



Connecting V4 and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions: V4, Croatia, Slovenia & the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans

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Introduction

The Western Balkan region, consisting currently of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, is an important territorial priority of EU foreign policy, especially its enlargement policy. The countries of the region were first given the “European perspective” at the EU Thessaloniki Summit back in 2003.¹ Since then, only Croatia has managed to accede to the European Union, while other countries received reassurance about their integration ambitions after a long break at the Sofia (2018) and Zagreb (2020) summits.²

The Visegrad Four (V4) is considered to be an important supporting group of the Western Balkan countries’ integration ambitions in the EU, while it also has a positive reputation in the WB region. Some other EU members also take an active part in supporting the enlargement process. Among them, especially the two former Yugoslav countries – Croatia and Slovenia – play a leading role. On the EU level, the V4 + Croatia and Slovenia, together with other like-minded member states, can continue supporting enlargement policy, while perhaps aiming to bring a new dynamic to it. Synergies and complementarity can also be found between the Visegrad Group’s activities and the Berlin Process³, of which both Croatia and Slovenia are members. Last but not least, more intensive cooperation between the Visegrad Group and Slovenia and Croatia within the framework of the V4+ format could also contribute to the strengthening of the enlargement prospects of the Western Balkan countries.

1. The current state of EU enlargement

2020 was a very difficult year for enlargement, though its beginning was positive. The veto of France, the Netherlands and Denmark was broken and accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia were given the green light. Another positive signal was that the new methodology of the enlargement process, which concentrates on progress in fundamental reforms in the areas of rule of law, democratic institutions and economy received strong support both in the EU and in the region itself. Negotiations on the fundamentals will be opened first and closed last, which, however, also provides some space for backsliding if the accession countries would fail to meet the criteria.⁴

The eruption of the COVID 19 pandemic, however, harmed the enlargement process. The attention of the EU (and member states) was focused on eliminating the consequences of the pandemic both to the health of the citizens and to the economies of member states. At the end of 2020, the enlargement process suffered from

¹ EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163.

² On the other hand, it is important to mention that the Zagreb summit focused mainly on the process (financial support of the accession process and development help and its acknowledgement by WB) rather than enlargement as the ultimate goal. It showed the divisions among EU member states in the question of enlargement. See, for example, Vlagyiszlav Makszimov, “Western Balkans summit encourages ‘European perspective’, but omits enlargement”, EURACTIV.com, 5 May 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/western-balkans-summit-encourages-european-perspective-but-omits-enlargement/>.

³ On a political level, the most influential grouping in the EU in terms of enlargement policy is the Berlin process, which encompasses six member states – Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Poland and Slovenia. For more details see The Berlin Process information and resource centre, <https://berlinprocess.info/about/>.

⁴ More on the new methodology in COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS. Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, Brussels, 5. 2. 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf.



Bulgaria's attempt to bind the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia to solving some bilateral issues. This was not the first time that bilateral issues had been used in the history of the enlargement process – a similar approach was pursued by Slovenia when Croatia was joining the EU – but the dispute initiated by Bulgaria negatively affected the whole enlargement process. Another complicating factor was that Bulgaria tried to condition EU membership with questions of national identity, though these do not fall under any clearly stated accession conditions. As an act of protest, the Czech Republic and Slovakia decided not to support the EU Council's conclusions on enlargement. Though efforts have been made to change Bulgaria's position (in the European Parliament, for example), a real breakthrough can only be made by the new Bulgarian government that is expected to be formed after the April elections.⁵ Another intervening factor is the latent support of some EU member states to the current status quo.

The credibility of the EU has also been continuously undermined by the fact that it behaves as a normative actor, emphasizing the importance of values and norms, but restrains itself from criticism of the authoritarian tendencies of some political leaders in the region.⁶ Additionally, the views of non-political stakeholders are not taken into consideration by the EU, especially when it comes to local actors and civil society representatives. On the other hand, the EU's role in the protection of the freedom of speech and support to independent journalism should be appreciated. Despite the lack of substantial development, enlargement is still perceived as a priority by the European Commission.⁷

