

The Visegrad Group and Western Balkans: Lessons and Interactions in Perspective

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Abstract

This policy paper adopts a comparative approach to explore how the Visegrad Group (V4) can serve as a role model for the Western Balkans (WB) in political, economic, and social development. From a historical perspective, both regions share a common experience as former socialist states, necessitating a transformative process towards democracy, market economy, and European integration. The V4's successful transition offers valuable lessons for the WB, showcasing positive practices in democratic consolidation, market-oriented reforms, and regional cooperation. However, significant differences exist between the two regions, particularly in the field of conflict resolution and inter-state relations. While the V4 countries largely managed to overcome their historical divisions and focus on cooperative relationships, the WB countries faced prolonged disputes in the 1990s and unsolved issues among neighboring governments. These ongoing challenges still pose obstacles to the WB's path toward stability and European integration. Recognizing the importance of completing the process of European integration, the V4 can play a pivotal role in promoting the accession of the WB to the EU. This not only aligns with the V4's commitment to European values and principles but also serves its own interests in enhancing security and economic cooperation within the broader European framework. Examples such as coordinating their influence in EU structures, establishing a network of think tanks, which facilitates knowledge exchange, or the V4 Development Fund, which supports regional development initiatives, can serve as recommendations for enhancing not only WB's internal cooperation but also V4-WB cooperation.

By examining both similarities and distinctions, this paper aims to provide insights into how the WB can learn from the V4's experiences while addressing its specific challenges in order to become a stable region integrated in the EU. It underscores the importance of reconciliation, institution-building, and regional cooperation as critical components of the WB's development agenda. This paper seeks to guide policymakers, civic and business actors through the V4's positive practices and navigate the complexities of the WB's transition process towards a more prosperous and integrated future.

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Introduction

The principle of regional cooperation has long been a fixture in international relations. From the alliances formed by ancient city-states to resist foreign conquerors, to the present day, this principle has shaped both the global map and historical developments. Following the end of World War II in the latter half of the 20th century, Europe became ideologically divided into two opposing blocs: the liberal-democratic Western bloc and the socialist Eastern bloc. The division at the time ran through the heart of Europe, with Germanic, Romance, Viking, and Anglo-Saxon nations on the western side, and predominantly Slavic nations, along with exceptions such as the Baltic nations, Hungarians, and Romanians, on the eastern socialist side.¹

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the “end of history” ushered in parallel processes: the liberalization of former socialist states within the Eastern bloc and the process of European unification.² These shifts led to major political, social, and cultural transformations. At the time, three countries ceased to exist — the Soviet Union, as the core of the bloc, along with Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia— giving rise to 23 independent states. Several others, such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria transitioned away from Soviet influence. In Central Europe, the leaders of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary—three countries recently released from Soviet influence—signed the Visegrad Declaration in 1991 at Visegrád Castle, near Budapest, establishing cooperation and mutual support in the process of decommunization. Thus, on February 15, 1991, the Visegrad Group was founded, which would later become the Visegrad Four (V4) after the peaceful split of Czechoslovakia into two nations in 1993.

Simultaneously, wars for the succession of Yugoslavia were unfolding. Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in 1991, sparking a brief conflict in Slovenia and a protracted war in Croatia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, war also erupted following a declaration of independence, lasting until 1995 when an international agreement ended hostilities and placed the country under international oversight. North Macedonia, under the name of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, gained recognition as an independent state in 1993, while Serbia and Montenegro, under international sanctions, maintained continuity as Yugoslavia in various forms until Montenegro declared independence in 2006, while Kosovo* unilaterally proclaimed independence in 2008.³

¹ Huntington P, Samuel. (1993) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon Schuster. New York. pp. 40-48

² Fukuyama, Francis (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*. The Free Press, New York, pp. 39-54

^{3*} All references to Kosovo, whether the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without the prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

By the late 20th century, several former Eastern Bloc countries attained full NATO membership, with most joining the European Union (EU) in 2004. Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia joined slightly later, while other Yugoslav successor states as well as Albania lagged behind due to years of post-1989 turmoil and conflict. Slovenia and Croatia, however, progressed toward EU membership, achieving it in 2004 and 2013, respectively. For other countries in the region, this missed opportunity delayed their status as EU candidates, with an uncertain outlook on accession dates. Thus, the term "Western Balkans" now serves as a largely political label for countries in this prolonged accession process, encompassing Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo*.

This paper aims to examine the causes and consequences characterizing the current conditions in the V4 and the WB, while identifying opportunities for future cooperation and the transfer of best practices. The V4 countries have extended support to EU candidate countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, drawing on their own integration experiences. To address these themes, the paper is divided into three thematic sections. The first section analyzes the historical processes that led to the formation of both regions, highlighting their core characteristics, similarities, and differences. The second section covers current examples of cooperation between the two regions. The third section proposes policies and practices that the WB countries might adopt from the V4, as well as the motivations behind the V4's interest in supporting the WB more extensively.

Visegrad Group

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the onset of democratization in the former Eastern Bloc countries, a wave of social and economic reforms began. Politically, these nations transitioned from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy, while economically, they shifted from centralized, planned economies to market-oriented ones. Among those leading "return to Europe" were countries positioned at the edge of the "Iron Curtain," specifically Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, which had been largely isolated from the West for nearly half a century. During the Cold War era, these three nations experienced significant uprisings within the Eastern Bloc: Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and a series of revolts in Poland, culminating with the Solidarity movement in 1981. These uprisings were consistently suppressed by the Soviet Union, which sought to prevent any major ideological shifts within its sphere of influence.

