

TEN YEARS
OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP
MEMBER STATES
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Edited by: Agnieszka Piekutowska, Iwona Wrońska

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Origins of and perspectives for the future for the Visegrad Group

Introduction

The Visegrad Group (V4) exists more than two decades. The twenty-year experience allows one to evaluate its activity, verify purposes and predict new perspectives, especially in the new geopolitical and economic environment.

For over 20 years the situation has been changed. The V4 countries have forgotten the communist heritage. They are members of the EU and NATO. Their development is stable and, despite emerging new threats, relatively safe. This is not, of course, the merit of the Visegrad Group, but the result of hard work of societies, in which the V4, contrary to the stated objectives at the beginning of little help. Both economic cooperation and political were rickety, far not corresponding to the possibilities of countries that in the early 1990s were still converging aspirations and interests. Repeatedly emphasized geographical proximity, shared history, cultural similarities and a similar level of economic development remained slogans, behind which was hidden the fact that the attempt to translate these values on a community of interests resulted in defeat.

The Visegrad Group was the most active just after its establishing in the early 1990s. It resulted from the fact that Poland, Hungary

and Czechoslovakia quite suddenly found themselves in the new geopolitical situation. Breaking the dependence on the USSR intensively sought a new identity and place in the structures of the West. In this context, both mutual economic cooperation and broad foreign policy coordination plane seemed to be important advantages. It gave some sense of security and community interests in international reality yet unrecognized. Achieving the original purpose slowed down the development of the organization. V4 countries were not able to develop a new common vision and objectives of the action, going beyond the ritual of the need to ensure the further deepening of cooperation. V4 began to turn into a discussion club, but without the moderator. From time to time there were indeed new initiatives, which were a reaction to short-term problems such as energy cooperation and joint modernization of the army. Unfortunately, many of discussed projects were not finalized.

The Visegrad Group countries were not able to work out a common infrastructure projects, speak with one voice at the EU and NATO forum, collectively identify risk areas and work to eliminate them. V4 economy does not create positive synergies, but strongly compete with each other – mainly to attract investment. The Visegrad Group did not create a “mark” either; it is still poorly recognized, even within the societies of the member states. V4 did not create a framework for cooperation on the model of the Benelux or the Nordic Group. What is more, , and its goals and interests are often divergent.

The current problems of V4 do not mean that the existence of this informal organization does not make sense. It also does not mean that the establishing of V4 was a mistake. To be honest, the list of real successes of V4 is admittedly modest. However, y are worth noting. First of all, in 1992 Central European Free Trade Agreement was established. Secondly, it is the cooperation of ambassadors of V4 in Brussels. Eventually, the fact of establishing in 2000 the Visegrad Fund awarding grants and scholarships.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the origins of the V4, and present the perspectives for the future, in particular facing a new security challenges in Europe.

1. Origins of the Visegrad Group

The Visegrad Group initiated its activity on April 9, 1990. Then, the leaders and MPs of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary had an appointment in Bratislava. The name of the group – at the beginning the Triangle Visegrad – resulted from the meeting of the leaders of those three countries in February 1991 in Visegrad. This appointment resulted in a declaration of cooperation between Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the pursuit of European integration [Zięba, 2000, p. 28]. However, political leaders decided that the cooperation would not have a character of an international organization. It was to be a kind of regular consultations and factual collaboration in the areas found by the leaders as needed. The V4 is viewed as an “informal discussion group” [Kavický, 2014, p. 11].

Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary led the coordination of its security policy towards the USSR. When Warsaw Pact still existed, they demanded its dissolution. Their strong pro-European stance explicitly stated in the declaration of Visegrad, contributed to the earlier dissolution of Warsaw Pact. They also jointly led consultations on the withdrawal of Soviet troops from its territory [Zięba, 2000, p. 32].