On the other hand, the Western Balkan countries continue to face challenges connected to political instability and the fragility of their governments and political systems. This goes hand in hand with the severe polarization of the societies. The last parliamentary elections in Serbia might serve as a telling example since a significant part of the opposition decided to boycott the election race, as a criticism of limitations on political competition and freedom of speech. The EU now serves as the mediator for inter-party dialogue. The spread of the Covid 19 pandemic and adoption of countermeasures led to a concentration of power in the hands of some political leaders and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies throughout the region. It is often forgotten that efficient justice, with respect to fundamental rights and transparent decision making are the preconditions for economic development. In this regard, the problem is that the governments in the region only pay “lip service” to the rights, values and principles mentioned above, but do not implement them in their policymaking. Sometimes the fact that unresolved historical problems still matter is forgotten, which also means that reconciliation is not accorded priority and lacks political support. There was a hope that the accession process would resolve some of these disputes, but there has been no significant initiative on the side of WB countries in this area. The reconciliation should be driven from the inside and focused on overcoming conflicts and differences through cooperation on issues which are in everyone's interest, such as prevention of the brain drain.⁸

Yet another problem is that the reforms often do not translate into real life, which is frustrating for (part of) the political leaders, as well as for the population. The two “frontrunners” – Serbia and Montenegro – have not progressed in their

⁵ The fact that far-right nationalists dropped out from the Parliament and won't be involved in the new government might serve as a supportive argument for such a change.

⁶ The rise of authoritarian tendencies in the WB countries has also been reflected in the Freedomhouse report. See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege/countries-and-regions>. Authoritarianism provides the floor for corruption to flourish – for more details see, for example, the recent Transparency International report at https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2020_Report_ExaminingStateCapture_English.pdf.

⁷ Based on the 1st panel discussion at the online workshop EU enlargement in the Western Balkans – regional perspectives”, which was organized on 24 February 2021 by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association in the framework of the project “Connecting V4 and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions”.

⁸ Ibid.



negotiations with the EU. In the case of Serbia, more efforts by the government are needed to open more negotiating chapters, while the Montenegrin government should aim to close more of those that are already opened. Real progress has not been achieved so far in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, which is of crucial importance for the whole enlargement process. In this case, the EU and in particular the former high representative for foreign and security policy Federica Mogherini did not play a particularly active role. The appointment of the new envoy Miroslav Lajčák can be perceived as a step in the right direction. His mediating role should continue to be supported by all stakeholders, although part of the Kosovar political elite questions his legitimacy, as he previously served as a foreign minister of a country that does not recognize the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo. The possibility of a land swap (between Serbia and Kosovo) is not perceived as a viable option by any of the relevant stakeholders, and has been assiduously kept off the table. This is considered critical to preventing the opening of a Pandora's box, which would have consequences for the whole of Europe. One positive sign is that both Serbian and Kosovar leaders are willing to continue the dialogue, though the new Kosovo prime minister Albin Kurti is expected to be a tough negotiator.⁹

Though the credibility of the EU was severely hit by the blocking of the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia by the three member states in 2019, public support for integration to the EU remains high in all Western Balkan countries.¹⁰ This is a true asset, but without more concrete and visible achievements in the enlargement process this high level of support could start decreasing in the years to come.

The role of external actors has made the enlargement process even more challenging. The spread of the pandemic and the lack of timely and well-targeted assistance from the EU provided opportunities for China and Russia to increase their influence in the region. In fact, an intensive infodemic can be observed in the region. Both powers used the window of opportunity and supplied the demand in the region with medical equipment, including vaccines. This is especially applicable to Serbia, which is the biggest market in the Western Balkans. Thanks to deliveries of Russian and Chinese vaccines, Serbia is among the fastest vaccinated countries in Europe and has become a vaccination hub for the whole region.¹¹ Though the EU remains by far the biggest donor in the region and most vaccines will finally be delivered through Europe, Russia and China are more active in promoting their assistance and other activities, also by engaging regional political leaders. The rising influence of external actors during the pandemic was – to some extent – caused by the absence of a timely and well-communicated humanitarian response from the EU. Increasing pollution in the region can also be connected to the engagement of China, as Chinese investors do not pay adequate attention to climate change and environmental protection in general and do not meet the legal requirements. Another problem is that the WB countries prefer short-term gains such as the creation of new jobs and investments with seemingly no strings attached over complex solutions leading to higher energy security and sustainability, which is also connected with lagging reforms in the energy sector. Unlike the financial support from the West, which is tied to many conditions, Chinese loans and investments into critical infrastructure are available almost immediately. Their acceptance by the WB countries, however, creates a hidden dependency on China and its model of modernization.

