building, good governance, as well as agricultural development". (Drażkiewicz-Grodzicka, 2011:2).

This continuity in offering support is evident in the case of the Polish Republic's democracy aid. Both the *Solidarity Fund PL* (Solidarity Fund PL, 2020: 5) and the *Polish Aid* (Kim, 2022) constantly provide democracy assistance, with slight changes in terms of priorities. Thus, in Ukraine, the *Solidarity Fund PL* continued to support the local administration reform, the local media and the *European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement*, while in the Republic of Belarus, it continued to assist the independent media, the human rights organizations, free and fair elections, civil society, and youth. Also, we can observe that the budgetary allocations for democracy support (allocations made through the *Solidarity Fund PL* and the *Polish Aid*, for all the funded projects) remain relatively unchanged, though they are gradually increasing (Petrova & Aydın-Düzgit, 2021).

Moreover, the projects included in the Republic of Poland's *Solidarity for Development programme* are a proof of its active involvement in the development of European trajectories and of its contribution to the achievement of the objectives specified in the *United Nations 2030 Agenda*. A very significant part of the *Polish Aid* programme encompasses development assistance projects, managed entirely by the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Poland and implemented through various governmental organizations. In this case, the main focus is on its regional neighbours, and Warsaw has already pledged that its assistance, starting from 2022, will be increased, in particular for the Western Balkan states, as an expression of its endorsement of domestic institutional reforms and continental aspirations. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2021: 5).

In December 2019, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland and the *United Nations Development Programme* launched the *Polish Challenge Fund* to further engage the interest of Polish private enterprises in addressing complex development challenges in partnership with regional actors. This initiative facilitates the transfer of knowledge, technological advancements and innovative solutions. Thus, in 2020, the *Polish Challenge Fund* (PCF) focused on providing support to ten joint innovation projects, in the fields of green technologies, information and communication technologies, in the Republic of Belarus and in Ukraine. Subsequently, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Republic of Poland joined the *United Nations Development Programme regional multi-partner response BOOST* to further enhance its transnational support (Website of the Republic of Poland, 2020b), alongside the *United Nations Development Programme Partnership: Innovative Solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals*, launched with a similar aim and as a build-up on the experiences accumulated through the 2020 PCF.

Furthermore, in addition to the modalities of assistance offered by the Challenge Fund, the new project has a "Knowledge Management component and focuses on Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine, and four development challenges: green technologies and smart solutions, information and communication technologies (ICT), anti-COVID-19 solutions and smart cities." (*United Nations Development Programme*, 2022b).

To sum up, the Republic of Poland has been a stable supporter of the Western Balkans' accession to the European Union. Due to its particularized perspective on external affairs, it places great emphasis on the geostrategic, geopolitical and macroeconomic

benefits of the process, putting forth, on numerous occasions, its successful transition and integrative experiences as a model for the region. While Warsaw proved to be a “tiger” (by analogy with the *Four Asian Tigers*) in terms of economic growth in the wider Eastern Europe area, the Western Balkans’ progression is hampered by different challenges, sometimes difficult to overcome, though all their development programmes entail the adoption of various democratic and European values. In spite of this mixed dynamics, the new initiatives of the Republic of Poland and its overall leadership position confirm its attachment to the idea of international solidarity and its sense of shared responsibility, including in areas that are not geographically connected to Warsaw, but rather linked with it by the shared pan-European ideals.

As far as Hungary is concerned, when the first negative reverberations of the pandemic were felt throughout the country and affected the Hungarian economy, the government stated that internal matters would be at the heart of its economic policies and, consequently, rather effective measures have been taken at national level, much to the detriment of Hungary’s international pursuits (Moldicz, 2021: 1).

It is worth mentioning that the *Global Green Growth Institute* in Hungary has the responsibility to assist Budapest in achieving its national and international climate goals, including by the implementation of a version of the *National Clean Development Strategy* (modified in order to achieve the 2050 climate neutrality standards) and of other policies designed under the *European Green Deal*. In this context, the *Global Green Growth Institute* supports bilateral environmental initiatives, including in the Western Balkans. More specifically, it focuses on urban sustainable planning, energy efficiency, the implementation of private-led bankable projects, or transportation renewal. Therefore, in 2019 the *Global Green Growth Institute* assisted Hungary’s executive branches in the creation of the *Western Balkans Green Centre*, an international development agency established to further support dedicated climate action, bilateral financing and green transition in the area (“Global Green Growth” Institute).