The idea of Central Europe was important not only for the politicians but also for intellectuals. In 1983 in French “Le Debat”, next in 1984 in American “The New York Review of Books” Milan Kundera published his essay titled “The West kidnapped or the tragedy of Central Europe”. Kundera’s paper resulted in growing interest of the idea of Central Europe (CE). This essay provoked a broad discussion not only between the Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians. It caused the discussion on the concept of Central Europe also between the French and Americans. Kundera’s essay not only raised the idea of Central Europe, but has become an excellent example of a specific conceptualization of the region [Stolarz, 2013, p. 25]. Prior to this publication, Central Europe was defined in opposition to Russia and other states being under Soviet influence. The main point of intellectual debate was redefinition of the borders and an attempt to show that Central Europe belongs to Western Europe. Kundera extensively wrote about CE identity. He separated V4 from Russia and other states being

under influence of the Cyrillic culture. He also underlined historical differences between Russia and CE. In Kundera's opinion, the origins of Eastern Europe and Russia are in Byzantium, while the V4 countries belong to Western Europe and cultural circle of Rome Christianity.

2. Geopolitics and new priorities

In early 1990s geopolitics was extremely changed. Unexpectedly, the Soviet Union and the communist bloc, including Warsaw Pact, disintegrated. The post-Yalta world crash also meant that NATO, which only a few months earlier defined as the enemy, now transformed itself into the desired ally. A full break of Soviet domination, however, was not easy. On the territory of the Visegrad Group countries, Russian troops still stationed: in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary – Central Group of Forces, and – Northern Group of Forces. These forces were deployed as an instrument of pressure on local authorities. Under these conditions, it was difficult to perform complete pivot of foreign policy, especially the Western side structures lacked the votes staring skeptically at the new international configuration.

Even at the beginning of 1991, few people assumed that it could come to a complete collapse of the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union. Moreover, such a process was seen as extremely dangerous for European security. Under these conditions, the cooperation of the Visegrad Group was extremely desirable. It gave a sense of community in the new reality, served building good neighborly relations in the social field and economics, but above all supported the process of integration with the EU and NATO. Moreover, Poland was interested in easing pre-war antagonism and mistrust among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Cooperation within of neutralization of animosity and fear [Grudziński, 2008, p. 154]. During the summit in Prague in May 1992 it was decided that the Visegrad Group jointly submit an application for admission to the European Communities (EU), which took place in December 1992.

The V4 cooperation was weak from the very beginning. Members of V4 did not decide to strengthen defense cooperation. It resulted from, inter alia, the fear that NATO could be considered as an alternative to the

development of V4 for full membership. Moreover, the priority of each country was to develop cooperation with the West, even at the other V4 members' expense. For example, Prague was the best prepared for accession to the NATO and it saw V4 strengthening political acknowledged as a potential burden on its way to Euro-Atlantic structures [Gniazdowski et al., 2012, p. 57]. Slovakia under the Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar tried to act as a bridge between East and West [Kopyš, 2013, p. 58]. In turn, the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Václav Klaus skeptically evaluated the idea of cooperation within the V4. In his opinion, the Czech Republic was not part of Central Europe, but Western Europe. In both cases, one could see a clear attempt to reject the Central European identity [Bajda, 2013, p. 9].

The attitude of Russia was another problem facing the V4 countries. Russia was against the extension of . By western states Moscow was regarded as more important partner and guarantor of stabilization of post-Soviet area. The area of Central Europe was seen by the West as Russia's Nevertheless, in the summer 1993, after meeting in Warsaw, the Russian President Boris Yeltsin said that the issue of Polish accession to NATO is a matter for the Poles themselves. This declaration, however, met with opposition in the hot Russian General Staff as well as the vast part of Moscow's political establishment. During this period (almost on the eve of the hearing of the parliament) Yeltsin badly needed support to the army so he had to revise its policy [Primakov, 1999, pp. 229–30].

In 1997 Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary were invited to participate in NATO and the EU summit in Madrid (8–9 July) it was decided that take place before the end of 1999. On March 12 1999 Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, except for Slovakia, became members of NATO. Slovakia could not join NATO as its Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar was accused of abuse of power and repression against ethnic minorities. In 1998 Meciar was replaced by Mikulas Dzurinda, but for the Slovakian accession to NATO in 1999 was too late.

The invitation to NATO was an incentive for renewed cooperation within the Visegrad Group. It resulted in political support for Bratislava.