With the weakening of Soviet control and the spread of democratic values, these countries embarked on a new historical path aimed at securing the future of their nations. In the early 1990s—a period marked by significant global shifts—they prioritized peace,

decommunization, and 'Return to Europe' as part of a broader Western reorientation.⁴ To solidify this cooperative objective, a trilateral meeting was held in Visegrád, near Budapest. This location held historical significance, as Czech, Hungarian, and Polish monarchs had formed an anti-Habsburg alliance there in 1335. On February 15, 1991, Czechoslovak President Václav Havel, Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall, and Polish President Lech Wałęsa signed the Visegrád Declaration, establishing a cooperative group (Visegrád Group or V4, following the division of Czechoslovakia) dedicated to several common goals: restoration of independence, democracy, freedom; elimination of remnants of totalitarianism; establishment of parliamentary democracy and a modern legal state with respect for human rights; creation of a free-market economy; and integration into European political, economic, and security structures.⁵

The rationale for forming the V3 (later V4) lies in the recognition of the necessity of joint efforts by nations that shared geographic proximity, historical experiences, cultural connections, and a mutual need for socio-political reform. Each of these states had a shared heritage under the Habsburg Monarchy, a brief interwar period of independence, and subsequent incorporation into the Eastern Bloc under Soviet influence. Historically and culturally aligned with the West, Central Europe (embodied by the V4 countries) found itself as "A Kidnapped West", due to geopolitical circumstances, under Soviet influence, which many viewed as an extension of foreign occupation rather than a natural alignment.⁶

The establishment of the V4 aimed to focus member states on Western integration, where NATO membership was the initial priority, followed by EU integration. Unlike regions such as the Balkans or parts of Eastern Europe, these countries transitioned into a new geopolitical era without armed conflict, highlighted by the Velvet Revolution and the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993. With Slovakia's declaration of independence, it joined the V4 as a full-fledged member.

Today, the V4 countries collectively represent 14.3 percent of the EU-27 population, forming the EU's third-largest market and the world's 17th largest economy.⁷ Cooperation within the V4 progressed steadily through the 1990s, with the most significant challenge occurring under the leadership of Slovak Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, who distanced

⁴ Tulmets, Elsa. (2014) Introduction: The 'Return to Europe' and the Rediscovery of the East. In: East Central European Foreign Policy Identity in Perspective. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

⁵ Visegrad Declaration. (1991) Retrieved from: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2>

⁶ Kundera, Milan. (2024) Oteti Zapad ili Tragedija Srednje Evrope. Laguna. Beograd. pp. 52-59

⁷ The Visegrad Group – 30 Years of Transformation, Integration and Development. (2021). Polish Economic Institute. Warsaw, pp. 6

⁸ Worldometer. (2024) GDP by country. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/>

Slovakia from European integration, nearly halting its accession process.⁹ However, a new government in 1998 revitalized regional partnerships, and in 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO. Thanks to their support, Slovakia joined in 2004, a historic year in which all V4 countries simultaneously entered the EU alongside six other nations. With their primary goals achieved, the V4 leaders convened in 2004, issuing a declaration that both recognized these accomplishments and outlined new objectives, including continued cooperation within the V4 and support for EU candidate countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, based on their own integration experiences. Therefore, three out of the four V4 countries prioritize the WB as a focus area for foreign aid, with Poland being the only exception.¹⁰

The V4 countries' advocacy efforts reflect their historical collaboration, initially intended to amplify the voices of small and emerging democracies in international relations by jointly pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration, primarily NATO and EU membership. This approach significantly bolstered each nation's standing on the global stage. Despite having populations of 10 million or less each, except Poland, together they exert influence comparable to that of a major European country like France. Beyond their advocacy during integration, V4 cooperation has continued, most notably in the collective stance against mandatory EU migrant quotas in 2015.¹¹ Since then, however, political divisions within the V4 have emerged, driven by trends toward illiberal democracy, particularly in Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and in Poland under the Law and Justice Party governments from 2015 to 2023, as well as periodic nationalist-led administrations under Robert Fico in Slovakia and the Czech Republic under Andrej Babiš.¹² The war in Ukraine further highlights these divisions, with liberal factions supporting Ukraine and Western alliances, while nationalist elements advocate for diplomatic solutions to halt the conflict. These differences have led some to view the V4 as more of a "2+2" or "3+1" group, with occasional verbal disputes and diplomatic challenges, earning it the informal nickname "the Northern Balkans."¹³

The V4 operates under an annually rotating presidency, an approach formalized in 1999 at the Bratislava Summit and later codified in 2002.¹⁴ The only institutional body established by the V4 is the International Visegrád Fund (IVF), headquartered in Bratislava since 2000, which funds a variety of initiatives, including civil society grants, scholarships, and cultural

⁹ Kováč, M. (n.d.) A True Feeling of Togetherness. Visegrad Group. Retrieved from: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-visegrad-book/kovac-michal-true>

¹⁰ Hornat, Jan. (2021) *The Visegrad Group and Democracy Promotion Transition Experience and Beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan. Cham. pp. 66

¹¹ Hörcher, Ferenc. (2016) *The V4 cooperation and the migration crisis: the history of political thought and political philosophy in the service of political analysis*. 10.13140/RG.2.1.1699.8806.