Additionally, Eximbank, the Hungarian Export-Import Bank Plc, opened several lines of credit, destined to encourage or facilitate investments into business operations across the Western Balkans. Thus, the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina individually received 61.5 million euros, and Montenegro approximately 150.000 euros (Domaradzki et al., 2018: 18). Several major Hungarian enterprises also invest in the banking and energy sectors of this region that equally benefits from EU funding. The *Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance* (IPA) of the EU regularly allocates funds for the implementation of cross-border cooperation projects. Budapest is urging for the completion or restoration of infrastructure connections, such as railways and highways, throughout the region and, much like the Republic of Poland or the *Three Seas Initiative*, often emphasizes the importance of developing the North-South infrastructure (Domaradzki et al., 2018: 33).

Moreover, Hungary’s *International Development Cooperation Strategy for the period 2020-2025* (IDC2025) is based on five goal-oriented pillars and is constructed in a way that would ensure Budapest “plays a more prominent role in addressing some of the foremost challenges faced by the international community.” Also, “in line with the vision of IDC2025, Hungary seeks to “contribute to the sustainable development of our partner countries and their local communities in a manner consistent with their

needs and demands, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and socio-environmental concerns”. The Hungarian government endeavours to “provide assistance where it is most needed, thereby addressing the root causes of migration; concurrently, Hungary recognizes that international development cooperation is an important enabler of, and tool for promoting, economic partnerships and economic development more generally.”. Therefore, the IDC2025 seeks to directly “stimulate the enhanced involvement of the private and civil sectors in development”, especially across several strategic dimensions within the Western Balkans (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, 2020). In accordance with the principle of “leaving no one behind”, *Hungary's International Development Cooperation Strategy for the period 2020-2025* closely complies with the objectives of the *UN 2030 Agenda* and the general guidelines of the *OECD Development Assistance Committee*, particularly in terms of eradicating poverty and addressing inequality at the continental level. It lays a greater emphasis on Budapest's role in international negotiations and strives to create mutually beneficial long-term economic partnerships.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary announced that the *Western Balkans Investment Scheme*, which seeks to enhance the economic development of the region, is to be achieved through a network of public-private partnerships, alongside a trade stimulus worth over 17 million euros. In this framework, almost ten beneficiaries receive support in implementing joint projects (Government of Hungary, 2022: 9). Due to this “renewed interest in strengthening economic ties with the Western Balkans and in increasing trade flows” (Hettyey, 2013: 1-19), the *Hungarian Export Promotion Agency*, which is in charge of the operational management of the *Western Balkan Investment Scheme*, introduced, in 2020, this investment tool with a total available budget of 7 million euros, dedicated to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and the Republic of Serbia, “in the pursuit of creating new economic instruments in the area” (Hungarian Export Promotion Agency, 2020). It also aims at promoting greater continental integration, an aspect which is a part of Budapest's independent and distinctive foreign policy approach (Huszka, 2017: 596).

In conclusion, Hungary regards the Western Balkans' transformative and integrative processes as a crucial part of its own external and economic affairs, seeking to stabilise the region and reconstruct a financially strong vicinity, as its projects allow for increased market participation and capitalise on the achievements of the companies that are already present on the market. These endeavours, connected with increased socio-cultural relations and the strengthening of institutional ties (which became more concrete in recent years, especially between Hungary and the Republic of Serbia), seem to be a stepping stone for an ever-growing regional influence, an aspect that might also turn Hungary into a pole of attraction for its Visegrád peers or for third actors.

4. Economic ties and foreign policy perspectives in the V4-WB6 corridor

From its inception in 1991, the Visegrád Group (V4) has not been considered as an alternative to the European efforts, but rather as an attempt to fill a void in the functional structures of Central and Eastern Europe. Its primary purpose was to integrate its four member states into the networks of the European Union and of NATO. Once this purpose achieved, its interest has shifted to increasing cooperation, including with

actors on the V4's frontier or periphery (Statistics Poland, 2020). Thus, this entity became a rather unique hybrid network that fostered subcontinental collaboration patterns, initially among its members and, subsequently, with common strategic areas, like the Eastern Partnership or the Western Balkans.

The Visegrád Group can be regarded as a transnational enabler of dialogue and a platform that safeguards collective interests and increases representation in a multilevel and omnidirectional manner within the wider region, while also leaving an ever-increasing mark on the international arena (Törő et al., 2013: 364-393). There were fluctuations and rearrangements, sometimes overlapping, in the V4's dealing with different matters, like migration, pandemic challenges, socio-cultural development. At times, the members of the V4 disagreed about the interaction with other global actors, whereas their support for the EU integration of the partner countries from the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, within the formats set by Brussels, remained constant, seemingly (Bogzeanu, 2011: 26, 29-30; Ivanova, 2016: 35-39; Zucconi, 2020).

