



Regional Convention on
European Integration
of the Western Balkans



V4 COUNTRIES IN THE PROCESS OF EU INTEGRATION OF THE **WB6** AND IMPLEMENTATION OF BERLIN PROCESS

Project - "Together for EU Enlargement - V4 and WB Strengthening
Cohesion of EU Integration and Berlin process"



GOVERNMENT OF
MONTENEGRO





European Movement
Montenegro

Regional Convention on European Integration
of the Western Balkans

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REGIONAL STUDY

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REGIONAL STUDY

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Vasa Raičkovića 9, 81000 Podgorica

Tel/Fax: 020/268-651;

Email: office@emim.org

Web: www.emim.org

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INTRODUCTION

Dear friends,

In the fifth year of the Regional Convention of the European Integration of the Western Balkans, we are coming to the successful end of another line of activities, fully dedicated to exploring of the structure, aims, achievements and capacities related to EU integration of the Western Balkans

in all six countries of the region, as well to exploring of different ways and levels of engagement of Visegrad 4 countries to all aspects of this process.

Within this policy study, **“V4 countries in the process of EU Integration of WB6 and implementation of Berlin process”**, we have tried to bring to closer regional and European attention all the efforts of the countries of the V4 that are related to institutional, social, political and economic assistance to WB6 countries within their efforts to become members of the EU family of nations..

This particular study was conducted within the project **“Together for EU Enlargement - V4 and WB Strengthening Cohesion of EU Integration and Berlin process”**, and it relates to assessing capacities and achievements of the institutional activities, as well as efforts of various social, political and economic subjects within Visegrad 4 countries that are directly or indirectly supporting Berlin process and overall EU accession of the Western Balkans countries.

At the very end, our intention was to draw specific recommendations for each category of the involved stakeholders, in order to take the most out of the involvement of the Visegrad 4 group inside the Berlin Process. Special attention was also paid to the contribution of Visegrad 4 to overall reforms and advancement of the WB6 countries at the EU membership path in general.

We would like to thank our partners on the project which directly contributed to the development of 4 studies for each of the Visegrad 4 countries: (EUROPEUM from Czech Republic, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade from Hungary, Research Center of Slovak Foreign Policy Association from Slovakia and Warsaw Institute from Poland), as well as to other local, regional and EU external partners that have supported our project in different capacities, with special gratitude to the Government of Montenegro.

Finally, and above all, this study and entire realization of the project would not be possible without support of the International Visegrad Fund, that was generously supporting our ideas and work since the very beginning of creation of the Regional Convention on European Integration of the Western Balkans.

We hope that we have justified the trust and hopes of our partners, friends and supporters and that following pages will find a practical use in the work of various structures, organizations and institutions that are dealing with Berlin process, as well to relations between Western Balkans and Visegrad 4 countries in various aspects of the EU integration in general.

Regional Convention on European Integration of the Western Balkans

The Czech Republic in the process of EU Integration of WB6 and implementation of Berlin process

The Western Balkan region represents one of the most important vectors of the Czech foreign policy since the country's EU accession in 2004. This is manifested through relatively high support to the region through the Czech development aid¹, financial support to the political transformation and democratization of the region via the Transition Promotion Program of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs² and vocal support to the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the Western Balkan countries. For the Czech Republic, the Western Balkans also provide interesting trade and investment opportunities. The proactive search for deepening of economic cooperation with the region was strongly manifested in the Czech economic diplomacy focus, a dominant feature of the Czech foreign policy especially since 2014 under the government led by social democrats.

A successful economic and political transformation of the Western Balkan countries, stability and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region are of crucial importance for the Czech Republic for several reasons. Apart from the above-mentioned economic opportunities the region provides for Czech export as well as strategic investments, other factors based on the close historical and people-to-people ties between the Czech Republic and the Western Balkans also influence the Czech approach towards the region. Despite not neighbouring directly with any Western Balkan country, the Czech Republic was affected by the wars following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, providing humanitarian aid to the region and granting asylum to many people escaping the war. Stability and good democratic governance in the Western Balkan countries is further important for

1. Priority countries for Czech development cooperation are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. Czech MFA, available at: https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/lidska_prava/prioritni_zeme_a_projekty_transformacni/index.html

2. Czech MFA, Transition Promotion Program website, at: https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/human_rights/transition_promotion_program/index_1.html

the Czech Republic due to the Czech minorities living in the region (e.g. in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina). In terms of support to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkan countries, the Czech Republic has traditionally been among the main advocates for the EU enlargement towards the region, offering its know-how gained through its own integration path.

Despite the strong support for the Western Balkans' integration into the EU as well as profound economic, political and societal transformation of the region, this support is usually voiced through larger multilateral platforms – the Visegrad Group and the EU. The cooperation between the Czech Republic and the region is limited predominantly to bilateral relations with each of the WB6 countries, using the V4 as a channel for implementing its policy towards the region as a whole.

The Czech Republic and the Berlin Process

The Czech Republic is not directly involved in the Berlin Process, despite suggestions from some WB6 countries³ and close following of the developments of the process. Due to the high interest and engagement of the V4 in the region, an opportunity for coordination and potential cooperation was provided in 2019 when Poland hosted the Berlin Process Summit in Poznań. However, based on the interviews conducted for this study as well as before the Summit, this potential was not utilized. Coordination between the agendas covered by the Visegrad countries and the Berlin Process could thus be improved in the future. Apart from infrastructure, the Czech companies are often involved in the energy sector, providing support in modernization of the existing structures and introduction of green energy.

The Czech Republic has particularly significant investments in Serbia where it is the fourth biggest foreign investor.⁴ In the business cooperation, the priority sectors for the Czech companies are those connected to infrastructure and energy, agriculture, forestry or food and drinks industry. The region further represents an important export opportunity for the Czech companies developing defence and security technology. The Czech Republic also strives for a more significant involvement in digitalization, including public administration and eGovernance. The previous experience in the field of digitalization (listed below in the relevant subchapter) could serve as a basis for a more significant involvement in the developing of digital economy and market in the Western Balkans.

In terms of European integration and assistance to the candidate countries in enhancing their preparedness for EU accession, it is important to mention not only IPA Twinning projects (IPA Twinning Project SR 13 IB EC 01 Strengthening Capacities of National Quality Infrastructure and Conformity Assessment Services in the Republic of Serbia⁵ but also partnerships at the municipal level. The Czech International Advisory Centre for Municipalities has cooperated with several municipalities and regional agencies in the Czech Republic in know-how transfer, especially in the field of local administration

3. Interviews with WB6 diplomats in Prague

4. CzechTrade, <https://www.businessinfo.cz/navody/srbsko-obchodni-a-ekonomicka-spoluprace-s-cr/#section-23>.

5. More information about the project at https://www.cai.cz/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/ipa_publication-eng-3-1-1.pdf.

and use of EU funds, with their Western Balkan counterparts.⁶ It is also important to mention the sharing of experience and know-how of the other Czech agencies and special chambers with their counterparts in the region (for example in the field of agriculture and food and drink industries, forestry etc.).