¹² Havlík, Vratislav. Hloušek, Vít. (2019) *Illiberal Trends in Central European Party Politics. 'Perspectives of European Integration in the Context of Global Politics II'* (MUNI/A/1044/2019)

¹³ Term introduced by Jan Cingel, Director of the Strategic Analysis think tank, in a meeting related to the research project

¹⁴ Strážay, Tomáš. (2011) *Visegrad—Arrival, Survival, Revival In Two Decades of Visegrad Cooperation—Selected V4 Bibliography*. International Visegrad Fund, Bratislava, pp. 14–38

exchanges, fostering regional unity. The IVF operates under a politically neutral mandate, with the directorship rotating among the member countries every three years. The V4 has also established a network of think tanks to coordinate collaborative projects over two decades, and public service training and exchanges form part of V4 partnerships. In 2010, the V4 agreed to establish a joint battle group, active since 2016 with approximately 3,700 personnel.

Economically, the V4 nations are among the leaders in transition, ranking as the highest-paid among the former Eastern Bloc and experiencing substantial growth rates, placing them among Europe's fastest-growing economies as well as member states with lowest unemployment rates in the EU.^{15 16} Public opinion surveys conducted three decades after the formation of the V4 highlight the closeness and cooperation among its member states. The findings reveal that 82 percent of respondents view the V4 as an essential platform for their countries, and 73 percent believe that there should be more frequent joint V4 actions in international affairs.¹⁷

In subsequent years, inspired by the regional collaboration established through the V4, member states also engaged in other multilateral partnerships. Poland, for example, initiated the Three Seas Initiative alongside Croatia, with support from the United States, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia formed the Slavkov Triangle with Austria.

Western Balkans

For most of the 20th century, the area stretching from Mount Triglav to the Vardar River was unified under the Yugoslav state. However, Yugoslavia's dissolution in the early 1990s led to the emergence of several new nations, a process marred by numerous localized armed conflicts. Consequently, the newly established Balkan states, each dealing with a range of unresolved bilateral issues, embarked on political and economic transitions that were recognized by the EU at the turn of the century. In the political discourse of the 1990s, the term "Western Balkans" was introduced as a sort of euphemism for a region associated with the term "Balkans," which many states emerging from Yugoslavia did not wish to identify with.¹⁸ Defined as "Yugoslavia minus Slovenia, plus Albania," the EU used

¹⁵ Pew Research Center. (2019) European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism, Chapter: Political and economic changes since the fall of communism pp. 21-33

¹⁶ Eurostat. (2024) Unemployment statistics. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/f/f4/Extra_tables_Statistics_explained_02_10_24.xlsx

¹⁷ Gyárfášová, Oľga. Mesežnikov, Grigorij. (2021) Visegrad Four as Viewed by the Public: Past Experience and Future Challenges. Institute for Public Affairs. Bratislava, pp. 7-9

¹⁸ Petrović, Tanja. (2012) YUROPA. Jugoslovensko nasleđe i politike budućnosti u postjugoslovenskim društvima. Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, pp. 22-23

the term to encompass countries seen from Brussels as sharing similarities, primarily based on their non-EU status rather than historical, geographical, or cultural cohesion.¹⁹

This designation, a Brussels-coined neologism, aimed to classify Balkan regions that, as of the late 1990s, lacked a clear EU membership trajectory—a prospect only extended at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. This approach overlooked significant regional differences and contributed to the perception of the WB as a fragmented, heterogeneous area with numerous unresolved issues. The WB's role became clearer in 2013 when Croatia joined the EU, thus leaving the WB grouping. Today, the WB consists of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo*, representing less than 4 percent of the EU's total population and slightly more than 1 per cent of the EU's total GDP.²⁰ Croatia's exit underscored that the region was more of a “waiting room” for EU accession, leading to the alternative term “Restern Balkans.” Functioning as a collective political entity in relation to the EU, the WB also serves as a buffer zone, helping the EU control, direct, and contain migration through reinforced border control.²²

The WB share certain similarities, particularly a violent recent past, with every country except Albania experiencing conflicts of varying intensity. These began with the Croatian War of 1991, followed by the Bosnian War in 1992, the Kosovo conflict in 1998, NATO's bombing of Serbia and Montenegro in 1999, and the civil war in North Macedonia in 2001. Concurrently, these states entered transition phases, adopting democratic governance and open-market systems, while initiating processes of integration into international institutions. The prospect of European integration remains one of the few unifying threads for the region.

Nonetheless, the region's differences are evident. The WB's ethnic composition is mixed, with both Slavic and Albanian peoples, who do not share common historical experiences or memory cultures. Only three states are NATO members (Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia), and enthusiasm for European and especially Euro-Atlantic integration varies, notably between ethnic Serbs and Albanians. Historical memory politics complicate bilateral relations, with the unresolved dispute over Kosovo's* status between Belgrade and Pristina posing a substantial obstacle to regional unity.²³

¹⁹ Jović, Dejan. (2018) Accession to the European Union and Perception of External Actors in the Western Balkans. *Croatian International Relations Review*. Zagreb

²⁰ Worldometer. (2024) Countries in Europe by population. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldometers.info/population/countries-in-europe-by-population/>

²¹ Worldometer. (2024) GDP by country. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/>

²² Stojić Mitrović, Marta, Nidžara Ahmetašević, Barbara Beznec i Andrej Kurnik. (2020) The Dark Sides of Europeanisation. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Border Regime. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung for Southeast Europe. Belgrade, pp. 20-30

²³ Jović, Dejan. (2018) Accession to the European Union and Perception of External Actors in the Western Balkans. *Croatian International Relations Review*. Zagreb