The United States plays a different role in the region when compared to China, Russia or the Gulf countries. The USA remains an important stakeholder both in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to its previous engagements which led

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See, for instance, <https://www.iri.org/resource/western-balkans-poll-shows-strong-support-eu>.

¹¹ See, for example, "How Serbia's Coronavirus Vaccines are Resetting Balkan Animosities", *The National Interest*, 4 April 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/coronavirus/how-serbia%E2%80%99s-coronavirus-vaccines-are-resetting-balkan-animosities-181961>.



to the conflict resolution. In the case of Kosovo, the parallel functioning of the US special envoy for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, Richard Grenell, with the EU envoy, Miroslav Lajčák, was considered as problematic by the EU, but with the arrival of the new US administration under the leadership of President Joe Biden more coordination is expected between Washington and Brussels.

Regional cooperation can be perceived as very useful, as it pushes the countries to coordinate their positions and pursue joint interests. Recently several new initiatives appeared in the region, such as “mini Schengen” or the common regional market.¹² These look attractive from a PR perspective, but when it comes to their implementation, results are less tangible.

2. V4 and the Western Balkans

In 1991, when Visegrad cooperation was established, accession to the European structures was a primary goal for its members. After 2004, when the Visegrad countries acceded to the EU, the enlargement of the European Union became one of the most important priorities of the V4 partnership. The overall environment of both integration processes is, however, significantly different. The V4 countries knew the date of the accession, which is not the case of the Western Balkan countries. The acceding V4 countries also did not have to fulfil as many criteria as the current candidate countries, which also concerns the number of negotiating chapters.

Interregional cooperation with the Western Balkans in the V4+ format has particular importance for both the V4 and WB countries. The V4 countries support the Western Balkans on a political level, which was demonstrated by the strong stance of the Czech Republic and Slovakia against the introduction of a bilateral agenda in the negotiation process by Bulgaria at the European Council in December 2020. The Visegrad countries also serve as an important source of know-how regarding transformation and integration processes. V4 is the only format of regional cooperation in the EU that holds regular meetings with the Western Balkan countries. Annual ministerial summits are held in the V4+ format, and to broaden the outreach of these meetings, representatives of the countries holding the presidency of the Council of the EU, as well as high representatives of the European Commission are invited.¹³

The transfer of know-how from transformation and integration processes concerns both individual V4 countries, as well as the Visegrad Group as such. An important source of inspiration for WB countries was the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which originated in V4 and soon included other countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia. The fact that CEFTA helped Central European countries to prepare themselves for acceding to the single market of the EU was the reason for the Western Balkan countries to create CEFTA 2006, based on the same principles as the “original” CEFTA but designed for Southeastern Europe.¹⁴

Another example of a successful procedural know-how transfer is the Western Balkan Fund (WBF), modelled after the example of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). The WBF serves as a donor for selected regional projects with

¹² For more details see, for example, Emina Muminović, “Mini-Schengen, Regional Economic Area and Common Regional Market: What is what?”, europeanwesternbalkans.com, 15 December 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/12/15/mini-schengen-regional-economic-area-and-common-regional-market-what-is-what/>.

¹³ The last meeting was held by the Czech V4 Presidency in Prague in February 2020 and special guests were the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia in the role of the EU Presidency, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia and the Secretary General of the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria. See “Meeting of the foreign ministers of the V4 countries and the Western Balkans,” February 28, 2020, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-meeting-of-the-200323>.

¹⁴ For more information visit CEFTA’s webpage www.cefta.int.



several rounds of grant calls already having been launched. Some of the projects are even supported jointly by the WBF and IVF, while WBF project managers are invited to evaluate IVF projects that are implemented in the Western Balkans, which also points to the synergies between the two organizations. Though the WBF still depends on the IVF's technical assistance, the long-term aim is to strengthen regional ownership by the Western Balkan countries over this initiative¹⁵. It is worth mentioning that the relevance of the WBF is also recognized by the EU, as it was mentioned directly in the Sofia Declaration of the 2018 EU-Western Balkans Summit.¹⁶