A more structured approach towards the Western Balkan region, beyond the scope of bilateral relations and cooperation, was initiated in the context of the migration crisis and the importance of the Balkan route for the security of Central Europe. The communication and coordination between the Czech authorities and their Western Balkan counterparts intensified, especially at the level of Ministries of Interior, police and border management agencies. The Czech Republic also provided financial support to countries affected by the migration crisis, especially Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Infrastructure and connectivity

The Berlin Process is closely followed and highly supported by the Czech Republic. The large BP projects, especially related to the Connectivity agenda, represent a very interesting business opportunities for the Czech companies, many of which are already well established in the region. The Czech Republic has cooperated on several projects aimed at improvement and modernization of the infrastructure in the Western Balkan countries, thus the potential for involvement in the Berlin Process projects could build on this already created contacts and previous experience. However, none of the interviewed institutions was aware of involvement of a Czech company in any of the implemented Berlin Process projects so far.

Some of the examples of Czech participation on projects improving the infrastructure in the region are following:

- Czech participation on reconstruction of the railway lines between Podgorica and Nikšić.
- Participation of AŽD Praha in modernization of the railway station in Belgrade-centre. The consortium was led by the Serbian Energoprojekt and AŽD Praha was the main technology supplier. More cooperation between AŽD Praha and other Czech railway companies with Serbia followed this positive experience.
- The Czech company Loko Trans signed a contract with North Macedonia on building a railway container terminal in Skopje. The company is also aspiring to participate in reconstruction and modernization of the railway infrastructure in Albania.
- In terms of touristic infrastructure, Czech volunteers cooperate with Albanian agencies in development of infrastructure in Albanian mountains.

Digitalization

The Czech Republic's strong focus on digitalization, digital economy and interest in the development of the Digital Single Market in the EU is reflected also in its engagement

6. International Advisory Centre for Municipalities - projects, <http://www.mepco.cz/index.php/mezinarodni-projekty-2/>.

with the Western Balkans. Czech companies engage in the Western Balkan countries' markets in the pursuit of technology and digitalization of public administration.

Probably the most visible outcome of the cooperation in the field of digitalization has been the cooperation between the Czech Neutral Interconnection Node with Montenegrin colleagues. Employees of NIX.CZ, the Czech Neutral Interconnection Node, collaborated with colleagues from the Montenegro Internet Exchange Point (MIXP) University to develop and launch an independent interconnection node in Montenegro. The aim of the Montenegrin national interconnection is to contribute to the development of the Internet in Montenegro, to improve the quality of the Internet connection and to reduce its price. Within the Danube Peering project supported by the START Fund of the European Commission, Czech Internet experts focused primarily on putting the technical infrastructure into operation and strengthening operational capacities.

Another example of cooperation was the engagement of a Czech tech company in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Czech company Incinity implements a platform for integrating digital technologies and services in an urban environment in Tuzla. The Tuzla project was supported under the Partnership for Sustainable Development Goals between the Czech Republic and the UNDP.

In Serbia, the Czech PPF investment group announced last year that it acquired a 100% stake in the Serbian Telenor Bank from the Telenor telecommunications group. The transaction was part of the acquisition of Telenor's telecommunications assets in Central and Eastern Europe, namely Hungary, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Serbia. The bank specializes in innovative online financial services and is the first in Serbia to introduce mobile and internet banking.

Energy and environment

The Czech Republic and Czech companies engage frequently in the energy sector in the Western Balkan countries. Although very often the cooperation focuses on green energy, building and modernization of thermal power plants also represents an interesting opportunity for the Czech companies.

As the environment is still one of the most dire problems in the region, which is closely connected to the energy sector, the Czech Republic often provides its know-how to their counterparts from the Western Balkans and cooperates on projects related to energy efficiency, use of renewable energy sources but also cleaning of the environment, for example the landfill remediation or wastewater treatment.

In Montenegro, a Czech company (Garnets) participated in the remediation of the "Vrtijeljka" landfill near Cetinje. A Czech investor co-financed a small hydroelectric power plant in Bijelo Polje. On the other hand, the most prominent Czech company, Škoda Praha, is cooperating on the project of completion II block of the Pljevlja thermal power plant.

The Czech engagement in projects focused on environment is most intense in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Usually these projects are financed by the Czech Republic through

the Czech Development Agency for which Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a priority country. The projects include for example the implementation of Czech-funded wastewater treatment projects in Gradačac, Bogušići and Kiseljak or a project in Cazin focused on detecting the presence of geothermal springs and propose their subsequent use for the development of the town.

Another example of the Czech support to development of use of green energy and environment protection is the donation for the project "Program to facilitate access to the Green Climate Fund and preparation of suitable projects for Serbia and neighbouring countries of the Western Balkans" by the Czech Government. This project is aimed at supporting countries in the preparation of projects to be submitted to the Green Climate Fund.

In Serbia, the Czech Republic participated in the twinning project "Capacity development in the field of plant protection products and pesticide residues", implemented in cooperation with the British partner Health and Safety Executive. The project focuses on the development of capacities of the relevant state administration bodies and harmonization of legislation on plant protection products with European standards.

Economic cooperation

The economic cooperation is particularly strong between the Czech Republic and Serbia as Serbia represents a traditional trade partner for Czech companies and the Czech Republic is the fourth main investor in the country. The most attractive industries for Czech companies are those related to infrastructure, energy sector, agriculture and food and drinks industry as well as defence and security technology. Another field where more cooperation is continuously encouraged and which provides potential opportunities for Czech companies is the growing tourism industry in the Western Balkan countries.

For example, Czech experts have long played an important role in the modernization and revitalization of the Serbian petrochemical industry. The CB&I s.r.o. company has been successfully implementing large projects in the Serbian refinery Pančevo. In Serbia, Czech companies also participate significantly in construction or modernization of airports and heliports, including the reconstruction of runway systems of the largest Serbian airports.

In terms of the food and drinks industry, one of the main successes is the 100% acquisition of Serbian producer of mineral water and soft drinks Knjaz Miloš. The new owner is the Czech company Karlovarské minerální vody, a.s. and American PepsiCo through a joint venture. Czech companies achieved also the entry into the Albanian market. At the end of 2018, the Budweiser Budvar entered the Albanian market. At present, the Albanian partner is expanding the country's distribution network and acquiring new partners from retailers and restaurants.