The EU's role as a catalyst has intensified multilateral cooperation within the WB, with integration processes pursued individually by each state except for North Macedonia and Albania, which have followed a joint path up until 2024. The Berlin Process, initiated by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, was launched in 2014 to enhance cooperation within the WB and strengthen ties with the EU and other host countries.²⁴ The initiative aimed to reinvigorate multilateral relations and bolster regional cooperation, particularly in infrastructure and economic development. Among the outcomes of the Berlin Process in its first decade were economic and social advancements, such as over 40 completed projects in transport and energy, the establishment of a regional economic area, a common regional market, a roaming agreement, and institutions like the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), and the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF).²⁵

While the Berlin Process was an external initiative, regional actors began to advocate for internal collaboration in 2019 when Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia initiated the “Mini-Schengen” cooperation, later rebranded in 2021 as Open Balkan. This agreement included memoranda to facilitate trade, enable free labor market access, and coordinate disaster management, marking the first regional ownership initiative. Initial achievements included free labor market access, reduced export/import times for food products by up to 50 percent, and lowered fees by 80 percent, resulting in a nearly 30 percent trade increase within Open Balkan.²⁶ However, not all WB actors joined this initiative. Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina attended the 2022 Summit as observers, while Kosovo* declined participation despite signing the Washington Agreement, which endorsed cooperation within this regional framework.²⁷

Although the Berlin Process has achieved some successes, the EU path for the Western Balkans remains uncertain over two decades after the Thessaloniki Summit, with no clear timeline for any country's accession, which has contributed to enlargement fatigue in the region.²⁸ Montenegro is furthest along, having opened all and provisionally closed three negotiation chapters, followed by Serbia with 22 of 35 chapters opened and two temporarily closed. However, both countries' integration processes have stalled recently.

²⁴ Berlin Process partner governments: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom

²⁵ Djolai, Marika. Mojsavska, Silvana. (2024) Ten Years of the Berlin Process – Stockatking Study. Aspen Institute. Berlin, pp.

²⁶ Nedeljnik. (2024, April) AmCham analiza: Vidljivi rezultati „Otvorenog Balkana“, za puni domet inicijative važan ulazak svih tržišta regiona. Retrieved from: <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/amcham-analiza-vidljivi-rezultati-otvorenog-balkana-za-puni-domet-inicijative-vazan-ulazak-svih-trzista-regiona/>

²⁷ Surlić, Stefan. Lazarević, Andrijana. Kolarski, Ljiljana. (2022) Integration vs. Sovereignty: The „Open Balkan“ in the Framework of Status and Identity Disputes. Serbian Political Thought. Retrieved from: <https://www.ips.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SPM-77-3en.pdf>

²⁸ O'Brennan, John. (2013) Enlargement Fatigue and its impact on the Enlargement Process in the Western Balkans. LSE IDEAS Special Report on EU Enlargement, London School of Economics and Political Science

Albania, in 2024, was approved to begin negotiations, having opened its first five chapters and moving beyond its previously joint path with North Macedonia, which continues to face longstanding bilateral obstacles. Bosnia and Herzegovina attained candidate status with conditions in late 2022, while Kosovo* is a potential candidate, recently granted visa liberalization beginning in 2024. An innovative proposal for phased EU membership, generated by regional think tanks network, while not being supported by governments, represents a unique regional approach within WB cooperation.²⁹

Comparative Analysis V4–WB

The similarities between the V4 and the WB are primarily rooted in shared historical experiences. Both regions spent the Cold War era under socialist regimes, though Yugoslavia—and by extension, most WB countries—took a distinct socialist path separate from the Soviet Union after 1948. In contrast, despite attempts at popular revolutions, the V4 nations remained firmly within the Soviet sphere of influence throughout the Cold War. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall marked a pivotal moment for both regions, presenting a historical crossroads they each responded to differently. In Central Europe, newly established democratic governments seized the moment, whereas in the Balkans, conflicts over Yugoslav succession ignited as the former state fragmented. Consequently, the two regions' paths began to diverge significantly.

Central European nations formalized their commitment to collaboration with the 1991 Visegrad Agreement, based on the symbolism of a historic alliance among their leaders, dating back six centuries, which laid the groundwork for cooperative integration into Western spheres of influence. A distinguishing factor for the V4 nations was their commitment to peace, which facilitated a more effective transition process than in both the Yugoslav region and the former Soviet Union. The peaceful division of Czechoslovakia into two states in 1993, known as the "Velvet Divorce," symbolized this peaceful approach and the awareness of the need for regional unity. Building on shared history, pragmatic conditions, and forward-looking interests, the V4 nations coalesced into a cohesive group, strengthening Central European identity through historical affinities and foreign policy goals, ultimately presenting a successful model of regional cooperation during their transition.

In the post-Yugoslav space, however, periods of war and peace fluctuated by area. Conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia ended in 1995, while those in Kosovo culminated in 1998–1999, concluding with NATO's bombing of the reduced FR Yugoslavia. North Macedonia

²⁹ Mihajlović, Milena. Blockmans Steven. Subotić Strahinja. Emerson Michael. (2023) Template 2.0 for Staged Accession to the EU. Center for European Policies. Belgrade

saw a brief civil conflict in 2001, while Albania, the sole WB country untouched by war, faced serious internal crises, including civil unrest in 1997. These conflicts reduced inter-ethnic relations to a historic low, with numerous unresolved issues persisting to this day. The WB lack any shared characteristic to anchor a cohesive regional identity, aside from technocratic factors like delayed EU membership. Without an equivalent of a symbolic "Visegrad" as a place of both geographic and historical unity, the WB were established artificially, lacking grassroots awareness and a sense of collective identity, which continues to limit unified regional action.³⁰

Thus, while both regions share a similar historical legacy, their divergent paths in transitioning from socialism to democracy constitute a fundamental difference, with effects visible to this day. In the V4 countries, there are no open issues between member states, despite occasional tensions, such as between Slovakia and Hungary due to Hungary's ethnic population in southern Slovakia. In contrast, WB relations have remained tense for over three decades since the onset of their transition and more than two decades since the last wars concluded. Kosovo's status poses the most significant barrier to deeper regional cooperation and a more prosperous future, compounded by other challenges, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex governance under strong international oversight, ethnic tensions in Montenegro and North Macedonia, and unresolved bilateral issues with neighboring countries.