The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) serves as an important donor for projects in the Western Balkans.¹⁷ The first scholarships were introduced by the IVF in 2004 and focused on Serbia and Belarus, and by 2021 around 80 projects in the WB had been concluded, with a total sum exceeding 3.3 million euros (which is about 4 percent of the fund's overall budget). In addition, around 200 scholars from Western Balkan countries conducted their scholarships in V4 countries with the IVF's support. The thematic focus of the implemented grants includes capacity building and training programs, with a particular focus on access to legal aid, environmental protection, energy, watchdog activities, anti-discrimination projects, reconciliation, youth as well as general experience from the accession process to the EU.¹⁸ Particular attention is paid to the support of people to people activities and civil society organizations. The IVF also serves as the donor to the Civil Servants Mobility Program (CSMP) - operated by the Think Visegrad platform - part of which focuses on civil servants from the Western Balkan countries.

The perception of the International Visegrad Fund and Visegrad cooperation in general is very positive in the Western Balkans, owing in large part also to the fact that it acts as a "soft power", without the aim to follow the patronizing principle and impose anything on the countries of the region. V4 cooperation is, in fact, often perceived as a role model.¹⁹ This is partly because of its credibility and the achievements of individual Visegrad countries, but predominantly because it serves as a positive example of regional cooperation. This is the added value that is missing in the case of other EU countries that have been engaging intensively in the region. In addition, well-developed cross-border cooperation and experience from the reunification of divided cities on the borders (e.g. Cieszyn - Český Těšín) also draw the attention of the Western Balkan countries to the V4. V4 countries consider the Western Balkans as a target region for their development (and transitional) assistance, while twinning programs represent another intensively used mechanism to engage with counterparts in the Western Balkans. Still, a more intensive and focused communication about V4 activities in the region is needed, with particular attention paid to their better promotion.

¹⁵ For more information see the WBS's official website www.westernbalkansfund.org.

¹⁶ Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit, 17.05.2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo_en/44794/Sofia%20Declaration%20of%20the%20EU-Western%20Balkans%20summit.

¹⁷ See the official website of the International Visegrad Fund – www.visegradfund.org, and particularly the section on the Visegrad + grants - <https://www.visegradfund.org/apply/grants/visegrad-plus-grants/>.

¹⁸ Data taken from the presentation of Edit Bátorfi, IVF Executive director at the online workshop "EU enlargement in the Western Balkans—regional perspectives", which was organized on 24 February 2021 by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, and further updated after consultations with other representatives of the IVF.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Advocacy Strategy for the EU Integration of the Western Balkans - Guidelines, 2016, <http://arhiva.emins.org/uploads/useruploads/knjige/ASWB-Guidelines-full-version-za-web.pdf>.



3. Possibilities of enhanced cooperation in the V4 + Croatia and Slovenia framework

When it comes to the EU member states located on the Balkan peninsula, Slovenia and Croatia deserve particular attention. Besides their continuous engagement in the region the reason lies in their coexistence with the Western Balkan countries (Albania being an exception) in the former Yugoslavia, as well as their cultural and linguistic closeness. Thanks to these predispositions both countries have a somehow better understanding of the situation on the ground. The economies of the Western Balkan countries and Slovenia and Croatia are still interdependent, which provides common ground for the exchange of expertise and know-how. On the other hand, both Slovenia and Croatia still have bilateral problems with each other, Croatia also with some Western Balkan countries, especially Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is a legacy of the past.

Though both Slovenia and Croatia attempted to distance themselves from the Western Balkan region in the 1990s, during their accession process they changed their attitude. The first Slovenian EU Presidency in 2008 already underlined the importance of the Western Balkan region. Both Slovenia and Croatia were the initiators of the Brdo-Brijuni/Brioni process, which focuses on the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries and on reconciliation.

3.1. Cooperation on the EU level

As EU member states, the V4 countries, as well as Slovenia and since 2013 also Croatia have the possibilities to shape EU enlargement policy. Membership of the EU is therefore an important tool for collectively supporting the EU perspective for the Western Balkan countries. And at the EU level, possibilities to build broader coalitions of like-minded countries, e.g. the informal group of friends of enlargement are open. The presidency of the Council of the European Union also enables the presiding country to put an emphasis on the enlargement process. In the framework of Croatia's 2020 Presidency, the EU-Western Balkans summit was organized in Zagreb with the participation of representatives of the Western Balkan countries.