Czech companies also often engage with the region through cooperation in the defence and security technology industry as well as in the development of the flood protection systems (due to the Czech experience with the disastrous floods in 2002). In Serbia, the Czech Republic was involved in development of flood protection systems in Sremska

Mitrovica and Čačak. As the region presents opportunities for the security and defence industry, a traditionally strong sector in the Czech Republic, bilateral as well as regional forums for companies in this field are frequently organized. The position of Česká zbrojovka, a leading Czech company, is particularly strong in the region and other Czech companies aspire to enter the market in the future.

Regional cooperation and reconciliation

The Czech Republic traditionally supports efforts and initiatives leading to a closer cooperation among the Western Balkan countries and initiatives promoting reconciliation among societies and communities in the region. In this regard, the Visegrad Group often serves as an inspiration and positive example, proving the benefits of regional cooperation not only in the context of EU integration but also per se. The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) developed a special grant program focused on cooperation between the civil societies and non-governmental organizations from the V4 and the Western Balkans (Visegrad+ projects) focused on projects supporting the transformation, democracy, good governance, regional cooperation and reconciliation in the WB countries. The civil society dimension of the interregional cooperation and the transfer of the positive experience from Visegrad was developed further with the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund (WBF). The Fund, established according to the IVF model and with support from the IVF experts, supports regional projects, strengthening thus the ties among civil society across the region. Furthermore, the WBF was financially supported by the Visegrad governments. At its launch, the budget for the first call for application was matched by the same amount provided by the V4 (30,000 EUR) and the V4 governments provided 80,000 EUR to support the operational capacity of the WBF.⁷

The Czech Presidency in the V4, played a crucial role in the development of the WBF at several occasions. The idea of establishing of the WBF originated at the V4+Slovenia Summit in Prague in 2011, held under the Czech V4 Presidency.⁸ The WBF was formally established with signing of the agreement at another annual V4-WB Summit in Prague in November 2015.⁹ At the last V4-WB Summit in Prague, the continuation of support to the WBF by the Visegrad governments was approved. The regular summits between the V4 and WB ministers and prime ministers as well as regular communication at other levels of the ministries represents yet another opportunity for the Western Balkan countries to communicate and cooperate, potentially advancing regional cooperation and reconciliation initiatives.

7. Czech MFA, Visegrad Group – Western Balkans Fund became a reality, available at: https://www.mzv.cz/pristina/en/bilateral_and_multilateral_relations/visegradaska_skupina_zapadobalkansky_fond.html

8. Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group and Slovenia on the Western Balkans, 2011, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2011/joint-statement-of-the>

9. Czech MFA, Visegrad Group – Western Balkans Fund became a reality, available at: https://www.mzv.cz/pristina/en/bilateral_and_multilateral_relations/visegradaska_skupina_zapadobalkansky_fond.html

• Visegrad Fund



Regional Convention on European Integration of the Western Balkans

Hungary's role in strengthening connectivity between the EU and the Western Balkans

Authors: Ferenc Németh and Anna Orosz

Supporting the European integration of the Western Balkan countries is one of those Hungarian foreign policy priorities that enjoy national consensus. Accordingly, Hungary supports every initiative that speeds up this process and strengthens closer integration with the region and it has been using various platforms, including Visegrad cooperation for this purpose. The country has not been involved into the Berlin process, so Budapest did not contribute directly to the implementation of that initiative.

Nonetheless, Hungary as a neighbouring country to the region has been engaged in a number of projects aiming to strengthen connectivity. This is of mutual interest as Budapest took several measures to increase further the economic ties with the region where Hungary is an important investor and trade partner.

When it comes to building physical infrastructure, Hungary is concerned mainly with projects related to Serbia, its direct neighbour. The governments of Hungary and Serbia already signed an Agreement on the road, railway and water border control on 14 January 2013. Two Memoranda of Understanding have been signed at prime ministerial level about the comprehensive development of connectivity between the two countries, aiming to develop road, railway and water infrastructure as well as network of border crosses between Hungary and Serbia.

In July 2015, the prime ministers expressed their support for:

1. modernising the Belgrade-Budapest railway which is part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) core network;
2. reconstruction of the Szeged–Subotica (in Hungarian: Szabadka), possibly with continuing support of the IPA CBC and inclusion of Szabadka–Csikéria–Bácsalmás–

Baja railway into TEN-T/SEETO as well as supporting East-West connections through better linking TEN-T/SEETO North-South X/b and VII (Danube), and multimodal junction points;

3. increasing the number of road and river border crossings (Röszke–Horgos II, Bácsszentgyörgy–Haraszti, Kübekháza–Rábé, at Szeged on Tisza); and
4. inclusion of Tisza in Rheine-Danube TEN-T corridor.

By the time of the second MoU signed in April 2019, the two countries established eight road border crossing points (including Röszke–Horgos II, Bácsszentgyörgy–Haraszti) so people can cross the border every 21 kilometres. The parties also foresaw the facilitation of better railway and water connection through agreements on railway and river shipping. Furthermore, they supported the establishment of road connection between Kübekháza–Rabe by September 2019 via using IPA CBC HU SRB funds. The border crossing is allowed by temporary facilities sustained by Hungary. The permanent road border crossing will be built on the Hungarian side in first half of 2022. Similarly, the renovation of road connection between Baja and Sombor is going to be funded by IPA CBC HU SRB. The final aim is to allow freight traffic through this connection. The two governments also agreed to work on speeding up border crossing, particularly with regard to the Schengen borders.

The political decisions that are inevitable to launch such projects are prepared by the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade but technical elements of the financing and implementation are agreed with the involvement of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology and the Ministry of Finance.

The above-mentioned connectivity projects are financed from three main resources:

1. EU funds (like IPA CBC HU RSB)
2. Hungarian funds (for example state budget, EXIM)
3. External 'third' resources (for example Chinese loan)

While the use of external 'third' resources like loans happens under different conditions (agreed on bilateral basis), IPA CBC is based on EU regulations. Accordingly, 85% of the project costs can be covered by the IPA CBC. State budget might contribute with 10%, plus 5% might be added by the organisation or institution that implements the project. In Hungary, local governments could be the latter but usually they lacked both the human and financial resources, so the state delegated these tasks to the National Infrastructure Developer Ltd. (Nemzeti Infrastruktúra Fejlesztő Zrt., NIF) which is in charge of implementation of road and railway infrastructural projects launched by the government.