Eventually, Slovakia became a member of NATO in 2004. Diplomatic support for There were also discussions on the V4 enlargement with new countries, such as Lithuania, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia [Gańczarz, 2012, p. 30]. The leaders of the Visegrad Group decided, however, that the V4 would not be increased with more countries [Bajda, 2013, p. 9].

The accession of the V4 countries into NATO resulted in disappearance of one of the key elements for development of regional cooperation. In 2005 the Polish-Czech-Slovak brigade staff was resolved. This institution was responsible for supporting Slovak accession. The V4 members began to follow own ways instead of undertaking common activities. This was unreasonable and significantly reduced the political possibilities of the region.

The crisis in V4 cooperation resulted from different perceptions of security issues, different choice of foreign policy priorities, and incomparable potential of the V4 countries. Poland without any doubt is the biggest and the strongest country in V4 and that is way it wants to play the role of a leader. Warsaw has strong influence the decisions of the EU and NATO. Poland has very rarely agreed on policy and actions with the three smaller countries. Warsaw used to independently conduct talks with the leaders of the major European countries. Warsaw's ideas did not always correspond to interests of other V4 partners. What is more, the Polish stance towards the future of V4 is still unclear.

The history does not help to create stable cooperation concerning security. Prior to WWII Poland and Czechoslovakia were de facto enemies in the area of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The Cieszyn Silesia conflict between those states was a key one. Both countries had a different geopolitical vision of the region. Warsaw and Prague competed for the position of the leading countries in the region, around which would be created wider alliances. In 1933 Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia established the so-called Little Entente. It is comparable with actual V4 regarding the problems. Every country differently perceived the threat: Germany was an enemy for Czechoslovakia, while Germany, Italy – for Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union for Romania. Today, we can observe a quite similar situation. Poland points Russia as

a serious threat to its security, while Hungary and Slovakia openly collaborate and develop contacts with Moscow. Even the Czech Republic skeptically looks at the threats defined by Warsaw.

3. V4 versus foreign policy

The current changes in international relations revalue both the position of the region in Europe, as well as the significance of the Visegrad Group. The financial crisis has highlighted differences in the vision of the EU. In Hungary and the Czech Republic skepticism towards Brussels is growing, while Poland is trying to swim 'mainstream' of the EU policy. The increasing political role of Germany traditionally raises concerns in Prague, while Warsaw openly puts on Berlin. Hungary, however, is in conflict with Brussels, Berlin and Washington and is looking for support

From time to time Poland tries to activate V4. In March 2013, a summit of heads of government of the Visegrad Group (Polish – Donald Tusk, the Czech Republic – Petr Necas, Slovakia – Robert Fico and Hungary – Viktor Orban) was held. The president of France Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel participated in it. Another idea of Warsaw for the future of the Group is to enlarge this formula by Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic countries as "V4+" [Gniazdowski, 2012, pp. 45–46]. Such a large bloc of countries from the Baltic to the Black Sea can give a new impetus to the organization and raise its real meaning. All those states are experiencing a similar path of transformation. They have also similar interests regarding the EU policy, energy security and the East issue. During Hungarian presidency Budapest also strongly supports regional policy based on "V4+2" (Croatia or other Balkan countries and Romania) [Kopyś, 2013, p. 77].

The discrepancy between the V4 countries highlights the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Different reaction of Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava and Budapest to the actions of Moscow is recognized. We can also observe incoherent steps of V4 in the area of energy, e.g. Hungarian support for South Stream Hungary, Hungarians reduction of gas supplies to Ukraine, or reluctant attitude of Slovakia regarding the so-called large reverse-Uzhgorod gas Voiany (finally launched on 2 September, 2014).

There is a discrepancy between the V4 also at the geopolitical level. The Czech Republic and Slovakia did not accept the postulate of additional strengthening “New Member States” by NATO forces in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine. The Czech Republic and Slovakia were not interested in participation in this initiative. They called for narrowing this initiative down to the territory of Poland and the Baltic states. The lack of support for Warsaw’s postulates regarding NATO by the other members of the V4 challenges the opportunity to deepen cooperation in the area of security for the future.