Economically, the development trajectories of the two regions mirrored their political paths. The V4 nations now stand among the most prosperous of the former Eastern Bloc states, with some of Europe's highest growth rates. Conversely, the WB remain among Europe's poorest regions, with economic indicators trailing even the EU's least prosperous members; for instance, the WB's total GDP is \$30 billion lower than Hungary's.

In the early 1980s, Milan Kundera described Central Europe's alignment with the Eastern bloc as a tragedy, referring to it as the "kidnapped West" due to its historical, cultural, and civilizational ties to the West. Given the WB's extended journey toward EU integration, lasting over a quarter of a century, often dubbed "enlargement fatigue," one might ask whether the WB are now the "kidnapped West," echoing the past experience of Central Europe.³¹

³⁰ Đukanović, Dragan. Dašić, Marko. (2021), *Međunarodni problemi*. Beograd. Vol. LXXIII, No. 4, pp. 627

³¹ Kundera, Milan. (2024) *Oteti Zapad ili Tragedija Srednje Evrope*. Laguna. Beograd.

Table. Overview of V4 and WB similarities and differences

Criteria	Visegrad group	Western Balkans
1. Population	65 million	18 million
2. GDP	\$1,273 trillion	\$137 billion
3. Historical Experience	Common = Austria-Hungary; Eastern Socialist Bloc	Distinct = Austria-Hungary/Ottoman Empire; Non-aligned Socialist Yugoslavia without Albania
4. Transition	Peaceful	Violent
5. Statehood Restoration/Establishment	Czech Republic, Slovakia - 1 st time as an independent state	All but Albania
6. Initiative	Regional Ownership	External (Open Balkan an exception)
7. Symbol of Cooperation	Visegrad Agreement (13 th century)	-
8. NATO Membership	4/4	3/6
9. EU Membership	4/4	0/6
10. Open Questions	-	Kosovo's status

Regional Cooperation and Transferred Practices

The V4 countries are regarded as one of the most successful examples of nations in transition. Since their full EU membership in 2004, these countries have dedicated themselves to supporting further enlargement, emerging as prominent advocates for EU expansion. They have provided crucial support to countries like Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, which joined the EU following the 2004 enlargement. Furthermore, the V4 emphasize the importance of extending EU membership to the WB, identifying this as one of two key strategic priorities. This commitment has been reiterated in both the V4 Declaration of 2004 and the latest V4 Declaration of 2011.³²³³

Political Cooperation

The Visegrad Group supports the WB's EU path through its advocacy power. Even during the tenure of Jean-Claude Juncker, who declared no further enlargement during his 2014–2019 European Commission presidency, V4 continued their support, asserting that the EU project remains incomplete without the WB. Regular summits between foreign ministers from both regions, dating back to the Hungarian V4 presidency in 2009, have reinforced

³² Visegrad Declaration (2004). Retrieved from: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1>

³³The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group. (2011) Retrieved from: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava>

this support. At the V4 Summit in 2019, the WB Declaration was adopted, signaling further commitment to the region's EU integration.³⁴ Additionally, WB leaders are occasionally invited to V4+ summits, such as in 2019, when Serbia's president joined an extended format including Slovenia. One notable initiative was the "V4-WB Expert Network on Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights," launched under Poland's 2013 V4 presidency. Regarding financial assistance, the WB occupy a strategic role for all V4 countries, except Poland. Poland alone from the V4 participates in the Berlin Process, hosting the 2019 summit.

However, the onset of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 led to political divisions within the V4, disrupting the tradition of V4-WB ministerial meetings, the last of which took place in 2021 under Poland's V4 presidency.³⁵ During the subsequent presidencies of Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, no such meetings were convened due to worsening political relations among V4 members. Nevertheless, if political cooperation within the V4 stabilizes, an objective could be to establish a permanent V4+WB expert working group focused on EU integration.

Economic Cooperation

Economic cooperation among V4 has inspired the WB and other Southeastern European nations to foster regional cooperation through the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), established in 1992 by the three founding Visegrad countries to create a free trade area. Although political challenges affected Visegrad cooperation in the mid-1990s, CEFTA continued to grow, with Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, and later Croatia joining. After the V4 states and Slovenia entered the EU, they exited CEFTA, a path later followed by the other three countries. The EU encouraged the creation of a Western Balkans Free Trade Area (WBFTA) in 2006, modeled on CEFTA, though the plan evolved to incorporate the WB under the CEFTA name following Croatia's objection.^{36,37}

In terms of economic relations between individual countries, the V4 nations conduct the highest volume of trade with Serbia, the region's geographically closest and economically largest country.

Regional Funds

The V4's sole institution, the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), was established in 2000 in Bratislava, with each member country contributing equally to its €10 million annual budget.