Cross-border Co-operation projects

Cross-border co-operation (CBC) aims at supporting economic development, sustainability and the quality of life within (sub-)regions of neighbouring countries. CBC between Hungary and Serbia started in 2003, however, the new generation of intensified co-operation launched with the Hungary-Serbia IPA Cross-border Co-operation Programme (2007–2013) under the framework of the Instrument for

Pre-accession Assistance (IPA).¹⁰

In the current seven-year financial cycle (2014–2020), the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia serves as the continuation of the previous programme¹¹. Projects are implemented on the NUTS III level; Programme-eligible counties (megye) in Hungary are Bács-Kiskun and Csongrád, while the following districts (okrug) in Serbia are entitled to participate: West Bačka, North Bačka, North Banat, South Bačka, South Bačka, Middle Banat, South Banat and Srem. As projects intend to have impacts on both countries, the so-called shared management system is an important feature: parties must be involved from the early stages of planning until the end of implementation.

Infrastructural projects are the backbone of CBC between the two states. The good high-level political relations between Budapest and Belgrade have also contributed to pursuing intensive co-operation on road, railway and water infrastructural developments. As a result, Government Resolution 1007/2016 concerning cross-border road infrastructure developments contains an indicative list of projects supported by the Hungarian government. Three of the main at linking neighbouring villages on the Hungarian-Serbian border¹². The Kübekháza–Rábé infrastructural development serves as an exemplary project from the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia: the connecting road supplemented with public lightning and more than 600 lampposts have been created between the cross-border villages. The project allowed inhabitants faster access, enabling them to pursue stronger kinship, cultural and economic ties. As for every IPA-funded initiative, 85% of costs are covered from EU funds, while the remaining must be provided from national contributions; for this development, the net cost of construction was €3.919 million. Moreover, a new border crossing with the necessary infrastructure (i.e. parking space, gates) has been carried out with the financial support of the Internal Security Fund (ISF).

Besides creating links between neighbouring settlements, establishing and developing border crossings are of high importance for both sides. Resolution X./2019. foresaw the opening of two new border crossings (Kübekháza–Rábé and Bácsszentgyörgy–Haraszti), financed from IPA funds. Moreover, there are plans for the extension of opening hours (Ásotthalom–Bački Vinograd) and for making border crossing point eligible for cargo (Hercegszántó–Bački Breg) and scheduled public transportation services as well.

The improvement of rail and water infrastructure are also based on Memoranda of Understanding between Budapest and Belgrade. The rail infrastructure projects financed (or to be financed) from EU funds aim at connecting regional economic hubs close to the Hungarian-Serbian border. The feasibility study for the Szeged–Subotica railway project has been conducted and construction works (i.e. electrification and the increase of axle pressure) are expected to get financial support from the next IPA cycle (2021–2027).

10. Hungary-Serbia Pilot Small Projects Fund (2003), Neighbourhood Programme Hungary-Serbia and Montenegro (2004–2006).

11. This programme combines the European Territorial Cooperation, most commonly known as Interreg, and IPA. Interreg is funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and is aimed at supporting cross-border, trans- and interregional projects.

12. The list contains three projects from the Hungarian-Serbian border region: Kübekháza–Rabe, Bácsszentgyörgy–Rastina and Baja–Hercegszántó–Sombor.

(The Hungarian EXIM offered 50 million EUR to Serbia to the implementation of the section in Serbia.) The Baja–Subotica rail line, however, is still in its planning phase as the feasibility study is yet to be completed. In water infrastructure projects, the river Tisza (Tisa) as the second biggest trans boundary line between the countries plays an important role¹³. As the commitments listed on the bilateral Tisza Treaty overlap with the undertakings of the TEN-T, the party’s aim is to reintroduce the river into the system. In addition, governments of Hungary and Serbia foresee joint ventures on developing and ensuring the river’s navigability. The reconstruction of sluices and the dam in Bečej is one of the major projects on the river.

Developments in the field of energy envision two main goals. Firstly, establishing connections between cross-border and regional Transmission System Operators (TSO) and secondly, the planned merger of the Hungarian-Serbian power exchanges. These projects will be beneficial for the economies of the states as well as for securing energy supplies for the (sub-)regions on both sides of the border.

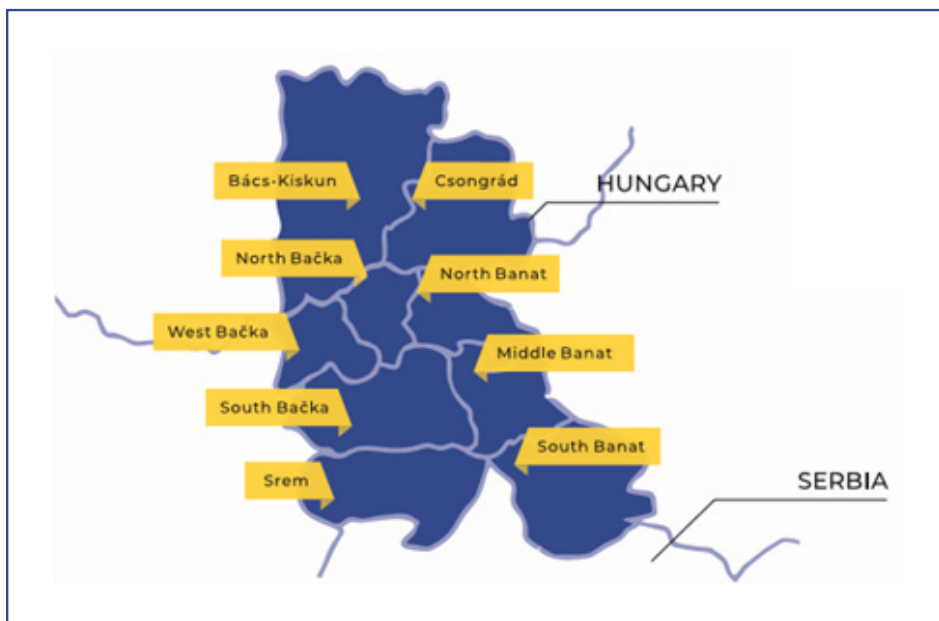


Table 1. Programme-eligible areas within Hungary and Serbia based on NUTS III classification. Source: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/file/1322/>.

13. Water infrastructure/transportation on the river Danube (Hungarian: Duna, Serbian: Dunav) must be understood in a broader international/multilateral context; thus, there are no bilateral projects under EU auspices between the countries in question.

Programme	Financial period/ timeframe	Legal/regulatory background(s)	Allocated fund (€)
Hungary-Serbia Pilot Small Projects Fund	2003		631 thousand
Neighbourhood Programme Hungary-Serbia and Montenegro	2004–2006		7.7 million
Hungary-Serbia IPA Cross-border Co-operation Programme	2007–2013	Council Regulation 1085/2006; EC 718/2007	50.1 million
Interreg-IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme Hungary-Serbia	2014–2020	C(2015) 9488; EC 231/2014; EU 447/2014	65.12 million (76.62 million with national contribution)

Table 2. Financial programmes provided by EU for cross-border cooperation between Hungary and Serbia.