From the Polish point of view, Hungarian policy is disputable. During the Russian aggression in Donbas Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban demanded autonomy for Hungarians living in Ukraine. Orban’s words were perceived almost as an ultimatum to Kiev. During the debate in Brussels on sanctions to be imposed to Russia, Orban said he did not want to spoil the trade relations with Russia or isolate Moscow in Europe, because it is contrary to the national interest of Hungary [Mociągęk, 2014]. Between 2009 and 2013 there was a surge in sales of goods and services to Russia from the V4 countries: 25% (Hungary), 80% (Slovakia), and even more than 130% (Czech Republic). Particularly painful for the performance of the three economies would turn out – coming for a long time by Moscow – suspending the purchase of cars, automotive goods, electrical machines and dual-use products. This entire segment covers more than 80% of exports of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary to Russia (in Poland – less than 40%) [Kałan, 2014, p. 2].

Prague and Bratislava are also skeptical about sanctions against Russia. According to the Prime Minister of Slovakia, the EU should abandon the sanctions, thereby expressing support for a truce in Ukraine and focus on support for the efforts of a political solution to the crisis and maintain an “open and intensive dialogue with Russia.” Slovakia is not interested in blocking sanctions, as the most of EU MS support them. Bratislava rather tries to limit their scope [Gniazdowski et al., 2014]. Prague tries to defend the interests of Czech exporters, especially related to the Russian market and engineering industries. Both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, however, do not take so clearly pro-Russian position as Hungary.

It seems that different perceptions of the risks posed to the region, such as, e.g. the conflict in Ukraine and different expectations of NATO, will probably hinder future cooperation in the field of security and defense within the V4.

4. V4 versus problems of security and defense

NATO summit in Newport in September 2014 and the EU discussion on the sanctions against Russia highlighted the rifts of the Visegrad Group. From one side, the differences in the perception of threats by members of the V4 are not significant, it is difficult to count on consistency of V4 [Gniazdowski et al., 2012, p. 58].

The V4 was not able to create a single block on the war in Georgia in 2008. The Visegrad Group was not unanimous regarding the installation of the American anti-missile defense system [Kałan, 2014, p. 2]. However, in April 2012, the V4 countries issued a declaration on “Responsibility for a strong NATO.” It was declared a necessity of “strengthening political commitment” and “NATO’s defense capabilities.” The Visegrad Group countries were in favor of conducting exercises, under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, including exercise “on our territories” (North Atlantic Treaty). Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary also analyze several areas of cooperation within NATO’s smart defense initiatives and the EU pooling and sharing: pilot training, joint logistics and medical security, countering improvised explosive devices, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) joint development of armored combat vehicles, ammunition, medium and large caliber, individual weapons systems, equipment and soldiers, as well as integrated command support and battlefield imaging [Lorenz, 2013, pp. 1–2]. The main postulates were repeated in the final communiqué of the meeting of defense ministers of the Visegrad Group in Litomierzyce in May 2012. The V4 countries pledged to intensify cooperation in the area of capacity development, indicating its potential areas, including defense against weapons of mass destruction, logistics, training simulators, helicopter pilots and air controllers. The possibility of harmonization of defense planning was announced, too. In addition, it

was decided that Poland would be the state of the Visegrad Framework Battlegroup provided for on-call in the first half of 2016.

The V4 was unsuccessful in implementing the projects to strengthen the region. It resulted from both political differences (perception of risks), attempts to defend its “strategic sovereignty” to the V4 partners, lack of political will, due to the limited partners of confidence, as well as with military potential difference. Among the V4 countries, Poland allots on national defense the highest amount, both in absolute terms and in relation to gross domestic product. Warsaw has the largest and relatively modern army [Gniazdowski et al., 2012, p. 58].