³⁴ N1. (2019) Višegradaska grupa usvojila deklaraciju o Zapadnom Balkanu – podrška ulasku u EU. Retrieved from: <https://n1info.rs/svet/a525159-samit-v4-i-zapadnog-balkana-u-pragu/>

³⁵ Strážay, Tomáš. (2024) In. Changing Geometry of Central Europe- Where does Slovakia fit? Brezáni, Peter. Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy. RC SFPA. Bratislava. pp. 119

³⁶ Radio slobodna Evropa. (2006, January) Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/657992.html>

³⁷ UNMIK represented Kosovo* until 2024

The fund supports grants, scholarships, research residencies, and artist residencies, focusing mostly on youth and students from the WB and Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries as V4 priorities. In 2023, the IVF awarded 213 grants totaling €6.27 million, with over €500,000 (6 percent of total funds) allocated to WB applicants. The largest thematic share of allocated grants is directed toward the fields of culture and the preservation of shared identity (31.38 percent), followed by education and capacity building (29.26 percent).³⁸

Following this model, WB foreign ministers signed an agreement in 2015 to establish the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) in Tirana, which became operational in 2017. Like the IVF, the WBF is funded equally by its members, awarding 291 grants in its first seven years. Its offerings include grants for civil society organizations, mobility grants, and research exchanges.

Think Tank Networks

Mirroring the IVF, the Think Visegrad network was formed in 2012, connecting eight think tanks from each V4 capital. This network develops analytical materials on V4 priorities and current topics for internal governmental and IVF use. Its programming includes public official exchange visits, research residencies, and a Brussels office to promote dialogue on EU and V4 priorities. With a budget of €116,000 in 2023, the network serves as a policy tool for V4 governments.

In 2013, the WB replicated this model with the Think for Europe Network (TEN), composed of six think tanks, one from each WB entity, and coordinated by the European Policy Centre in Belgrade. This network, among other things, advocates for a staged EU accession model for the region.

Specialized Regional Media

In 2012, the Res Publica Foundation launched the Visegrad Insight platform to generate future policy directions for Europe and transatlantic partners. Other V4 regional media outlets include Visegrad 24, Euractiv Central Europe, and CEENERGYNEWS. Even though not directly being linked, similar initiatives followed in the WB with Balkan Insight, an English-language platform by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), which covers news and analysis across all WB countries, as well as Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Moldova. Since 2019, Balkan Insight has expanded its coverage to include all V4 countries and Ukraine. Also, Balkan Green Energy News is an example of regional media outlet on the WB in the specific area.

³⁸ International Visegrad Fund 2023 Report. (2023) International Visegrad Fund. Bratislava. pp. 8-15

Principles of V4 Cooperation

Formed in 1991, the V4 has remained active for over three decades. During this period, a range of local, regional, and global events and processes have shaped the context in which it operates. Its trajectory can be divided into several phases, with 2004 marking a pivotal year, as all four V4 countries joined the EU.

The phases preceding 2004 included the following: an initial establishment phase (1990–1992); the "Visegrad slow transit phase" (1993–1998), marked by political shifts in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, slower integration progress in Slovakia compared to the other three, and a decrease in collaboration—though later revitalized through CEFTA and NATO integration process; and "Visegrad 2" (1999–2004), strengthened by the NATO membership of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary and their support for Slovakia's accession, culminating in the achievement of the 1991 Declaration's goals with EU membership for all in 2004.³⁹

Following 2004, cooperation within the V4 continued, with notable successes and challenges. Among the highlights was the region's unified stance during the 2015 migrant crisis, where V4 countries collectively opposed the EU's migrant quota policy. This period also saw the formation of a V4 battlegroup. However, substantial differences emerged, particularly between Hungary and Poland on one side—under the right-wing leadership of Viktor Orbán (2010-present) and Poland's Law and Justice Party (2015-2023)—and other V4 nations. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico (except for 2010-2012 and 2018-2023) and Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (2017-2021) were also identified as populist leaders. The outbreak of conflict in Ukraine in 2022 further polarized the V4, often referred to as "2+2" or "3+1", due to divergent policy approaches. Hungary and Slovakia, led by Orbán and Fico, advocate for reduced aid to Ukraine and a peaceful resolution to end hostilities, while current governments of Poland and the Czech Republic strongly support Ukraine.

Despite enduring differences over the past three decades, the V4 has established principles of regional cooperation that have proven effective, positioning it as one of the most successful examples of regional collaboration. This analysis will examine some principles that could guide WB nations in future cooperation, helping to bridge regional differences.

³⁹ Damjanovski, Sasho. (2023) The Visegrad Group's Regional Cooperation as Response to Complex Security Environment. 41-49. 10.20544/ICP.8.1.23.P04.

1. Focus on Shared Interests – Despite their differences, the V4 has remained resilient, demonstrating sustainable and concrete examples of mutual collaboration. A critical component has been the shared understanding of cooperation as essential for each country to fulfill its national goals, particularly in the post-Berlin Wall era. Their common historical path, experience under socialist regimes, and the need for political and economic reforms on the path to the West initially united the three, later four, countries. The V4’s collaborative framework has remained flexible, without fixed structures or headquarters, rotating leadership annually, and convening ministerial-level meetings among sectoral experts and policymakers as needed.⁴⁰ This approach has facilitated joint action on shared interests, such as during the migrant crisis while minimizing conflicts arising from occasional political disagreements among member states.
2. Regional Ownership Initiative – Recognizing the historical moment following 1989, marked by the start of transition and exit from the Soviet sphere, was a key factor distinguishing the V4 from the WB. Leaders of the V3 countries at that time recognized the importance of the moment, pursuing a different path of transition from those in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union. The Visegrad Group emerged from shared national awareness and goals, formalized by the signing of the Declaration in the historically symbolic Visegrad Castle, signaling to international partners their readiness for dedicated reform and adherence to the Declaration’s objectives.
3. V4 as a Bridge for Transitioning Countries Toward EU Integration – Although this was not a primary objective in the 1990s, the V4’s example of regional cooperation inspired other countries to accelerate integration into Western organizations. Slovenia joined CEFTA in 1996, followed by Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, and later WB countries and Moldova upon V4 nations joining the EU. At the 2004 V4 Summit, the group adopted a declaration committing to support EU candidate countries from the WB and EaP, offering mentorship based on shared socialist history and the need for reforms. Through advocacy, donor support, and knowledge transfer, the V4 seeks to expedite the integration process for these countries.