In the second half of 2021 Slovenia will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union, which brings further opportunities for more intensive cooperation with the Western Balkans. The enlargement agenda and a focus on the Western Balkans will be high up the presidency agenda, and Slovenia also aims to organize a Western Balkans summit in November or December. The summit will provide an opportunity to renew the commitment and consolidate the political engagement of the EU, as well as to legitimize the new methodology of enlargement. When it comes to political issues, close attention will certainly be paid to progress in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. A widely understood resilience to threats and crises will be a central focus of the presidency as well, which also concerns the Western Balkan countries. Other priorities, such as the green agenda and sustainability, economic development, energy, transport infrastructure or migration also have an impact on the region.

It is expected that the 2022 Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU will also have enlargement as one of its priorities, but it is premature to discuss any details, also due to the forthcoming parliamentary elections (to be held in October), which could bring a new government to power and reshuffle, to a certain extent, the foreign policy priorities.



3.2. V4 and the Berlin Process

From the Ljubljana and Zagreb points of view, the most important platform for supporting the Western Balkan region is considered to be the Berlin Process.²⁰ Besides political support to the integration ambitions of the Western Balkan countries, the Berlin Process emphasizes the connectivity agenda and youth. The establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)²¹ is considered to be one of the most tangible outcomes of the Berlin Process as such.

Both the Berlin Process and the V4 support the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU. Both initiatives complement each other and therefore can further reinforce each other in the framework of the enlargement process. While the Berlin Process' strength lies in its political outreach as it has a strong political dimension, the V4 added value is more in "soft" aspects, translated into concrete projects supporting regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations. The biggest V4 country – Poland – is at the same time a member of the Berlin Process, which also might bring some windows of opportunities for enhanced cooperation between the two initiatives in the future.

3.3. Cooperation in the V4+ format

When it comes to enhanced cooperation of V4 with Slovenia and Croatia, the V4+ instrument can certainly continue to be used. The possibilities between the V4 and Croatia and Slovenia to work jointly on selected priority areas, such as justice and home affairs, terrorism and organized crime, energy and transport infrastructure, but also enlargement as such are now higher than ten years ago, as cooperation has moved from being only occasional, on to a more systematic basis.

When it comes to joint V4 + Slovenia + Croatia initiatives towards the Western Balkans, activities are mostly limited to the support of the European perspective of the region. Both Slovenia and Croatia attended the last V4+Western Balkans ministerial summit held under the Czech V4 Presidency.²² Slovenia also joined the V4 and Estonia in supporting the non-paper on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which openly calls for a strengthened cooperation with countries in the Western Balkans.²³

Sectoral cooperation with the Western Balkans has not developed substantially on the Visegrad Group level so far. Slovenian and Croatian experience could nevertheless help the V4 countries to understand the reality on the ground in greater complexity. Besides political support, the V4 countries and Slovenia + Croatia are active in the implementation of the twinning projects, while the Western Balkans is a target region for development (and transitional) assistance to all of them. In addition, both the V4 countries, as well as Croatia and Slovenia have quite rich experience with reconciliation processes. When it comes to think tank cooperation, a good example of a project that combines the V4, Western Balkan countries and Slovenia could be the Think Balkans think tank platform, which is now being established in the Western Balkans following the example of the Think Visegrad initiative.²⁴

Cooperation is also possible in the framework of other regional initiatives, e.g. the Three Seas Initiative (TSI),²⁵ which has the potential to accelerate cooperation in priority areas, namely infrastructure, energy and digitalization. Though TSI is

²⁰ The 2021 Berlin Process summit is supposed to be held in Berlin.

²¹ See www.rycowb.org.

²² "Meeting of the foreign ministers of the V4 countries and the Western Balkans," February 28, 2020, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-meeting-of-the-200323>.

²³ Non-paper – New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Joint Position of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia, 2020, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements>.

²⁴ Think Visegrad – V4 Think-Tank Platform, <https://think.visegradfund.org/>.

²⁵ See www.3seas.eu.



focusing primarily on the intensification of cooperation among 12 EU members, the 2020 TSI summit in Ljubljana, and particularly the Business Forum also hosted representatives of businesses from Western Balkan countries. The identification of possible synergies and proposals for joint action, however, needs to be further analyzed.