Belgrade-Budapest railway connection

The modernisation of the Belgrade-Budapest railway connection is one of the main Hungarian infrastructural projects that are high on the agenda. As the connection is part of the TEN-T core network (earlier X/B Pan-European Transport Corridor), the project belongs to the priority infrastructural projects of the European Union too. Despite its importance, the project is realised as part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

The aim of the project is the reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway line, the development of a new, double track, 225 kN axle load electrified railway on a length of 159.4 km with ETCS2 on railway line No. 150 between Budapest-Ferencváros and Kelebia border with a geometry fit for 200 kms per hour speed which is able for the traffic of trains with a maximum length of 740 metres in a compatible manner with the technical standards of the European Union with an operational speed of 160 kms per hour.

China outlined the credit frame of 10 billion USD for the Central and South East European countries in 2012. In 2013 during the ‘16+1’ Summit in Bucharest, a trilateral agreement of China, Hungary and Serbia was signed. This was followed by the Prime Ministers’ Memorandum of Understanding in December 2014.

The detailed feasibility study was the next step of the preparation. The Treaty between the Government of Hungary and the Government of the People’s Republic of China about the development, construction and financing of the Hungarian section of the Budapest-Belgrade railway line has become legally binding by the entry into force of

the Law No. XXIV/2016. The procurement procedure should have gone under pilot procedure launched by the European Commission so the law was amended in 2017 (No. XXXV/2017). Accordingly, the procurement procedure and tendering started in late 2017 in line with EPC (engineering, procurement and construction) contracting terms. However, as a consequence of the increase in the expected costs the process was re-launched in 2018.

The conditional EPC contract that oversees 2.078 billion USD was signed with the winner consortium in May 2019. Then the loan agreement request was submitted to the EXIM Bank of China. According to the Agreement between Hungary and China, the Chinese loan covers up to 85 per cent of the project while the rest must be ensured by the Hungarian party with a 20-year maturity period and an annual loan interest of 2,5 percent.

As soon as the loan agreement with the bank is signed, the Contractor will have five years for the implementation of the project. The agreement was scheduled to be signed at the end of February, however, due to the new coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, it has been postponed for an indefinite period. This decision (and the epidemic) will further delay constructions too.

Air connectivity

Beyond building connectivity infrastructure toward Serbia, Hungary also strengthened its connectivity with the Western Balkans in general by financially supporting the launch of flights to the other capitals in the region. Ministry of National Development signed a public service contract for 48 months with Wizz Air in 2017. The contract foresaw a maximum compensation for the company in the amount of 4.06 billion HUF.

Accordingly, the company has been operating two return flights per week between Budapest and Podgorica, Budapest and Tirana, Budapest and Prishtina, Budapest and Sarajevo and Budapest and Skopje.

• Visegrad Fund

Regional Convention on European Integration of the Western Balkans

Poland's Priorities for the Western Balkans

Poland's Priorities for the Western Balkans

25th February 2020, Jakub Lachert

Out of all the Visegrad Group countries (also known as the Visegrad Four, or V4), Poland is the most geographically distant from the Western Balkan region. However, since joining the European Union in 2004, Warsaw has been pursuing an active policy aimed at helping the new EU candidate countries. Direct political interests and both the attention of the media as well as the public opinion in Poland have all been largely focused on supporting the countries directly bordering Poland, in particular Ukraine. However, it is worth noting that the Polish Presidency in the Berlin Process has recently contributed greatly to increasing public awareness about the Western Balkans among the Polish people.



2019 Western Balkans Summit, Poznań, Poland. Source: MFA Poland

The Western Balkans are of great importance for Poland in the context of their future accession to the European Union. Warsaw's activities are aimed at sharing Poland's experience on the path to the European Union with the Western Balkans. For Warsaw, the EU accession of the Western Balkans is also of economic importance. The Western Balkans are inhabited by about 20 million people, implying that this is a potentially attractive investment destination for Polish entrepreneurs.

Poland also participates in initiatives such as the 16+1 Platform (which in March 2019 transformed into the 17+1 Platform after Greece joined the format) that brings together 16 countries from Central and Eastern Europe, including the Western Balkans, and one country from Asia, China. This is the only initiative that brings together all V4 countries and the Western Balkans. "Although some areas probably do need to be corrected, it is worth working on improving and increasing the effectiveness of this cooperation platform so as to bring tangible benefits for all its members," Deputy Prime Minister of Poland Jarosław Gowin noted. The prime minister also highlighted that the initiative may become one of the instruments for ensuring greater cohesion in the region, alongside the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative, both of which Poland actively promotes. It may also play a constructive role in the context of developing geographically sustainable transport routes and logistics connections between the European Union and China¹⁴.

However, taking into account the multitude of issues related to the specificity of relations between individual countries of the region and China, it seems that this is not the most suitable cooperation platform for both the Western Balkans and the V4. The 17+1 Platform may pose a threat to Polish interests in the Western Balkans. Beijing's goal in this region is to build its own logistics foothold, not to enter into partnership relations with the V4 countries, which may later prove to be competitive for China.

It should be noted that European infrastructure projects within a network of international transport corridors (TEN-T) are of great importance from Warsaw's perspective. Most of these projects are being carried out in the North-South direction (for example, the Baltic-Adriatic transport corridor), either running through the territory of the Western Balkans or in close neighbourhood to the region. Due to the transit location of the Western Balkans in relation to its members, it seems that the Three Seas Initiative may play a key role in these projects and, as a result, ensure greater cooperation between Poland and the region.

Apart from economic and political issues of cooperation, Poland takes part in reconciliation initiatives in the Western Balkan region. In 2017, students from Poland, Germany and the Western Balkans attended the first-ever "Reconciliation and Remembrance" seminar. Through a series of meetings, the youth from the Western Balkan region could learn about the process of Polish-German reconciliation, which may serve as an inspiration for the region that is still struggling with the legacy of the wars of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia¹⁵.

14. <https://www.premier.gov.pl/wydarzenia/aktualnosci/jaroslaw-gowin-na-vii-szczycie-szefow-rzadow-panstw-europy-srodkowo.html>

15. <https://www.krzyzowa.org.pl/dzialalnosc/akademia-europejska/projekty/zrealizowane/177-pojednanie-i-pamiec-seminarium-dla-studentow-i-wolontariuszy-z-polski-niemiec-i-balkanow-zachodnich-krzyzowa-wroclaw-9-13-10-2017-r>

The Polish Presidency in the Berlin Process

Poland is the only V4 country that is also a member of the Berlin Process, an initiative launched during the 2014 Conference of the Western Balkan States in Berlin, Germany. Poland joined the Berlin Process in 2018 and took over the rotating chairmanship a year later. One of the main events of the Berlin Process during the Polish Presidency was the Forum of Cities and Regions organised in June 2019.