In the WB, achieving regional cooperation among its constituents remains a complex task. Nonetheless, initial steps toward regional collaboration have been taken, even if driven largely by external initiatives. Notably, the Berlin Process, initiated by Germany with support from several EU member states, formalized the WB region’s presence. In contrast, the Open Balkan initiative—arising from direct communication among three Balkan states—demonstrates a regional ownership initiative with unique potential, despite only partial participation from all regional actors. Both initiatives embrace the principle of

⁴⁰ Andrea, Schmidt. (2017). Friends forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration. *Politics in Central Europe*. 12. 113 - 140. 10.1515/pce-2016-0019.

voluntary participation, prioritizing economic and social cooperation where consensus exists. V4 partners have been recognized as key supporters of the EU integration path for all WB countries, and positive public perceptions in the WB toward V4 nations present an opportunity for deepening cooperation in the coming period.

Policy Recommendations

Based on prior experiences, implemented practices, and the potential for further collaboration, several policy recommendations have been outlined to serve as models of positive practices that could be shared across regions—primarily from the V4 to the WB—or to highlight areas where future cooperation could be expanded.

V4–WB Investment Forum

Opportunities for enhanced economic cooperation between these two regions are substantial. With Hungary and Serbia as neighboring countries bridging the regions, bilateral collaboration is most prominent between these two states. Nevertheless, there remains potential for expanded investment from both sides. Establishing a Western Balkans Investment Forum in a V4 country could stimulate bilateral economic ties, with a reciprocal forum hosted in the WB to reinforce equitable partnerships. Building on the V4 Business Conference model, launched in 2022 and drawing over 700 participants from business sectors across V4 countries on topics like energy security, AI, green transitions, and cybersecurity, a similar forum could be developed for the WB.⁴¹ In the future, merging these events into a joint V4-WB investment forum or awarding WB an honorary guest role at the V4 Business Conference could be beneficial.

Key players for this initiative include regional trade and industrial forums in both regions, as well as the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF), which was established in the framework of the Berlin Process in 2017 with a Secretariat in Trieste, Italy, and V4 Chambers of Commerce. These two regional chambers established cooperation by signing the Joint Declaration in 2021.⁴² Joint investment forums by these organizations could enhance mutual cooperation, promote foreign direct investment, facilitate B2B partnerships, and support technology transfers across the regions, thus aligning with the goals outlined in their Joint Declaration. Such a forum could also draw on the success of established business forums in the WB, like the Belgrade Business Forum,

⁴¹ Visegrad 4 Business Conference. (2024). Retrieved from: <https://www.visegrad4business.eu/#about-us>

⁴² Joint Declaration. (2021) Retrieved from: https://v4.mfa.gov.hu/asset/view/148564/JointDeclaration_V4-WB6.pdf

Sarajevo Business Forum, Tirana Economic Forum, Podgorica Investment Forum, and others.

Young Professionals Academy V4-WB

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) has become one of the WB's most successful initiatives since its establishment in 2016 under the Berlin Process, providing collaboration opportunities to youth (ages 15-30) across the region. Throughout its history, RYCO has facilitated more than 25,000 youth exchanges within the region, investing approximately 3 million euros.⁴³ Similarly, the Visegrad Fund (IVF) supports numerous opportunities for young people in the V4 area through grants, scholarships, and residency programs. One of the longest-running examples is the Visegrad Summer School, having been implemented for 22 years, which brings together 30 young participants to Krakow for a 10-day cultural and educational program. This program is tailored for students, graduates, young researchers, and journalists aged 18 to 30 from V4 countries, more recently including also participants from the WB and EaP regions.⁴⁴

Drawing on these successes, a new program aimed at a specific group of young professionals (ages 25-40) from sectors like politics, business, and civil society could foster specialized inter-regional collaboration, creating networks of emerging leaders across fields. This academy could be structured as a year-long program with modules hosted in various countries, combining theoretical insights with practical case studies to deepen connections and cross-cultural understanding. Participants could collaboratively develop policy recommendations to further V4-WB cooperation, enhancing both regions' future partnerships and professional capacities. Programs like the Swedish Academy for Young Professionals and We Lead: EU Scheme for Young Professionals in the WB provide similar models and could serve as frameworks for this initiative connecting the two regions.^{45,46} Additionally, expanding the program to include EaP countries could be a valuable component from the V4 perspective.