Yet another platform for cooperation between V4 and Slovenia and Croatia is the Salzburg Forum. In this case, however, the possibilities of cooperation are limited to one sector, which is internal security, and related cross-border cooperation. Western Balkan countries are not members, they are only included in the Group of Friends of the Salzburg Forum.²⁶

Conclusions and recommendations

The enlargement of the European Union is a complex and long-term task, so coordination on the EU level, as well as synergy between the different platforms in the EU that focus on supporting the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries is needed. This also applies to cooperation between V4 + Slovenia and Croatia.

On the EU level, the V4 together with Slovenia and Croatia should work together to prevent a situation where enlargement becomes the victim of EU internal reforms. The EU has the ambition to act as a geopolitical player, which also means that it should be more active in neighboring regions. The EU needs to regain its credibility in the region as soon as possible. Measurable criteria and clear commitments should be the substance of the enlargement process and a new methodology on enlargement could really help to strengthen the EU's credibility in the region. On the one hand, the EU should stress the necessity of maintaining rule of law principles for economic success, while on the other hand it should aim to minimize administrative burdens to make its funding more competitive. Other stakeholders, such as local and civil society actors, should also be given relevance in the accession process and should be engaged. The EU should also pay attention to extending the outreach of particular EU delegations outside the capitals, which should go hand in hand with the change of the overall communication strategy and communication style. The EU delegations and the embassies of the member states should also coordinate their efforts in communicating and promoting the EU's medical and economic assistance in the post-Covid recovery. It would also be recommended to include the Western Balkans in crucial discussions on strategic issues that concern the European project, including the debate on the future of Europe.

To achieve the tasks mentioned above, like-minded countries in the EU supportive to the enlargement should be gathered together, e.g. through an informal group of "friends of enlargement". The V4+ framework and the Berlin Process could also play a role here, as they complement each other. The partners in the Western Balkans should be jointly encouraged to develop good neighborly relations and to intensify regional cooperation. The importance of regional ownership of any regional initiative should also be stressed. By no means should regional cooperation in the Western Balkans become a substitute for EU membership, so the prospect of this scenario should be avoided. Bilateral disputes in the region should be solved with the assistance of the EU, with the aim of finding lasting solutions. In this regard, projects focusing on the reconciliation process should be given further attention and support and the involvement of a broad scope of stakeholders should be guaranteed, including religious leaders.

Projects focusing on reconciliation promoted jointly by V4 and Slovenia + Croatia might be of added value for the region, while achievements and lessons learned should also be shared in the area of cross-border cooperation. Joint

²⁶ See <http://www.salzburgforum.org/>.



cooperation could intensify in the fields of combating corruption and organized crime, as well as strengthening resilience to hybrid threats and preventing radicalization of the societies. Cooperation in border protection with the aim of keeping migratory movements under control should be mentioned as well, also in the framework of the Salzburg Forum. Furthermore, the space for enhanced cooperation should include more intensively the energy sector and development of energy infrastructure, as the Western Balkans plays a substantial role in developing the EU's diversification of energy supply through the Southern Gas Corridor.²⁷

V₄ + Slovenia and Croatia should also intensify their efforts in coordinating their development assistance towards the countries of the region. More intensive attention should also be paid to the implementation of twinning projects and the secondment of experts from various ministries, in order to assist the Western Balkan countries in the negotiation process, especially when it comes to the "difficult" chapters. The V₄ + Slovenia and Croatia should perhaps initiate the launching of a program to counter the increasing Russian and Chinese presence in the region, which could eventually be supported by the EU. To enhance cooperation in the V₄+Croatia and Slovenia format with the Western Balkans, it would be useful to develop an analysis mapping the strengths and weaknesses of existing regional initiatives. Such an analysis would enable the better identification of the needs of Western Balkan partners and to target cooperation towards the most pressing issues. All in all, besides supporting integration of the Western Balkan countries on the political level, the V₄ + Croatia and Slovenia should promote EU integration on the society level as well. To achieve this goal, programs and projects supported by various donors, among which the EU and International Visegrad Fund should continue playing a significant role, can be used.

²⁷ See V₄ Statement on the Western Balkans, September 12, 2019, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/v4-statement-on-the-190912>. Though this statement of the V₄ Prime ministers concerns exclusively cooperation between the V₄ and Western Balkans, it can also be adapted to the V₄+Croatia+Slovenia+Western Balkans format.



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