While analysts argue that the setbacks of the Western Balkans, on their European path, lead to questioning the process of Europeanisation or jeopardize altogether Brussels' normative power, the presidencies of the Visegrád Group appeared to be more than willing to assume a pragmatic role and implement a series of complementary initiatives, which help the Western Balkan states advance on their continental and transatlantic trajectories. The V4 viewed this as a window of opportunity to assert its capacity as a regional player (Manners, 2002: 235-258; Petrescu, 2020: 81-90).

From all the other documents we consulted, a joint statement made by the Visegrád prime ministers in 2021 stands out and is worth mentioning, with some aspects that can also be found in the messages sent during the 2021 *European Union-Western Balkans Summit* hosted by Slovenia. They reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the peninsula's accession and they pledged to continue their efforts towards increasing development and inter-regional collaboration (Website of the Council of the European Union and the European Council, 2021; Loy, 2021; Bagoly, 2021).

In addition, if we look at the latest developments of the 2022-2023 Slovak presidency of the V4, we can conclude that, following the EU's Council decision to grant candidature status to Ukraine and to the Republic of Moldova, Bratislava highlighted the group's support for their European pathway, reiterating once more the commitment of the CEE to provide aid to Europe's neighbouring areas. Furthermore, several documents put forth under the Slovak chairmanship reveal that the Western Balkans' integration remains one of the V4's core priorities. Several programmes allow for tangible progress in the Europeanization of these states, both from a socio-cultural and an economic perspective.

Bratislava increased the International Visegrád Fund budget to 10 million euros in 2022, as a way of providing more resources, which will be redirected towards strengthening regional cooperation efforts, especially amongst youth, as the organization seeks to expand its horizontal and vertical approaches within and beyond the area (Slovak Presidency, 2022). Therefore, several documents place emphasis on the attention required by the EaP and WB6 partners, especially in order to mitigate the Russian-Ukrainian war's effects and its unprecedented humanitarian crisis. In this sense, the Slovak presidency sought to build up and augment a special line of credit (which reached 1 million euros

in the spring of 2022), destined to support projects that are directly linked to Ukrainian refugees and migrants, both across the V4 and WB6 regions (Slovak Presidency, 2022).

To further optimise the IVF operationality, Bratislava proposed that all V4 governments endorse a large campaign to secure funds from third donors, as a way of creating a public-private partnerships network, that would be focused on developing inter-regional research in some of the EU's strategic areas (e.g., healthcare and the green transition). Similar to other presidential cycles, the last Slovak Presidency reiterated and consolidated the group's position towards enhanced cross-border cooperation, especially in the EaP and Western Balkans' areas. Such synergies can be directed at optimising the latter's European trajectories. A new range of highly visible activities is unveiled, allowing for the V4 to strengthen its position in the collective imagery, both at home and abroad.

Conclusions

To sum up, under the V4 presidencies, the successful completion of the EU integration process of the Western Balkans or the Eastern Partnership countries is viewed as an opportunity to strengthen the region in a triangular manner (Baltic Sea – Adriatic Sea – Black Sea), to shape its prospective pathways on the basis of shared values, principle-anchored cooperation and increased predictability. This aspect confirms the validity of the inherent assumptions of this research paper. While collectively beneficial, the endeavour is expected to stimulate, on a greater scale, the consolidation of regional power amongst the members of the Visegrád Group and, simultaneously, the emergence of new perspectives on conducting studies and making political, economic and social projections, especially with the aim of eliminating the interference of non-Western competitors in Brussels' neighbourhood (Domaradzki et al., 2018: 30).

The mechanism of the Visegrád Group presidency plays an important role in these endeavours, since it ensures a rotating leadership that often reinvigorates the bloc and fulfils the requirements of negotiations, mediation and conciliation processes of all the parties involved. (*Visegrád Group*, 2022). Usually, when it comes to external affairs, the presidency formulates its programme on a collective aspiration to “capitalize on their unique experiences” (Végh, 2014: 7), mainly with regard to democratic transformation and transition processes within the Western Balkans. This approach clarifies the manner in which this collaboration is carried out.

The V4 as a concrete foundation for regional projects seems to have worked so far and this is why we have decided to take a closer look at its objectives and actions, in general, and its interactions with the Western Balkan partners, in particular. The V4 presidencies and funding patterns offered us useful insights into its priorities and areas of interest. This research can provide a transcontinental radiography on the current and future dynamics of the relations between these two clusters and, in extenso, on the dynamics at the heart of Europe, especially if one further studies the issues addressed in this paper and elaborates on some of the new insights it offers. Though numerous socio-economic ties with the WB6 partners have been spearheaded by the V4, particularly during the latest presidential cycles (aspect that could become a topic for further analysis), this research could not have encompassed all the direct and indirect measures taken by the above-mentioned countries, or the positive and negative ramifications and cascade effects entailed by those initiatives, because such a detailed account would have required longer timeframes and correlative data.

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