From the perspective of increasing public knowledge about the Western Balkans and their accession process to the European Community, it is worth emphasising that in 2019 a number of social initiatives were undertaken in Poland. These included several analytical publications and conferences that aimed to familiarise Polish society with Western Balkan issues. The event that drew particular attention was a conference entitled The Western Balkans: Infrastructure and Energy from a Geopolitical Perspective that took place in May 2019 and was organised by Warsaw Institute, a think tank based in Poland. Its purpose was to present the main challenges in the EU integration process of the Western Balkans ahead of the 2019 Summit of the Berlin Process in the Polish city of Poznań, among which infrastructure was a key issue¹⁶.

The main event during the Polish Presidency was the Berlin Process Summit held on July 4-5, 2019 in Poznań. The main goals of Poland during its chairmanship in the Berlin Process were focused on economic cooperation. The Polish Presidency in the Berlin Process was built on four main pillars: economy, connectivity, civil society and security¹⁷. The Western Balkans Summit in Poznań was accompanied by such events as the Think Tank Forum, the Civil Society Forum, the Business Forum, ministerial meetings and the Leaders' Summit.

According to the assumptions of Polish diplomacy, Poland tried to focus chiefly on economic projects during its chairmanship in the Berlin Process, implying that issues related to political disputes were not the number-one priority of the Polish Presidency. Panel discussions and meetings of politicians focused primarily on providing economic support for the Western Balkans and seeking investment opportunities in the region.

Poland's financial assistance for the Western Balkans

Poland has allocated 1.51 million euros to support projects in the Western Balkan region in the years 2009-2019. These activities were carried out in support of the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF). This amount seems small when compared with, for example, the financial assistance from Norway, which provided the Western Balkans with over 22 million euros. Out of all the V4 countries, the Czech Republic contributed the most by providing the Western Balkans with 2 million euros¹⁸.

16. <https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/westernbalkanspl/>

17. The position of Poland's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Szymon Szynkowski vel Sęk, who was in charge of the agenda of the Polish Presidency in the Berlin Process, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/02/20/ewb-interview-vel-sek-value-berlin-process-stems-narrower-pragmatic-approach/>

18. <https://www.wbif.eu/en/about/bilateral-donors>

Poland also supports the EU integration process of the Western Balkans by raising public awareness among its own citizens through, for example, holding the “Public Diplomacy” competition, which in 2020 is devoted to projects on “The Role of Poland in the Process of EU Integration of the Western Balkan Countries”. The sum of money allocated for this purpose alone is one million zlotys (about 230,000 euros).

The main reason why Poland allocates its funds for the Western Balkans is to provide support for the implementation of reforms that are crucial for European integration. Warsaw supports the Western Balkans through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). The funding aims to support administrative reforms in the Western Balkan countries by sharing Poland’s experience. This is implemented through twinning projects, which involve presenting expert opinions, prepared by the relevant institutions of the EU Member States, on the main areas of reforms in public administration. So far, Poland has submitted 69 twinning projects, 29 of which were intended for the Western Balkans. Of this number, 11 projects have already been implemented in the Western Balkans. These included the following: four twinning projects for Macedonia, two twinning projects for Kosovo, two twinning projects for Croatia (implemented prior to the country’s accession to the EU) and one twinning project each for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Most of the twinning projects focused on the areas of agriculture, public funds audit, institutional reforms, the protection of the rule of law and education reforms. In 2019, Poland won two competitions for twinning projects for Kosovo and Albania. In May 2019, Poland won a competition to help reform the Kosovo National Audit Office, a state audit institution in Kosovo. This project is being implemented by the Supreme Audit Office of Poland with a budget of 700,000 euros¹⁹. By contrast, a project for Albania, which Poland won in October 2019, involves providing support for the development of transport infrastructure. It is being carried out by the Ministry of Investment and Economic Development in cooperation with the General Directorate for National Roads and Motorways, the Centre for EU Transport Projects and the Public Procurement Office²⁰.

Cooperation with individual Western Balkan countries

Poland also cooperates with the Western Balkans through the Polish-Balkan Parliamentary Group. As part of the group’s activities, Polish parliamentarians held meetings with their counterparts in the capitals of the Western Balkan countries. In December 2018, parliamentarians from Montenegro visited the Polish Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament) and, in 2019, Polish deputies paid two visits to the Western Balkans, one to both North Macedonia and Serbia in May and the other to Albania in June.

In 2006, Montenegro declared its independence. In the same year, regulations on state succession were introduced, identical to those of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Poland supports Montenegro’s EU integration efforts. During a parliamentary session of the

19. <https://twinning.msz.gov.pl/aktualno%C5%9Bci/rozpocz%C4%99cie-realizacji-projektu-nik-dla-kosowa/>

20. <https://twinning.msz.gov.pl/aktualno%C5%9Bci/wygrany-projekt-twinningowy-dla-albanii-transport/>

Montenegro-Poland Parliamentary Group in December 2018 in Warsaw, the Polish side urged Montenegro to use pre-accession funds.

During his visit to Serbia, the Chairman of the Polish-Balkan Parliamentary Group, Ryszard Terlecki emphasised that Poland supports Belgrade’s EU integration efforts, despite having different visions of ensuring the country’s security. At the same time, Chairman Terlecki proposed the development of multi-vector cooperation in bilateral relations, which should be conducted within parliamentary groups²¹.

During the visit to North Macedonia, the Polish parliamentary delegation also demonstrated its support for the country’s accession to the European Union. When discussing transport projects, it was proposed that the Via Carpathia infrastructure project be extended and North Macedonia join the initiative. Poland could also cooperate with North Macedonia on the modernisation of tourist infrastructure in this country. As highlighted by Chairman Ryszard Terlecki, Poland also offers cooperation in the field of army modernisation²².

As part of the Polish Presidency in the Berlin Process, the Polish parliamentary delegation also paid a visit to Albania. While in Tirana, the Polish side proposed to establish cooperation at the level of parliamentary committees on defence and economy, among others. At the same time, the need for bilateral cooperation was stressed, implying that it should be carried out as part of projects connecting the countries of Central and Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea, even if the prospect of European integration has been diminished due to a negative stance of some EU Member States towards further European enlargement²³.