The V4 was inefficient in attempts to establish closer relations in the field of military-technical cooperation of the V4 countries – joint armed forces modernization, maintenance equipment, or create a completely new design. It is inexplicable as the armaments industry of the Visegrad Group countries is comparable, e.g. the post-Soviet legacy of military technology. The V4 countries were successfully experienced in cooperated production of wheeled transporters OT-64 / SKOT and tracked armored personnel carrier Topas. Both vehicles were used by the Polish and Czechoslovak armies. It seemed that, at least in the cases of former Soviet design hardware, upgrades would be possible to establish closer cooperation. It concerned mainly the modernization of T-72 tanks, in which the V4 armies were equipped and required extensive and costly upgrades. The agreement on cooperation in the modernization of the Mi-24 helicopters (2002) seemed to be significant. According to this agreement, nearly 100 helicopters (being out of stock of the armed forces V4) were to be modernized in Poland. Poland was interested in the purchase of Russian engines and transmissions for the Mi-24. The rest of the work which would be helpful in modernizing to NATO standards the Poles were to make themselves. The Czechs resigned from this project in 2003. What is more, Russia decided to refuse Poland licenses and favored bilateral talks with individual V4 countries.

The cooperation between the V4 countries in the field of purchasing new weapons and equipment was inefficient, too. The particular interests of every single country prevailed the common interests. The most glaring example of this trend was the lack of cooperation in the of new

fighter planes. Poland bought American F-16. Hungary and the Czech Republic leased Swedish JAS 39 Gripen. Finally, Slovakia did not exchange MiG aircraft and received 12 new MiG-29A [Gniazdowski et al., 2012, pp. 57–58].

A new cooperation in armaments and military equipment was to take place in 2009, when four working groups were established. They were coordinated by the particular countries: defense against weapons of mass destruction (Czech Republic); project “Soldier twenty-first century” (Poland); modernization of air defense and missile (Slovakia); strategic transport (Hungary). The cooperation concerned the consultations, exchange of information, harmonization of national legislation and preparation of conceptual documents. However, unsuccessful was leading the joint research projects, modernization and acquisition and use of training centers. The activities of those working groups were limited only to consultation and declarations [Gniazdowski et al., 2012, p. 59].

Nevertheless, there are new plans for technical modernization of the armed forces. There are plans for joint working out a new radar station in order to replace radars P-37 made in the USSR [Palowski, 2014]. It is expected to purchase 11 radars for the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, mounted on the chassis of Tatra trucks. It is also planned to develop wheeled and tracked armored personnel carriers for the V4 armed forces. A new infantry fighting vehicle would be a common product of the defense industry of all countries of the V4. Carrying out repair or maintenance would be divided between entities from different countries on the reciprocity rule. There are also plans for cooperation in the production of ammunition medium and large caliber, the operation of certain aerial platforms, mainly a transport aircraft C-295M, and the helicopter W-3 Sokol. The automation systems and battlefield equipment for an individual soldier in the 21st century is also provided [Szopa, 2013].

The V4 countries share dependence on gas supplies from Russia. The V4 countries are not able to create a unified vision of at least partial independence from the Gazprom monopoly. However, important agreements for the development of a single market for gas and electricity

were signed. Nevertheless, On October 31, 2012 an agreement on the integration of gas systems was signed in Warsaw by the ministers of V4. The key element is a planned gas corridor NorthSouth. This pipeline is crucial in the context of the emerging LNG terminal in Swinoujscie. This terminal will be ultimately connected with the Croatian energy infrastructure Adria terminal. The gas pipeline between Poland and Lithuania (also in the variant with Latvia) is planned, too.

Another initiative coming out of the Visegrad Group countries was a letter addressed to the Congress (March 2014) on the acceleration of exports of liquefied natural gas [Turowski, 2014, p. 112]. The USA gas could significantly undermine Gazprom's monopoly in the region, but the launch of the USA export requires not only the consent of Congress, but also a significant investment in infrastructure (construction of LNG terminals). It is therefore a matter of years rather than the solution for today and under the condition that Poland will manage to complete the construction of the LNG terminal in Swinoujscie.