Integrated Master's Degree Program

⁴³ Regional Youth Cooperation Office. (2024). Retrieved from: <https://www.rycowb.org/>

⁴⁴ Visegrad Summer School. (2024) Retrieved from: <https://www.visegradsummerschool.org/>

⁴⁵ Swedish Summer Academy for Young Professionals (SAYP) Western Balkans. (2024) Retrieved from: <https://si.se/en/apply/si-leadership-programmes/si-summer-academy-for-young-professionals-sayp-western-balkans/>

⁴⁶ WeLead: EU Scheme for Young Professionals in the Western Balkans. (2024) Retrieved from: https://www.adecco.si/en/welead/?fbclid=PAY2xjawGUXd1leHRuA2FlbQlxMAABppQJ-lftFfBoT2v_vWidaWZOVbqtQxIUUxCPg3dwJpGnBNFi7OjzoYDmeg_aem_Tgf7CAYcUM_6rSoSolZ73g

Integrated master's programs, like the Erasmus Program and Erasmus Mundus, have significantly contributed to shaping European identity by enabling student exchanges across universities. The concept of joint master's programs between universities from different countries is well-established, with initiatives present in both regions. In addition to the Erasmus Mundus catalog of joint master's programs, the V4 region launched Europe from Visegrad Perspective joint master's program in 2013. This program is delivered by a consortium of four universities—one in each V4 country—including Jagiellonian University in Krakow (Poland), the University of West Bohemia in Plzeň (Czech Republic), the University of Pécs (Hungary), and Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia).⁴⁷ Supported by the International Visegrad Fund, the program is distinctively decentralized, as none of the consortium universities are located in the capital cities of the V4 countries.

In the WB, several joint master's programs illustrate cross-regional collaboration with universities outside the region. The University of Sarajevo, for example, offers the European Regional Master's Program in Democracy and Human Rights in South East Europe (ERMA) in partnership with the University of Bologna in Italy, while the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade collaborates with the University of Graz to deliver a joint master's in Southeast European Studies.^{48,49} Additionally, the European University of Tirana offers a joint master's program in Political Science – Integration and Governance (PoSIG), in cooperation with several universities from the WB region including Pristina, Podgorica, and Skopje.⁵⁰ However, no joint master's program yet includes all WB stakeholders.

These existing initiatives highlight the potential for collaborative efforts between universities in the two regions, with Europe from Visegrad Perspective program serving as an inspiring model for a similar initiative in the WB or even a cross-regional program involving both the V4 and WB institutions, as seen in the collaboration between the universities of Graz and Belgrade. Such projects could benefit from the support of both regional funds as well as Erasmus grants. In addition, recent EU efforts to support the WB's integration are highlighted by the establishment of a third College of Europe campus dedicated to EU studies in Tirana in 2023. Symbolically, the second campus was founded in Natolin, Poland, in 1992, reflecting the EU's commitment to extending its influence to post-Soviet states.⁵¹ This new initiative in Tirana reinforces the EU's dedication to supporting

⁴⁷ The VNDREAM consortium. (2024) Retrieved from: <https://v4.uj.edu.pl/the-consortium>

⁴⁸ ERMA, The European Regional Master's Programme in Democracy and Human Rights in South East Europe . (2024) Retrieved from: <https://gchumanrights.org/education/regional-programmes/erma/about2024.html>

⁴⁹ Joint Master's Programme in Southeast European Studies. (2024) Retrieved from: <https://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/79104>

⁵⁰ Master POSIG. (2024) Retrieved from: https://uet.edu.al/en/master-posig/?fbclid=PAY2xjawGUYBlleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABpiA1CN5N6tASd3EN8uB77wRS1Sc3Hvx2m2kgJbsVcqisth z-C2icwZVL5w_aem_P-ZPbvmtZKXafjCvjeYogw

⁵¹ The first College of Europe was founded in Bruges, Belgium, in 1949

the WB's path toward integration and underscores the strategic importance of educational programs in fostering EU alignment.

Public Communication on EU Integration

Based on the experiences of V4 countries, particularly in public engagement strategies during their European integration processes, WB countries could adopt similar approaches to communicate effectively with both domestic and international audiences. This includes not only informing citizens on the EU accession process but also enhancing the country's image in EU member states. A case in point is Poland's strategic communication initiatives in the early 2000s to advance its EU accession goals. Recognizing the cultural and tourism potential, Poland organized the "Europolia 2001 – Poland" festival in Brussels and launched the "Polish Year" cultural showcases in countries that held the EU presidency, such as Spain in 2002 and Sweden in 2003. Additionally, Poland was the guest of honor at the 2000 Frankfurt International Book Fair and undertook major economic promotional efforts, not only to attract investment and expand trade but also to counter stereotypes of Poland as an underdeveloped nation. Poland's information strategy included a three-phase campaign: "Union without Secrets," which involved producing 50 short films about the EU; "Poland in the EU without Secrets," detailing accession benefits; and a final phase in the lead-up to the national referendum.⁵²

In the WB, examples of public diplomacy grounded in a strategic framework remain limited. This gap presents an opportunity for tourism boards and cultural institutions to employ a professional, digitally-savvy and up-to-date approaches, including metaverse diplomacy, to attract international attention by showcasing reforms and alignment with EU integration goals.⁵³ Public diplomacy efforts may gain additional traction as Hungary and Poland, both V4 members, consecutively hold the EU Council presidency from July 2024 to June 2025, offering WB countries a platform to increase their visibility within the EU. Furthermore, as EU accession progresses, fostering domestic public dialogue through thematic events will be essential to inform citizens about membership implications and prepare them for EU integration.

⁵² Szpala, Marta (2016). Poland. In: Minić, Jelica. *Advocacy Strategy for the EU Integration of the Western Balkans – Guidelines*. European Movement in Serbia. Belgrade. pp. 114-120

⁵³ Pavlović, Nina. (2023) *Unlocking Diplomatic Harmony: Strengthening Serbia-South Korea Relations through Metaverse Diplomacy*. Center for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiative. Belgrade