From the viewpoint of Polish-Albanian relations, economic ties are also of great importance. Poland also shares its own experience from the accession negotiations with the European Union with Tirana. From the perspective of bilateral economic relations, an economic mission to Albania organised on September 26-29, 2018 by the National Chamber of Commerce in Poland in cooperation with the Union of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Albania, the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Tirana and the Embassy of Albania in Warsaw with the support of the Polish-Albanian Parliamentary Group turned out to be an interesting event. It was a continuation of the economic activities and meetings initiated during the Business Forum in Tirana in 2016 and the Business Forum in Warsaw in December 2017 attended by the Prime Ministers of Poland and Albania²⁴.

The succession of agreements concluded between the People’s Republic of Poland and the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia in 1955 marked an important milestone in the relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Poland. The original agreements,

21. <https://www.premier.gov.pl/wydarzenia/aktualnosci/jaroslaw-gowin-na-vii-szczycie-szefow-rzadow-panstw-europy-srodkowo.html>

22. Ibidem

23. <https://www.gospodarkamorska.pl/Administracja,Prawo/wizyta-polsko-balkanskiej-grupy-parlamentarnej-w-albanii-z-udzialem-wicemarszalka-sejmu.html>

24. <https://kig.pl/uslugi/znajdz-zagranicznego-partnera/wyjazdowe-misje-zagraniczne/europa/szczegoly/10387/>

dating back to the years 1955-1956, regulated such issues as air transport, scientific-technical cooperation and cultural cooperation, among many others. An agreement on the legal succession of the previous agreements was signed in 2006²⁵. Poland supports Bosnia and Herzegovina's efforts on its path towards European integration. During a visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Igor Crnadak to the Senate of the Republic of Poland (the upper house of the Polish parliament), the Marshal (Speaker) of the Senate, Stanisław Karczewski highlighted that Poland puts special emphasis on parliamentary cooperation as well as economic, trade and tourist exchange with Bosnia and Herzegovina²⁶.

As regards Kosovo, Poland recognised its independence in February 2008. However, so far, no diplomatic relations have been officially established with Kosovo. Polish citizens residing in this country can seek assistance at the Embassy of Hungary in Pristina.

Summary

The main focus of Poland in its relations with the Western Balkans is to develop economic ties and to provide support for the efforts of these countries in their accession negotiations with the European Union. It seems that the relations between Poland and the Western Balkan countries can be further developed through the implementation of infrastructure projects such as the extension of the Via Carpathia road route as well as energy projects. This, in turn, falls within the so-called "extension" of the Three Seas Initiative, which may lead to an even greater intensification of Poland's activity in the Western Balkan region. Poland is not in conflict with any of the six Western Balkan countries, and Warsaw's diplomatic efforts towards the Western Balkans are focused primarily on developing a framework for security and stability in both Central and Eastern Europe and Southern Europe. The 2019 Polish Presidency in the Berlin Process was arguably the best manifestation of Poland's commitment to achieving these goals.

Author:

Jakub Lachert – Expert, Warsaw Institute

Jakub Lachert is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies at the University of Warsaw. His research interests include: European Union neighborhood policy, including, in particular, Eastern policy, Eastern Partnership, Western Balkans in the process of integration with the EU.

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25. <https://www.prawo.pl/akty/m-p-2008-52-462,17456194.html>

26. <https://www.senat.gov.pl/aktualnosci/art,8512,wizyta-ministra-spraw-zagranicznych-bosni-i-hercegowiny.html>

• Visegrad Fund



Regional Convention on European Integration of the Western Balkans

EU enlargement and connectivity agenda: a view from Slovakia

Tomáš Strážay, Director, Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA)

The Western Balkans represents a long-term priority of Slovakia's foreign and European policy. Though Slovakia is active in supporting the integration ambitions of the countries of the region and develop ties with them, its voice would be limited if it would act solely. Therefore, Slovakia actively uses EU policies, as well as different regional initiatives in order to spread political support for the EU enlargement. The same applies to the development of sectoral cooperation with the countries of the region.

The EU level is considered as the most important in terms of improving ties and cooperation with the Western Balkan countries. The decisions adopted on the EU level, together with pursued policies and instruments used by the EU are therefore considered of primary importance for safeguarding the membership aspirations for the Western Balkan countries. Specific attention is paid to the enlargement policy, perceived as one of the most successful EU policies and the real tool for the modernization of the Western Balkan countries. The fact that Slovakia, along with four other EU members, does not recognize the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence is not considered a major obstacle to promoting the European perspective of the region and also developing ties with Pristina.

Though Slovakia participates directly in various regional initiatives with focus on the Western Balkans – be it Central European Initiative or the so-called Slavkov Triangle, the most efficient turns out to be the Visegrad Group. It should be highlighted that V4 is the only regional grouping within the European Union that has maintained a regular dialogue with the Western Balkan countries over the long term. Since 2009, regular summits have been held between the Foreign Ministers of the V4 and Western Balkan countries, which, as a rule, are attended by EU senior officials and representatives of the countries holding presidency in the EU Council. On a general level, V4 cooperation with Western Balkan countries can be divided into political, sectoral and institutional (know-

how sharing). While sectoral cooperation is generally not much developed, in the case of political cooperation and the transfer of know-how, we can speak of relatively extensive activity. In the area of political cooperation, the Visegrad Group is characterized by long-term and continuous support for the aspirations of the Western Balkan countries to accede the EU. This is confirmed by numerous declarations and common positions.²⁷ With regard to the transfer of institutional know-how, it should be pointed that despite its “loose” institutionalization, the V4 managed to inspire counterparts in the Western Balkans at least in two concrete initiatives – one of them being Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)²⁸, while the second is the Western Balkan Fund (WBF).

It is a well-known fact that Slovakia does not participate directly in the Berlin Process, so an official position towards this initiative and its activities is rather missing. In general, Slovakia supports all the activities aiming at the development of ties between the EU and Western Balkan countries and projects that can improve the situation in different sectors. However, under the condition that these do not serve as an alternative to the future membership. The fact that Poland – an ally from V4 - joined the Berlin Process and even hosted its 2019 summit did not inspire Slovakia to take any concrete action – Bratislava just accepted the status quo. In light of the above, in order to pursue the connectivity agenda, Slovakia operates mostly in the EU and V4 frameworks.

The development of transport and energy infrastructure is a necessary precondition for further economic growth and economic prosperity. On bilateral level, due to the absent common border with the Western Balkan countries the possibilities for the development of joint transport and infrastructure projects are rather limited. Even before the eruption of the COVID-19 crisis Slovakia was not connected with the region by any direct train. In case of flight connections, the situation was only a little bit more positive – Bratislava has had a direct connection with the capital of North Macedonia Skopje and Nis in Serbia. Several bus connections usually use the Hungarian highway network. Nevertheless, the membership in the EU provides Slovakia real possibilities to take an active part in the shaping of a broadly defined interconnectivity agenda. To some extent this applies to some regional initiatives of which Slovakia is a member, with the primary focus on the Visegrad Four.