The V4 member states are different in determination of commitment to meet energy investments. For Poland, the crucial Warsaw wants to be independent from Russia's Gazprom. For other V4 countries dependence from Russian gas is an economic problem, not security one. Bratislava is convinced about the great importance of V4 transit gas for Russia. The largest gas transmission pipeline from Russia to Germany runs through Slovakia. Only the transit of Russian gas is able to ensure the viability of the existing infrastructure and trade gas on the north-south axis from the West to the East will not compensate incomes from continuing operations. This is likely to explain Bratislava's caution in the development of gas connections with Poland and Hungary [Turowski, 2014, p. 113].

In the Czech Republic, security of gas supply sources is believed to be more in the full integration of the Czech Republic to the German transmission system. The Opal gas pipeline running from the Baltic Sea to the Czech Republic (as the ground leg of the Nord Stream), is seen as improving energy security and a source of Russian gas supplies in case of transmission cut through Ukraine [Turowski, 2014, p. 113]. It was built to bypass Ukraine as a transit country for Russian gas.

Currently, Gazprom may use 50% of Opal bandwidth. However, the Russians are seeking permission for its full utilization.

Finally Budapest focuses on cooperation with Russia in the energy sector. First of all, despite the opposition of the European Commission, Budapest is involved in the construction of a section of the South Stream on its territory [Turowski, 2014, p. 113]. The pipeline is to lead from Russia through the Black Sea to Bulgaria and then to Serbia, Hungary, Austria and Slovenia. Withholding reverse gas supplies to Ukraine (officially until 2015) or problems with the putting into service of an interconnector with Slovakia can also be read as part of the implementation of Gazprom's interests.

5. Perspectives for the future?

Shortly after 2004 there was a convergence in foreign priorities. The importance of ties with the USA and the need to maintain a close transatlantic alliance were underlined by all V4 countries [Sadecki, 2013, p. 100]. For this moment, discrepancy in international relations and security issue is significant. The V4 is not able to play a crucial role, especially in the context of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and even energy security. In Poland's interest is developing alternative regional alliances, e.g. with the Baltic States, Sweden and Romania. Those countries share Warsaw's sense of danger. A positive impulse is also the enlargement of the V4 with Baltic states, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia. This enlargement might result in establishing a relatively strong bloc of countries with similar expectations towards the EU and NATO in Europe. The condition would be, however, to preserve the functional unity of purpose and methods in it.

The cultural, scientific and social cooperation ; especially as concerns the Visegrad Fund's activity [Gizicki, 2013, p. 49]. The cultural and scientific relations are second-order significance. The common gas and electric market, and defense industrial cooperation are the most important for Central Europe. The Visegrad Group should define common positions in energy policy, in the approach to the supply of raw materials (especially gas), to fight for a similar approach in relation to the EU climate package. It also should be a structure integrating

the members of the “new EU” regarding the common goals. Some states being outside the EU and NATO expect V4 to support their integration policies.

Conclusion

The idea of Central Europe and Visegrad agreement had different meaning for particular members. For Poland, it was a kind of balance between Russia and Germany. For Slovakia – a chance to abandon political isolation and to become a full-fledged member of the region. Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary express aspiration to be a leader of the V4. Poland as the biggest country with the highest economic growth seems to be a natural V4 leader. However, this idea is not shared by others.

Does the future of the V4 look in bright colors? The main goals were achieved: the membership of NATO and the EU, Schengen accession. Cooperation within the V4 achieved its primary goal. It gave the members of the V4 a sense of the importance and belief that the region plays an important role in shaping this part of Europe. The V4 cooperation facilitated the existence of its countries in Western Europe and also helped to integrate into the EU and NATO. However, the dynamics of the V4 has been exhausted. It resulted from divergent interests, mutual competition and different perceptions of the security issues. Currently, the V4's activity is limited to a series of meetings and arrangements without real significance. The north-south gas corridor is still rather a kind of collection of national projects than a single, unitary plan. The Visegrad Group countries are not able to create a unified vision, or even collectively respond to the contemporary threats. No one in V4 group is interested in renaming it in a real international organization. Moreover, the V4 countries are often competitors for each other. Nevertheless, they support the European cohesion policy and strong relation with the USA. Furthermore, the V4 could be an excellent example for the Western Balkan region to build closer relations with the EU.