Transport and energy infrastructure – EU level

As the EU member, Slovakia is supportive for all infrastructure and energy projects that have the “label” of the European Union. This applies to the connectivity agenda and concrete projects that have been realized in its framework. Slovakia has provided support to the Transport Community, which extends the EU transport market rules, principles

27. See particularly the Kromeriz Declaration of 2004 and the Bratislava Declaration of 2011, as well as the programs of the individual Presidencies. All documents are available at the Visegrad Group’s website www.visegradgroup.eu.

28. The agreement was originally intended to help the Visegrad countries (as well as Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia) to prepare for entry into the EU free market. Currently, CEFTA 2006 includes the Western Balkan countries and fulfills the same goal for them as they did for Central European countries few years ago.

and policies to the Western Balkan Parties through a legally binding framework.²⁹ Since one of the expected activities of the Transport Community³⁰ also is the extension of both core and comprehensive TEN-T networks to the Western Balkans, Slovakia perceives it as a useful tool to develop new infrastructure projects in the region. This is important especially when taking into the consideration that none of three TEN-T corridors crossing Slovakia connects it with the Western Balkans. In addition, due to the missing physical border with the countries of the region Slovakia’s possibilities to develop cross-border infrastructure projects are equal to zero. Therefore, the EU projects (together with some regional ones described below) are considered as the real opportunity.

When it comes to energy and energy security, Slovakia has been a long-term supporter of the diversification of suppliers and routes, especially when gas and oil transmissions are concerned. The situation in Slovakia is to a large extent comparable to those countries in the Western Balkans, which are dependent on the import of both commodities. The lesson learned from 2009, when Slovakia was cut off from the deliveries of gas due to the Russia-Ukraine dispute led its governments to act intensively in order not to repeat the situation again. Since then Slovakia made several steps in order to strengthen its energy security, which can be taken as an inspiration for the Western Balkan countries. The most important ones would include the introduction of a reverse gas flow from the Czech Republic, as well as the development of interconnectors with its neighbors on the so-called North-South axis. The interconnector with Hungary (already built) and Poland (under construction) will create the part of the **North-south gas interconnections in central eastern and south eastern Europe (NSI East Gas)**³¹.

Another opportunity lies in the area of electricity interconnections.³² The development of the regional electricity market in South-Eastern Europe is one of the aims of the Energy Community, of which Slovakia, as the EU member state, is a supporter.³³ The already existing market coupling between Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania is a good example how cooperation in this field can further develop.

When comes to EU instruments, macro-regional strategies need to be mentioned. Slovakia takes an active part in the Danube Strategy (EUSDR), which also includes three Western Balkan countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. Besides the road, rail and air mobility also sustainable energy is among the priorities, while particular

29. See Connectivity Agenda, <https://www.wbif.eu/sectors/connectivity-agenda>.

30. Treaty establishing the Transport Community, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22017A1027\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22017A1027(01)). See also COUNCIL DECISION (EU) 2019/392 of 4 March 2019 on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Treaty establishing the Transport Community, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019D0392>.

31. See Trans-European Networks for Energy, https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/infrastructure/trans-european-networks-energy_en#priority-corridors.

32. North-South Interconnections in Central-East and South-East Europe, <https://tyndp.entsoe.eu/2016/insight-reports/north-south-interconnection-cee-see/>.

33. Energy Community, https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/international-cooperation/international-organisations-and-initiatives/energy-community_en?redir=1. See also the Treaty Establishing Energy Community, <https://www.energy-community.org/legal/treaty.html>.

attention is paid to the waterways mobility (Priority Area 1).³⁴ The river Danube is perceived as an important transport corridor connecting different regions of Europe also from the Slovak perspective.³⁵

Connectivity agenda – regional (V4) level

When the regional (V4-WB) level is considered, transport and infrastructure do not play a particularly important role in the agenda. In general, sectoral cooperation on the V4-WB 6 level is quite limited and if it exists, it is mostly targeted to other sectors, e.g. security and border protection. The fact is that V4 countries as such have to deal with numerous deficiencies when it comes to the improvement of their transport infrastructure, especially when cross-border interconnections are concerned. Hungary is the only V4 country that has a physical border with the Western Balkan region, so infrastructure projects are maintained on bilateral (Hungary-Serbia) level, e.g. the project of the fast train connecting Belgrade and Budapest. On the other hand, the plan to develop a fast rail interconnecting V4 capitals³⁶ could perhaps easily be connected with the Budapest-Belgrade railroad, once both are built.

The importance of the Western Balkans in energy issues has also been recognized on the V4 level, but recently the emphasis became much stronger. The V4 countries realize that Southern Gas Corridor can contribute to the diversification of supplies and therefore they support the development of cooperation with their counterparts in the Western Balkans in the energy issues. The declaration adopted after the meeting of V4 and WB Countries prime ministers held under the umbrella of the Czech V4 Presidency 2019-20 proves this intention.³⁷

The Visegrad Group turned out to be especially successful in supporting people mobility and people to people contacts within the Western Balkan region, as well as between the Western Balkan and Visegrad countries. Through its grant scheme the International Visegrad Fund, which is de facto is the only V4 institution, supports projects that are implemented in the Western Balkans and involve project partners from the V4 region.³⁸ Attention is also paid to student and expert mobility. The IVF also provides technical assistance to the Western Balkan Fund (WBF),

34. The Danube Region, www.danube-region.eu.

35. See, for instance, “Dunajakomedzinárodnávodnácesta”, <https://www.asb.sk/stavebnictvo/inzinierske-stavby/doprava/dunaj-ako-medzinarodna-vodna-cesta>.

36. See “Joint declaration of the ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic responsible for transport, development and EU funds concerning the project of high-speed train network in Central Europe and its financing,” Bratislava, May 21, 2019, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements>.

37. “V4 statement on the Western Balkans,” September 12, 2019, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/v4-statement-on-the-190912>.

38. See the website of the International Visegrad Fund, especially the section dedicated to “Visegrad+ Grants”, www.visegradfund.org.

which was established with the aim to support common projects in the region³⁹. The IVF served as an inspiration, so the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund can be perceived as one of the most powerful examples of the transfer of (institutional and procedural) know how from one region to another.

39. See the official website of the Western Balkans Fund, <http://westernbalkansfund.org/>. The WB and its role is also directly mentioned in the Sofia Declaration from the 2019 EU-Western Balkans Summit, see https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf.

